Keith Kingsberry

Professor Stacey M. Burleson

PHIL 1313 – Introduction to Philosophy

23 April 2025

Justice, Duty, and the Greater Good: Ethical Conflicts in The Dark Knight and Captain

America: Civil War

Superhero films do more than entertain their audiences; they can cause them to reflect and explore moral and philosophical issues surrounding justice, responsibility, and ethical choices. Two prominent examples are The Dark Knight and Captain America: Civil War. These movies not only captivate audiences with their action-packed scenes but also prompt deep reflections on the nature of heroism and the ethical dilemmas that come with great power. These films seem to challenge viewers to consider how complicated justice is and the consequences of questionable decisions made in the heat of the moment. While both films take place in quite different universes, they share a common theme: the struggle between differing moral philosophies and the complicated aftermath of ethical decision-making when faced with extraordinary challenges.

In The Dark Knight, Bruce Wayne, secretly Batman, is faced with a major moral dilemma. The Joker, a character who represents chaos and pessimism, continually challenges Batman's ethical principles, forcing him to rethink the foundation of his ethics. Batman's firm commitment to his moral code is a testament to his character, but

it constantly causes him to face ethical conflicts. A key moment we see in the film is Batman's refusal to kill the Joker despite the chaos, death, and destruction the Joker brings to Gotham City. From a moral philosophy that focuses on the importance of duty and following the rules, Batman's commitment to his no-kill policy is admirable. It shows his strong belief in the value of life and his desire not to become like the villain he opposes. But this decision also raises challenging questions about the consequences of sticking to moral principles. Is it right to let the Joker live if that decision leads to innocent people dying? Does Batman's strict adherence to his personal moral code make him indirectly responsible for the harm the Joker causes? These dilemmas show the friction between Batman's personal ethics, which primarily focus on following rules, and consequentialist ethics, which prioritize the outcomes of actions.

On the other hand, Captain America: Civil War introduces a separate set of ethical issues centered on accountability and personal freedom. The main conflict revolves around the Sokovia Accords, a proposed framework that holds superheroes accountable for their actions under governmental oversight. Steve Rogers, known as Captain America, refuses to sign these Accords, arguing that giving up autonomy to a governing body could lead to power abuse and hinder the ability to act based on personal conscience. His position reflects a belief in individual moral responsibility and skepticism toward institutions that may prioritize political motives over ethical considerations. In contrast, Tony Stark (Iron Man) supports the Sokovia Accords, advocating for a more practical approach. Having seen the consequences of irresponsible superhero behavior, Stark believes oversight is crucial to minimize harm and protect the greater good, even if it means loss of personal freedom.

Both The Dark Knight and Captain America: Civil War explore complex ethical issues, but they approach these topics in diverse ways. In The Dark Knight, Batman faces deep personal struggles, focusing on his individual moral choices as he confronts tricky situations. On the other hand, Captain America: Civil War looks at the larger responsibilities of superheroes and the ethical dilemmas related to government regulation in a world filled with superpowers. Both films highlight the ongoing conflict between two kinds of ethics: deontological ethics, which focus on rules and duties, and consequentialist ethics, which emphasize the outcomes of actions. Batman's choice not to kill the Joker is an example of deontological principles, but it comes at a high cost to the city of Gotham. His journey in The Dark Knight shows how important it is for individuals to stay true to their moral values even when everything around them is chaotic. Similarly, in Captain America: Civil War, Steve Rogers stands firm against the Sokovia Accords, which reflects his dedication to his own conscience. Meanwhile, Tony Stark supports these accords with a more utilitarian viewpoint, stressing the need for collective safety and reducing harm. Overall, Captain America: Civil War expands the discussion on ethical issues, looking at the shared responsibilities of superheroes and the potential consequences of governmental control.

Both films make us think about tough ethical questions: Is it ever okay to bend our principles for the greater good? How do we balance personal freedoms with the needs of the community? What happens when heroes, who we usually see as moral leaders, face tricky ethical choices? These movies invite us to reflect on what it means to be a hero and the moral challenges that arise when powerful individuals confront difficult situations. They show that superheroes are not always perfect role models;

instead, they are complex characters dealing with challenging decisions. These films offer a deep perspective on the superhero genre by exploring themes of justice, human experiences, and responsibility. The Dark Knight and Captain America: Civil War address these types of questions, offering a more complex perspective beyond traditional superhero narratives.

Works Cited

Kant, Immanuel. Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. Translated by Mary Gregor,

Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Mill, John Stuart. Utilitarianism. Edited by Roger Crisp, Oxford University Press, 1998.

White, Mark D., editor. Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul. Wiley,

2008.

Yogerst, Chris. "Superhero Films: Fascist or Morally Virtuous?" Journal of Religion &

Film, vol. 21, no. 1, 2017, https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol21/iss1/37/.

Smith, A. "The Ethics of Superheroes: Moral and Philosophical Lessons from Comic

Books." Philosophy Now, 2016.

6 Main Characteristics of Scandinavian Cinema | The Monthly Film Festival The Monthly

Film Festival. https://tmff.net/6-main-characteristics-of-scandinavian-cinema/