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Batman Should Let the Joker Live

Should Batman kill the Joker? This question seems meaningless. However, considering this question provides us with an opportunity to think philosophically about ethics, which may help us understand some abstract ethical concepts. In Mark D. White and Robert Arp's essay entitled "Should Batman Kill The Joker?" (2008), they introduce three major ethical perspectives, Utilitarianism, Deontology and Virtue Ethics, to help us think about this question. "Utilitarianism would probably endorse killing the Joker, based on comparing the many lives saved against the one life lost" (White and Arp 546), which implies that Utilitarianism focuses on the consequences trying to obtain the best result. On the contrary, Deontology would deny killing the Joker, because the act of murder itself is not moral or ethical (546), which indicates that Deontology focuses on the act itself. Besides, Virtue Ethics would also deny killing the Joker, because Batman do not want to be a murder (547), which shows that Virtue Ethics stresses the character of the person who takes the act. Combining these three ethical perspectives, White and Arp argue that there are good reasons for both killing and not killing the Joker (547).

In this essay, I will interact with White and Arp's essay and discuss the dialogue between Batman and the Joker and some visual details in *The Dark Knight* (2008) to show the Joker's twisted values and Batman's Kantian philosophy. Besides, I will make an analog

between my thought experiment and Batman's quandary to help us think deeply about Batman's Kantian attitude. From the perspective of Deontology, I would argue that Batman is morally and ethically right to let the Joker live, because by doing this can Joker receive relatively impartial judgement, being respected, and Batman can avoid the act of murdering. Thinking deeply about Batman's ethics may help us reflect on our personal belief systems.

When it comes to the characteristics of the Joker, White and Arp indicate that the Joker is a murderous psychopath who has twisted devotion to chaos and tragedy (545-546), which means that he is crazy about committing a crime without any particular purposes. In *The Dark Knight*, when the Joker implies the choice people and criminals on the two ships with bombs, respectively, might make to blow up the other one to save themselves, he says that "we'll miss the fireworks" (*The Dark Knight*), which represents that the Joker considers the possible explosion which may murder many innocent people as fireworks. The Joker's ridiculous and twisted perspective is opposite to the normal way of thinking right and wrong, highlighting his murderous characteristics. On the contrary, Batman acts as a Kantian in *The Dark Knight*. After throwing the Joker down the high building, Batman immediately uses his grappling gun to catch the Joker to save his life (*The Dark Knight*), which represents that Batman does not want to kill the Joker, because he has a sense of self-righteousness, a reflection of Deontology. That is to say, Batman believes in Kantian philosophy that the act of murder itself is neither moral nor ethical, so he does not take the Joker's life, which is consistent to my thesis that Batman should let the Joker live, because by doing this can Batman avoid murder and the Joker can have a chance to receive impartial judgement instead of vigilante justice (546).

Considering a thought experiment, a method has been used by philosophers for centuries (White and Arp 547), may help refine our thinking about Batman's ethics. A father takes his sick son on a visit to a doctor, only to receive terrible news that his son has contracted a deadly disease with only mere days to live and that the only way to save his son's life is to use a drug called "cure it all" which is so expensive that the father cannot afford it. After talking with the father, the doctor goes to restroom leaving the father alone in his office. At the same time, the father notices that a safe in the doctor's office is unlock with a drug labeled "cure it all" in it. At present, the father encounters a moral dilemma that he can either steal the drug to save his son's life or accept his son's fateful death due to his lack of wealth. From the perspective of Utilitarianism, someone may argue that stealing the drug is moral and ethical, because it can save his son's life, which seems to be the best result the father can obtain. However, from the perspective of Deontology, I would argue that stealing the drug is not morally or ethically right, because the act of stealing itself is illegal no matter how good the result it can bring. Once the father steals the drug, he will become a criminal who may be put into prison. Instead of stealing the drug, there are some legal ways to save his son's life, for instance, the father can borrow money from his relatives or apply for financial aid from the government. In a word, it is neither reasonable nor acceptable that provided with legal ways to choose, the father still steals the drug, breaking the law.

Applying thought experiment to Batman's ethics aims at "making philosophy accessible, and helping us think through difficult topics by casting them in a different light" (White and Arp 547). When it comes back to Batman's quandary, from the perspective of Utilitarianism, someone may argue that Batman could save countless innocent lives by

ending Joker's miserable existence once and for all (546), which seems morally and ethically right because this act leads to a reasonable result where citizens are protected from the Joker. However, from the perspective of Deontology, I would argue that this act is not morally and ethically right, because it only focuses on the result, "based on comparing the many lives saved against the one life lost" (546), regardless of the act of murder itself. Once Batman kills the Joker without permission from the law, he himself will become an unethical murderer, the same as Joker. Thus, we need permission from the law, which means that "if the Joker is to be punished, it should be through official procedures, not vigilante justice" (546), corresponding to Kantian opinion that while the Joker is evil, he is still a human being who deserves of at least a minimal level of respect and humanity (546). From this perspective, it is morally and ethically right that Batman helps policemen arrest the Joker to put him into legal procedure instead of killing him, because this act ensures that Batman avoids murder and that Joker can receive relatively impartial judgement reflecting the will of citizens.

When it comes to applying philosophy to Batman, White and Arp introduce a naysayer who argues that this application "may seem silly or frivolous" (White and Arp 547) in their essay and argue against him by saying the point is making philosophy accessible and helping refine our thinking (547). This response shows their respect to the naysayer, which presents that they deserve to be heard. Thinking about Batman's ethics not only provides us with accessible ways to learn about ethics but also helps us realize our personal belief systems. While arguing for Batman's Kantian philosophy, I realize that I am establishing and supporting my own Deontological values.

Works Cited

- White, Mark D., and Robert Arp. "Should Batman Kill the Joker?" *The Norton Sampler Short Essays for Composition*. 8th ed., edited by Thomas Cooley, W. W. Norton & Company, 2008, pp. 525-527.
- The Dark Knight*. Directed by Christopher Nolan, performances by Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, Aaron Eckhart, Michael Caine, and Maggie Gyllenhaal, Warner, 2008.