

Cindy Lai

Professor Holguin

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### Virtue Ethics: Batman Should Not Kill the Joker

Philosophy has always been a complicated subject with many opposing but seemingly right answers towards one particular question, provoking fierce debates among different schools. Using pop-culture figures, Batman and the Joker in the movie *The Dark Knight* (2008), as an example, 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 do not give a final answer to the question and show 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.

To make it clearer, here are some definitions of philosophical terms referring to White and Arp's article. Virtue ethics highlight the character of the person who conduct the act (547), and require acts to obey one's principles. Virtue, defined as a quality considered morally good or desirable (*OED*), is assumed to be consistent and decent. Deontology requires the act itself to accord with common morality, emphasizing the commonly-accepted obligation and rules (546). Utilitarianism focus on the consequent overall happiness factor of the majority (*OED*). White and Arp show no bias toward any school, and their impartial introduction of three schools (Para.6-8) and the objective present of discussions with "while there are good reasons to kill...there are also good reasons not to kill..." (Para.9) all enhance their credibility. This neutral and informative article appears to be ambiguous, allowing readers to choose their own preferred school freely.

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. In my opinion, under no circumstances 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. Batman's commitment of no-killing is a line that Batman always sticks to and will never cross.

The movie maker's approval of virtue ethics is visually implied in the final scene between Batman and the Joker in *the Dark Knight*. "See, madness, as you know, is like gravity. All it takes is a little push", said the Joker in the movie after being saved from falling by Batman. Although being hung upside down, the Joker is still insolent and keep satirizing Batman's virtue ethics with. I think this final scene is figurative. The Joker's being hung upside down reflects his converse values, while the worm's-eye perspective of Batman's tall image implies his heroic characters. The Joker's awkwardly swinging in the wind symbolizes that the corrupted people will get lost in madness, whereas the righteous Batman stands for the firm adherence to virtue ethics. The sharp contrast indicates the movie's appreciation of Batman's moral codes.

Although the proponents of deontology, Kantians, will come to the same conclusion as virtue ethics that Batman should not kill the Joker, they utilize common morality to plead for Batman's not killing (546). However, 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 the codes. It is only his no-killing creed that separates "Batman" from "bad men". To some extent, Kantians

are implementing double standard on Batman's refusal to kill if they approve of his previous fight against criminals.

To dive deeper, what if the Joker is holding a baby and only by killing him can Batman save the baby? Will Kantians break their words to allow of killing for saving? Or will they just refuse breaking the law and try to stop the ongoing crime with other means of unavailing efforts? When it comes to an extreme situation which is not considered when setting the common morality, deontology may not be considerate enough to give an ethically-right solution. However, in this case, righteous proponents of virtue ethics will give a clear answer to kill without hesitation basing on their saving-the-innocent codes, which have a higher priority than no-killing.

Focusing on the consequences, utilitarianists argue that Batman should kill the Joker to save more people (546). Although we cannot deny the potential harm done by the Joker, 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 or get accustomed to fighting crimes by killing callously. Worse still, moral corruption can spread like virus due to the falling of a superhero who is the spiritual pillar of the city. From the perspective of utilitarianism, the long-term loss of killing is even worse than the potential loss of several lives, thus contradicting with their assertion.

To extend even further, the famous "Trolley Problem" is a good example. Imagine that a trolley is running on the prescribed course, with five people ahead on the tracks. You are the driver next to a lever which if you pull, the trolley will switch to another set of tracks where there is one person. All the six people cannot escape and will be killed when the trolley goes by. The only two options are whether to do nothing resulting in five people killed on the main track, or to pull the

lever to let the trolley kill the one on the side track. Comparing five to one, utilitarianists will choose to save the maximum of people by killing the single one. However, if you are standing next to a fat man by the tracks, who as long as be pushed down, the train will be stopped and all people will be saved. Although both are similar five-to-one situations, even firm utilitarianists will hesitate to push down the fat man with their own hands. During the hesitation, it is nothing else than virtue ethics that plays a dominant role in making decision.

From the above analysis, it can be inferred that both utilitarian and deontology are deficient and inconsistent in some cases while virtue ethics can be flexibly adopted depending on situations. If the thought experiment comes to reality, the lack of time for reaction will simplify the issue. Chances are that at the critical juncture, neither do we have sufficient time to calculate the total benefits brought by each choice and compare the possible consequences quantitatively, nor will we care much about what is expected by the common morality or by the public. In that nick of time, most people will act spontaneously, and their intuitive choice will follow their moral codes, that is, adopt virtue ethics. In such a tense situation where sacrifices are bound to be made, from my point of view, it is always ethically acceptable – though not necessarily right - to stick to our principles and feel no qualms upon self-examination, regardless of what others might think.

All in all, Batman's quandary, a pop-culture issue, serves as a metaphor to help us reflect on the parallel real world. 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; therefore, it is morally and ethically right for Batman to let the Joker live.

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