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Virtue Ethics: Batman Should Not Kill the Joker

Philosophy has always been a complicated subject with many opposite but seemingly right answers towards one particular question, provoking fierce debates among different schools. Using pop-culture figures, Batman and the Joker, as a pointcut, Mark D. White and Robert Arp introduce three major schools of ethics and their perspectives on Batman's quandary in their essay "Should Batman Kill the Joker?". Although the authors did not give a final answer to the question and showed no tendency towards any single school among utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics, I would like to argue that Batman should not kill the Joker, basing on virtue ethics' point of view.

From my perspective, I find the virtue ethics correspond with my moral ethics best. We all have our own principles which determines how we behave. Under no circumstance should we abandon our morality and go beyond our principles. Batman defines himself as a fighter against crime and a defender of justice rather than an executioner. Although the Joker is culpable, there exists enforcement agency whose job is to bring criminals to justice. Killing contravenes Batman's creed because Batman says that "I do not want to become that which I hate" (547), and those who take their enemies' lives is the very kind of people he hates. The virtue not-killing is a line that Batman always sticks to and will never cross.

Focusing on the consequences of the actions, utilitarianists argue that Batman should kill the Joker to save more people (546). Although we cannot deny the potential harm that the Joker will probably do to the city, we cannot neglect the consequences of Batman's killing neither. For

one thing, killing the Joker cannot eradicate crimes because the “evil” may simply take another form and criminals may even revenge for Joker’s death. For another, having broken his moral codes, Batman will probably either be ashamed of himself and sink into depression from then on or get accustomed to fighting crimes by killing callously. Worse still, the falling of a glorious hero who is also the spiritual pillar of the citizens may cause the moral corruption to spread like virus. From the perspective of utilitarianism, the long-term loss resulting from killing should be even worse than the potential loss of several people’s lives, thus contradicting with their assertion.

Although the proponent of deontology will come to the same conclusion as virtue ethics that Batman should not kill the Joker, they have different considerations. Emphasizing duties or rules, deontologists use common morality to plead for Batman’s not killing (546). But in this case, it is questionable whether so-called common morality can restrict Batman’s conducts. During Batman’s fight against crime, he has done many things such as vandalization and deception that violate common morality, making him already above codes. It is only his no-killing moral code that separates “Batman” from “bad men”. To some extent, Kantians are implementing double standard on Batman’s refusal of killing if they approve of his previous fight against criminals.

All in all, Batman’s quandary, a pop-culture issue, serves as a metaphor to help us reflect on the parallel real world, and the detachment between fiction and reality allows us to think objectively about the philosophical questions. This germane analogy and thought experiment provides a specified circumstance for an abstract philosophical question, thus making the complicated philosophy concept assessable. From my point of view, it is the inner pursuit of virtue that should direct our conducts and it is our conscience that matters. As a Chinese saying goes, we should “remain true to our original aspiration and keep our mission firmly in mind”. Not killing the Joker complies with Batman’s original aspiration and moral code and killing the Joker will

cause even much more adverse impact such as the rot of justice, so it is morally and ethically right for Batman to let the Joker live.

Works Cited

Mark D. White and Robert Arp. "Should Batman Kill the Joker?" *The Norton Sampler*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2013, pp. 545-47.