

Garbo Lou

Professor Holguin

Rhetoric 101 Section C5

13 December 2017

Morally Right for Batman to Let the Joker Live: Adhere to Morality and Influence in Subtlety

With the success of *The Dark Knight* in 2008, the debates on moral problem behind the movie have heated up. Mark D. White and Robert Arp throw a question “Should Batman Kill the Joker?” in their homonymic essay to the society where they attach a deeper thinking into ethics and morality. By applying the pop culture, Batman and the Joker, without breaking away from the essence, White and Arp wisely simplify the abstract ethical and moral problem to a concrete question on whether Batman is morally or ethically right to let the Joker live which can get readers involved in a philosophical problem more easily.

Instead of giving a direct solution, White and Arp put forward three possible perspectives to deal with the moral problem reflecting on three schools, Utilitarianism, Deontology and Virtue Ethics which provides readers with a well-refined background to ponder. Utilitarian would argue that Batman should kill the Joker based on “comparing the many lives saved against the one life lost.” (White and Arp 546) While Deontology contends “if the Joker is to be punished, it should be through official procedures, not vigilante” (546). Additionally, Virtue Ethics provides a perspective of not killing the Joker by highlighting “the character of the person who kills the Joker” (547). Among the three perspectives, I support Deontology which insists on Batman is morally and ethically right to let the Joker live.

Deontology is defined as “the study of the nature of duty and obligation.” (*OED*) On the position of deontologist, only the actions that obey the ethical rules are moral. As is mentioned in the United States Declaration of Independence that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all

men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." It is an accepted ethical rule that everyone has the inviolable right to survive regardless of what he has done. According to the widely accepted moral rule, lynching is an immoral action that deprives people's right to live through killing and torturing. In addition, White and Arp indicate that "While the Joker is evil, he is still a human being, and is thus deserving at least a minimal level of respect and humanity." (546) in which "a minimal level of respect and humanity" points to the fundamental right to live. Therefore, if Batman has killed the Joker, Batman would be the immoral person who lynches others. Instead, letting the Joker live shows respect to his right to live and demonstrates Batman's determination in adhering to morality which heartens citizens to maintain the morality.

Although White and Arp provide readers with clear and credible contexts of three schools of philosophy and get readers involved by appealing to their sense of ethics on the analyses of "should Batman kill the Joker?" as well as the real-world torture problem, they do not give adequate details about how the question comes up from *The Dark Knight*. From my point of view, Deontology has been presented through elaborate scene designs. At the end of the movie, Batman has a confrontation with the Joker at the top of a high building. The Joker is hung upside down on the rope, while Batman is standing on the edge of the platform. The dangerous filming location and the breathtaking plot arrangement add to the tense atmosphere which implies the absolute opposition of ethically wrong and right in the Deontology. When the Joker speaks, in the scene is the close-up of the Joker's inverted pale but fiendish face with his dreadful sanguineous mouth crazily laughing like a "loony" (White and Arp 546). The scene design intimates the Joker's worldview of confusing right and wrong. On the contrary, Batman is shot from the low-angle so that Batman will look taller and stronger which makes the image of Batman lofty. The visual representation of the standing tall

Batman versus the hanging insane Joker hints the school of Deontology whose theory divides the world into antithesis, being morally right and wrong.

Utilitarian may refute that it is moral for Batman to kill the Joker because the death of the Joker can save citizens. However, I highly agree on White and Arp's statement that "While there are good reasons to do it, based on the positive consequences that may come from it, there are also good reasons not to, especially those based on our national character." (547) I cannot deny that killing the Joker can end the bloodshed immediately. But at the national level, killing the Joker may not be a long-term solution to keep the nation moral and stable. As White and Arp indicate that "there are plenty of masked loonies ready to take the Joker's place" (546), there still exist a large number of criminals or even murderers in the nation. Hence, I want to point out that killing the Joker cannot ensure absolute justice but may instead mislead the society into immorality. Hero is defined as the individual admired and recognized by the majority. Thus, what a hero does will have a strong impact on his admirers' morality and behaviours. In addition, individualistic heroism which refers to sacrificing an individual imitating the example of heroes has become a popular social value. Killing a criminal will fan the flames of violence in society since the hero, Batman, has murdered a person according to his own judgement which may incite criminals or even citizens to murder based on their own benefits or senses of justice. Killing the Joker may exert a negative influence on social stability. On the contrary, Batman's insistence in adhering to morality and not killing the Joker privately will set an ethical example which might promote the society to transform to morality.

Objecting to Utilitarianism, I think individual happiness matters the same as majority's and the impact counts more than the result. Assume the following scenario: If the relationship between two hostile countries has become extremely tense, the opposed country asks your country to kill ten military experts. If you do not kill the ten military experts, there is an eighty percent chance that the opposed country will start the war. On the contrary, if you do kill the military experts, the possibility

to start a war will decrease to twenty percent. Suppose you are the leader of the country, will you kill those military experts? According to utilitarian's tenet that the majority's happiness is more important than individual's interests, utilitarian will choose to kill the ten military experts in exchange for a much higher possibility not to start the war. However, I think it is better not to kill the military experts from the perspective of Deontology. First, the action of killing innocent citizens, the ten outstanding military experts, is immoral against the law as well as the fundamental human right to live. If the military experts were killed, the whole nation might panic and lose confidence in the government due to killing the innocents obeying the command of the hostile country. Besides, an eighty percent chance cannot guarantee permanent peace between the two countries, let alone the two countries are within the tense relationship which means even if the war does not occur this time, the possibility of wars remains high. Therefore, combining what White and Arp say in their essay that "there are also good reasons not to kill, especially those based on our national character." (547), the leader should not kill the ten military experts and Batman should not kill the Joker in order to keep the nation stable and set up the correct social moral value of no murdering.

In an ambiguous standpoint, White and Arp provide readers with different angles which resonate with readers' sense of ethics. This heuristic introduction of three schools of philosophy induces readers to delve into real-world moral issues behind the simple question, "Should Batman kill the Joker?", without being confined in only one perspective. As I have argued in my essay that Batman's action of killing the Joker is not only an immoral decision against the fundamental human right of life, but also an unethical behavior which has a negative impact on social morality. Although the death of the Joker can end the current atrocity, the disrespect for life and the immoral value reflected by Batman's lynch might exacerbate social instability. Therefore, in consideration of humanity and the social stability, Batman should not kill the Joker. Batman killing the Joker does not end evil, but the value of adhering to morality reflected by letting the Joker live does.

Works Cited

“Deontology, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed December 24, 2017.

The Dark Knight. Directed by Christopher Nolan, performances by Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, Warner Bros., 2008.

The United States. *The Declaration of Independence*. 1776.

White, Mark D., and Robert Arp. “Should Batman Kill the Joker?” *The Norton Sampler Short Essays for Composition*, edited by Thomas Cooley, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013, pp. 545-548.