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17. WHY BATMAN IS BETTER THAN SUPERMAN

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Backstory: Bat-fans' Bane

A classic staple of discussion in the world of comics is the comparison of two great superheroes, and perhaps the most famous of all comparisons is that between Batman and Superman. Unfortunately, all too often Batman is summarily dismissed for lacking any superpowers, leaving Bat-fans crying foul. This chapter—like a great hero—comes to the aid of those Bat-fans by giving a brief introduction to value theory, specifically the notion of "better than."

Donning the Philosophical Persona

As shown in *Batman: year One* (1987), Batman's first night out on the streets of Gotham ended disastrously. Bruce Wayne entered the fray unprepared. True, he did have years of martial arts training, but no matter what the movies show, if enough [228▶] guys attack at once, all that training won't be enough. Bruce learned from that little adventure, and from it he developed his Batman persona. We can learn from that little adventure, too, by making sure we don't jump into a dispute with Super-fans without adopting a persona of our own.

Bruce knew that criminals were a superstitious and cowardly lot, and that the best way to catch them off guard—and ultimately be more effective—was to be scary. Childhood experience in a well (that would later become the Batcave), and a random run-in with a bat in his sitting room at home, convinced Bruce to don his famous cape and cowl.

In the realm of arguments and disputes, there is no better persona than the philosopher. It certainly isn't as scary as a man parading as a bat—in many cases philosophers are quite laughable—but philosophers are specially trained to argue. When you need to strike fear in an opponent, be like a bat—dark, elusive, and scary. But when you need to change a person's mind about something, be like a philosopher—careful, quizzical, and tenacious. More specifically, if you're trying to convince someone that something is "better than" another thing, then be like a value theorist.

Value theory is the area of philosophy that is primarily concerned with the study of value and evaluation. Evaluation is the process of determining how good or bad something is, and *value* is what makes that thing good. For example, we might suppose that "being cool" is one of the properties that makes something good. In a way, then, being cool is a sort of value to us. When we are evaluating something that's cool, like the Batmobile, then we count that value of being cool as one of the reasons the Batmobile is so good. Unfortunately, it isn't so obvious what values really are. "Coolness factor" is just an example of what values are like, but it isn't likely to be an actual candidate for real value.

Most of value theory is devoted to figuring out what values boil down to, and among other things, value theorists try to [229▶] figure out what the difference is between something valuable and something that isn't valuable. Value theorists are also particularly interested in how something can be "better than" or "worse than" another thing. In our case, we want to

be like value theorists, because we want to know what it is that makes Batman better than Superman.

Donning now our philosophical persona as value theorists, we can continue our quest. The first step is to prepare our utility belts with a little vocabulary that will help us on our way. When we say that Batman is better than Superman, we are making an *evaluative comparison*. Comparisons are pretty common in our everyday lives, but many of them are not necessarily evaluative. Sometimes we're just trying to explain how two things are alike or different without saying that one is better than the other. We'll call these *descriptive comparisons*. An example of a descriptive comparison could be noting that one car is black and another is blue. If our only aim is to explain how the two cars are different, then we aren't making an evaluative comparison.

An evaluative comparison relies on our evaluation of several things, and basically, evaluations tell us how good or how bad something is. Thus an evaluative comparison occurs when we take our evaluation of one thing and compare it with our evaluation of another thing. For example, if we evaluate the black car and determine that it is really good, and we evaluate the blue car and determine that it is really bad, then we can compare these evaluations and conclude that the black car is better than the blue car. In so doing, we will have made an evaluative comparison.

This vocabulary that we've added to our utility belt helps us describe our quest. The battle that rages between Bat-fans and Super-fans is a dispute over an evaluative comparison. Bat-fans think Batman is really good and Superman is not so good, and so they conclude that Batman is better than Superman. Bat-fans are just comparing their evaluations of these two superheroes. Whether their judgment is correct hinges crucially on [230►] whether their evaluations of these two great superheroes are correct. We can't, however, solve this puzzle without doing a little background detective work.

The Origin Story: How We Make Evaluative Comparisons

The evaluative comparison of Batman and Superman is much like any evaluative comparison we've made in our lives, and so there's something to learn by examining how we've made these evaluations in the past. For example, evaluative comparisons we once made as children do not always come out the same when we make the comparisons as adults. If we're honest with ourselves, when we Bat-fans were young and immature, we too may have really liked Superman and all his superpowers. What's more, we may have a difficult time explaining why we changed our minds. When Batman fights crime, we all know why he does it. We're all familiar with what Joe Chill did to his parents. Batman's origin story helps explain why he does what he does as an adult, and in similar fashion, we have origin stories, too. So let's take a moment to explore our own origin stories to see how it is that we came to make evaluative comparisons in the way that we do. In doing this, we may be able to put our finger on why it's so difficult to justify our evaluative comparison that Batman is better than Superman.

When many of us were young, evaluative comparisons of ice cream primarily revolved around the amount of ice cream we were going to get. In other words, the bigger the bowl of ice cream, the better it was, and between two bowls of ice cream, the bigger bowl was the best. We'll call this simplistic way of making evaluative comparisons the *quantitative* method. Quantitative evaluations are evaluations based on the amount or number of something there

is. When we move to comparing those evaluations based solely on differences in amount or number, we are making quantitative evaluative comparisons. [231 ►]

As we grew up and became more sophisticated in our tastes, the mere amount of ice cream simply wasn't enough to persuade us. We began to prefer things like chocolate to vanilla, and so our evaluative comparisons took on new and more complicated aspects. Quantitative evaluations would take us only so far, because now we began to recognize that *qualitative* differences in things sometimes made smaller amounts better than larger amounts. Suppose you think chocolate is better than vanilla. If you had to evaluate and compare a bowl of chocolate ice cream to a bowl of vanilla ice cream, then the chocolate ice cream is probably going to be better to you. We'll call this sort of evaluative comparison a qualitative evaluative comparison.

Our evaluations and comparisons become the most difficult to make when we blend quantitative and qualitative aspects of things together. If, for example, you need to evaluate a large bowl of vanilla ice cream against a spoonful of chocolate, then you run into the difficult challenge of determining which bowl of ice cream is better than the other by mixing quantitative and qualitative evaluation. If you really hate vanilla, then no amount of it is going to be good to you. But what if you think vanilla ice cream is okay? Is a lot of okay-tasting ice cream really better than a spoonful that tastes really good?

By now I suspect most Super-fans have tired of reading about evaluation, comparison, and ice cream. Their origin stories still have them thinking quantitatively: more power is better. This explains why they've probably moved on to something that doesn't take as much intellectual fortitude. Bat-fans' efforts, on the other hand, have been rewarded by learning what makes the comparison of Batman to Superman so difficult. And if we've learned anything from Batman, it's that knowing and understanding the problem is essential to solving it. (This is why we think villains are so stupid for sharing their evil schemes with heroes once they've been captured.) We can sum up the problem like this: comparing Batman and [232 ►] Superman is like comparing two bowls of ice cream that have many good qualities in various amounts. Knowing that it's sometimes hard to make a simple comparison of ice cream helps us to see it's exponentially more difficult to compare two great superheroes. But I am confident that Bat-fans are like their fearless (and smart) hero, and so they're up to the challenge. (Don't let me down!)

Lurking Villainy: Begging the Question

We've come a long way, Bat-fans, but before moving further into the heart of this debate, it will be useful to note an important error that people tend to make when evaluating and comparing. This error is the lurking villainy in most evaluative comparison disputes like those over Batman and Superman, and it is particularly important to take note of it so as to not employ it ourselves. The error I'm referring to is a general argumentative strategy called "begging the question." It's a subtle and fallacious—in other words, bogus—style of argument that can be employed in virtually any argument. It's relevant to the Batman and Superman dispute because it is commonly employed when we make lists of pros and cons to make difficult evaluative comparisons.

"Question-begging" is an abused term these days. We often hear people say things like "This begs the question" when what people really mean is "This raises the question." What philosophers mean when they say something begs the question is that an argument

assumes the truth of the conclusion in its premises, whereas a good argument will support its conclusion with evidence or reasons that people can agree on apart from the conclusion.

For example, suppose you and I are arguing over whether or not vanilla is a better flavor than chocolate. I think vanilla is better than chocolate, and in order to convince you that I'm correct in thinking this, I formulate the following argument: **[233▶]** "Vanilla is better than chocolate, because vanilla is the best flavor in the world." The conclusion is that vanilla is better than chocolate, and the reasoning for this conclusion follows from the fact that vanilla is the best flavor in the world. When we examine this argument, we can see that if vanilla really is the best flavor in the world, then it has to be better than chocolate. The problem, however, is that if you don't think vanilla is better than chocolate, then you aren't going to be convinced by my reason that vanilla is the best flavor in the world. For vanilla to be the best flavor in the world, vanilla must be better than chocolate. Unfortunately, our original argument assumes that vanilla is the best flavor in the world and so it assumes that the conclusion is true as well. Therefore, it begs the question.

In the dispute over Batman and Superman, we run into the very same begging-the-question problem. In these arguments, Superman's amazing powers come up time and time again as the reason Superman is better than Batman. But just as in the chocolate and vanilla dispute, unless you already agree that superpowers make for the best superhero, then you aren't going to agree with the Super-fans' conclusion. For decades now, the Super-fans have been using this bogus argument to undermine Batman's primacy, and that's an insidious villainy we must put a stop to. (To the philosophy-mobile!)

As we all know, in stopping any villain, it is of supreme importance to avoid stooping to the level of the villain. In this particular case this means avoiding begging the question against Super-fans. To avoid the Super-fans' mistake and to help them see the error of their ways, we need to once again discover the source of their mistake. When we were exploring our origin story, we noticed that it is extremely difficult to justify an evaluative comparison when mixing quantitative and qualitative evaluations, which we're doing when we claim that Batman is better than Superman. One of the most common ways to overcome these difficulties is to list the pros and **[234▶]** cons of the things you are comparing. It is, however, this very method of deciding between two possibly good options that causes us to beg the question.

When we make a list of pros and cons, we are making assumptions about what should count as a pro and a con. This means that you are not providing a reason for why something goes on the pro side of the list or the con side of the list. You are simply assuming that particular attributes are pros while others are cons. If you did something similar with Batman and Superman, your lists of pros and cons for each superhero would consist solely of the attributes the superheroes have that you assume are good and bad. Problematically, this provides fertile ground for begging the question in a dispute.

When a Super-fan makes their list of pros, it's probably chock-full of things like X-ray vision, superstrength, and the ability to fly. When the very same Super-fan makes a list for Batman, they probably cite Batman's *lack* of X-ray vision, superstrength, and the ability to fly as cons for Batman. But this is clearly an unjustified evaluation of Batman, since Batman does not need these features to be great. And it begs the question against Batman's greatness when Super-fans assume that Batman needs these features to be the better superhero.

Bat-fans, on the other hand, must also avoid making lists based on the assumption that only the features that Batman has are good. I hesitate to point out the number of times Bat-fans have said that Batman is better because he is smarter. While certainly true, it, too, runs the very same question-begging problem. What makes us Bat-fans think that being smart is so great? We need to have a good reason for thinking this that is independent of our evaluation of Batman, before we can use it as a reason to justify Batman's greatness. To emphasize the error that is being committed when Bat-fans assume this, let's take a look at a similar argument.

Suppose we made a list of pros and cons for Batman. Batman has a lot of cool gadgetry. He needs it. Which column **[235▶]** would cool gadgetry go into, pro or con? I'd put it down as a pro, as I suspect many other Bat-fans would. But for what reason? Here is one reason we cannot use: Batman is great and so his gadgetry must be a pro. Of course, this would beg the question, since we are trying to figure out why Batman is so great. If you think about this argument, it would go like this: Batman is great because he has awesome gadgetry, and his awesome gadgetry is great because he's Batman, and Batman is great. This argument travels in a circle. To avoid begging the question, we need to straighten that circle out. To do this, we need to justify the greatness of Batman independently of how we already feel about Batman.

So here's the task for the Bat-fan: explain why Batman is better than Superman in such a way that doesn't already assume all the things about Batman are better than features possessed by Superman. If we think about how we got to this point in the discussion, we can see where some of the major errors in reasoning have occurred. In particular, think about making lists of pros and cons. Such lists start by assuming some things are good and some things are bad, even though they don't tell us why we think they're good and bad. To avoid begging the question when comparing Batman and Superman, we need to decide first what makes a superhero great and then see whether Batman or Superman has those features. In other words, figure out what sorts of things belong on the list of pros and cons before evaluating the individual superheroes.

Justice Restored: Superheroes and Bravery

No doubt the last section ended with a difficult task, but this is no time to despair. We have discovered a great weakness in these nefarious argumentative strategies, and now it's time to bring them to justice. To accomplish this difficult task, we need to decide on some essential features of a superhero. We can **[236▶]** then use these essential features to make a list of pros and cons for both Batman and Superman that doesn't beg the question in favor of one or the other. These lists will, however, tell us who turns out to be the best superhero of the two.

Our list of essential features will have to be brief, since it would take an entire book to cover the issue thoroughly. The motivation is for you to get an idea of how to start thinking about solving this comparison between Batman and Superman. I will offer one possible argument. It is not watertight, but it may kick off a more fruitful debate about what it is to be a great superhero, and why Batman better fits that mold than Superman.

Before diving into the argument—because we know that usually turns out badly—here's my plan of attack. Good superheroes must be heroic, and to be heroic a person must be courageous or brave. Batman is more courageous and brave than Superman, and so he is

more heroic. The more heroic a superhero, the better that superhero is, and since Batman is more heroic than Superman, we can conclude that Batman is a better superhero than Superman. To see how this argument works, let's make up a superhero to see how he compares to these greats.

Imagine, for a moment, a superhero who has the ability to make socks appear on people's feet by clapping his hands. And these socks are extremely comfortable and durable. Every time this superhero does this, however, he gets a small headache. He likes to help people, and so he often endures the headache to provide socks for hundreds of thousands of people around the globe. He can do something that ordinary people cannot do, and he makes a personal sacrifice to help people every time he endures his headaches. This is a superhero, and we, of course, are interested in determining how great this "Argyled Avenger" really is.

I've suggested that one thing that separates great superheroes from the not-so-great is bravery. There are, of course, other factors like the greatness of their goals, and for this argument we'll assume that Batman and Superman are basically [237▶] tied on that score. The Argyled Avenger is a superhero as well, but he's not so great since his heroism comes from putting socks on people's feet at the cost of suffering a small headache. If he were somehow risking his life to do this great service, then we'd probably speak more highly of him as a superhero, even though his goals are still not as lofty as those of Batman and Superman. Bravery, then, is fundamental to evaluating a superhero. If a superhero is not all that brave, then he is not all that great.

What does it take to be brave or courageous? Enduring a headache doesn't seem to be very brave, even if it is making a sacrifice to help others. But why is it that enduring a headache doesn't seem all that brave? One reason is that we don't think that enduring pain automatically qualifies as doing something dangerous, and we do think that doing dangerous things can mean a person is brave. Going to work can give most people a headache, but we aren't going to be handing out certificates of valor to those with good attendance. On the other hand, when someone confronts something dangerous to help others, then we usually say that person is brave.

It's also important that the heroic person knows that what they're doing is dangerous in order for us to think of them as brave and courageous. For example, there is a big difference between the person who runs into a burning building to save children when he knows it could collapse at any moment, and the person who runs in thinking that the fire is small and unlikely to harm them. A brave person understands what he's doing is dangerous and confronts it anyway.

Return now to Batman and Superman. They both have the lofty goals of saving lives and maintaining justice, but only one of them faces danger on a regular basis and knows it. Only one of them is consistently brave and courageous, while the other is a lot like the Argyled Avenger. (Three guesses as to which one. . .)

Batman has no superpowers. He is not bulletproof. He cannot fly. He cannot look through walls to see what's coming. [238▶] What's more, he is smart enough to know that he is constantly putting himself in danger to help others. So Batman is braver and more courageous than Superman. In other words, Batman takes bigger risks to help people than

Superman. In this respect, Batman is better than Superman, which means that on the list of pros and cons, Batman is a better superhero than Superman on a very important score.

To our credit, we came to this conclusion without begging the question against Superman. We didn't have to stoop to the Super-fans' level. Our goal was accomplished by thinking about what makes superheroes great before we applied our criteria to our evaluation, and our comic relief—the Argyled Avenger—was a useful foil for helping us in the evaluation of all superheroes. (See—he was useful after all!)

To Be Continued. . .

This does not, of course, end the debate. I suspect some Superfans who got bored learning how to reason fairly opted to just skip to the end of this chapter to see the conclusion, and in so doing have had time to think of many objections to my claims about Superman's bravery. It's true that Superman is, on occasion, brave, and it's also true that on occasion Batman is not brave. After all, sometimes his gadgetry stops bullets or helps him fly, but the simple quantitative comparison here is that more often than not, Batman is more heroic than Superman. The great irony in all this is that the things so many Super-fans like about Superman, his superpowers, are the very things that prevent him from being better than Batman. After all, isn't Superman at his most heroic when kryptonite or magic is around? It's just too bad for Super-fans that it isn't around more often!¹

¹ I'd like to give a special thanks to Chris Metivier and John Ridgway for inspiring critical thoughts in this chapter.

19. LEAVING THE SHADOW OF THE BAT:

ARISTOTLE, KANT, AND DICK GRAYSON ON MORAL EDUCATION

Carsten Fogh Nielsen

A Superhero without Superpowers

Batman is a superhero without superpowers. He's a very different character from, for instance, Superman, whose powers and abilities exceed and surpass those of any mere mortal. No amount of training or preparation could ever turn a human being into Superman.

But no supernatural or highly implausible scientific gimmicks are needed for someone to acquire Batman's powers and abilities. This may be the reason Batman has inspired and attracted a number of pupils and apprentices: Nightwing, Robin (or Robins), Oracle, and Huntress, to mention but a few. For various reasons these characters have all devoted their [255 ►] lives to the continuing fight against crime, and they have all chosen Batman as their mentor. Why? Because Batman's powers, as opposed to Superman's, Wonder Woman's, or Spider-Man's, are recognizably *human* powers. What Batman is, what he has become, is not the result of an unexplained natural phenomenon or a mysterious, scientific accident. Batman's "powers" are the result of a dedicated (and arguably obsessive) human pursuit of physical, mental, and moral perfection. It may be far-fetched, but it is possible, at least in principle, that an ordinary human being, by devoting his or her life to a program of relentless exercise and study, could attain the same level of physical, mental, and moral excellence as Batman.

Aristotle and Learning-by-Doing

The idea that you can learn to be a good or virtuous human being by emulating or imitating a morally exemplary person is a very old idea. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE) argued for precisely this idea almost 2,500 years ago in his book the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle asked a very basic and very simple question: How do we become good human beings? His answer was equally simple: We become good human beings in the same way that we become good at most other things, namely through practice and repetition. As he wrote, "Anything that we have to learn to do we learn by the actual doing of it: people become builders by building and instrumentalists by playing instruments. Similarly we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing brave ones."²

At first glance this might seem mere common sense. How else could we learn anything except by actually doing it, or at least attempting to do it? It is how we learn to do math, drive a car, throw a Batarang, and so on. But there seems to be a problem with Aristotle's idea. It seems easy enough to distinguish and recognize the activities and actions involved in, say, building [256 ►] a house or playing an instrument, but how do we know which acts are just, temperate, and brave? How do we determine whether any particular action embodies the virtues that we are trying to acquire and develop?

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, rev. ed., trans. J. A. K. Thomson (London: Penguin Classics, 1976), 1103b2-5. The numbers refer to marginal page numbers that are the same in any edition of this work.

Luckily Aristotle had an answer to this problem: if we want to know what it means to be just or temperate or brave, we should study those persons to whom we attribute these virtues.³ A just person, after all, is a person who regularly and reliably performs just actions; a temperate person is a person who can be relied on to not overindulge; and a brave person is a person who faces dangers without backing down. So, if we want to learn about justice, temperance, or bravery, we should look to those morally exemplary persons who we think actually *are* just, temperate, or brave.

However, if we want to be just, temperate, or brave, we should not merely study the actions of people who are just, temperate, and brave. We should also try to imitate the actions of such people, in the hope that we might in the process acquire their admirable moral qualities or virtues. If we want to become brave, we should perform actions similar to those a brave man would perform; if we want to become temperate, we should perform actions similar to those a temperate man would perform; and so on.

Is Batman a Morally Exemplary Human Being?

Consider the relationship between Batman and Robin. Batman not only teaches Robin certain particular skills, like how to use the Batarang or the best way to disarm a robber. By his very actions Batman also provides Robin with certain moral standards and norms; for example, the idea that criminals should be pursued relentlessly, that dangers should be faced without flinching, and that one should attempt to make the world a better place. By following the example set by Batman, [257 ►] by attempting to act as Batman acts, Robin gradually acquires not only certain practical skills and abilities, but also a moral outlook and a number of virtues (like courage and a sense of justice) related to this outlook.

Batman thus seems to be a good example of what Aristotle had in mind when he suggested that we look to the virtuous person for guidance about how to become morally better persons. In Gotham City, in the DC Universe in general, and even in our own mundane reality, many people regard Batman as a morally exemplary human being. And, it would seem, with good reason: Batman is without a doubt courageous and intelligent. He has a strong sense of justice, is capable of keeping his head cool even in the midst of battle, and is willing to sacrifice his own life and happiness to make the world a better place. These all appear to be desirable and valuable qualities, which we would like more people to possess. So, following Aristotle's suggestion, we should all perhaps attempt to be more like Batman, to act as he would act, in the hope that we can gradually acquire some of the virtues he has. Nightwing, Robin, Oracle, and the other masked heroes who have chosen Batman as the ideal by which to model and structure their lives thus seem to be following sound Aristotelian advice. They have chosen to emulate the actions and behavior of a morally exemplary person in order to acquire and develop the morally desirable qualities he seems to possess.⁴

Authority Shmauthority!

There are several problems with Aristotle's account, however. He may very well be correct that we acquire our very first understanding of right and wrong by following the example of people we regard as morally exemplary. In practice, the people whom children regard as

³ Ibid., 1140a24-25.

⁴ For further discussion of Aristotle's idea of moral education, see the essay by David Kyle Johnson and Ryan Indy Rhodes in chapter 9 of this book.

morally exemplary will, more often than not, be people in a position of authority—their parents, their teachers, and so on. So it's not surprising that Robin [258►] regards Batman as a person worth following and imitating. Both the first and the second Robins, Dick Grayson and Jason Todd, regard Batman as a kind of father figure. Bruce Wayne took Dick Grayson in as his legal ward after his parents were killed, and he adopted Jason Todd after having surprised him trying to steal the tires off the Batmobile.⁵

But people should not be regarded as morally exemplary persons merely because they are in positions of authority; they should be regarded as morally exemplary because they are morally exemplary. Batman should not be considered a person who embodies many valuable virtues simply because he is Batman, but because he actually *embodies* these virtues. And children should choose to admire and emulate people who actually are morally admirable, not simply people who happen to be authority figures. Parents and teachers are not necessarily morally admirable persons, and the fact that children often admire and imitate their parents does not mean that their parents are, in fact, worth admiring and imitating. Just imagine what would have happened if the Joker, not Batman, had taken in Dick Grayson.

Let's Call This the "Gordon-Yindel Disagreement"

So how do we know that the people we regard as morally virtuous actually are morally virtuous? Most of the people in Gotham City, as well as most of us here in the real world, may very well think that Batman is courageous, intelligent, just, strong, and so on. But not everyone thinks so. Some people believe that Batman is a dangerous vigilante, whose deliberate disrespect for the law constitutes a far greater threat to society than do the actions of criminals he puts behind bars.

The question of whether Batman is a hero or a villain is a very important theme in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986).⁶ When James Gordon resigns as police commissioner [259►] of Gotham City, his last request is to ask his successor, Ellen Yindel, to take note of, and learn from, Batman. But instead, Yindel's very first action as the new head of the police department is to denounce Batman as a masked vigilante and to sign a warrant for his immediate arrest. Yindel later regrets this decision, and toward the end of *The Dark Knight Returns* she actually seems to support Batman's actions. But her initial reaction, and one shared by many of the characters appearing in Miller's tale, is a clear rejection of the very idea of Batman's being a morally laudable person.

The disagreement about Batman's moral status reveals that merely *regarding* someone as morally virtuous and worth emulating does not mean that they actually are morally virtuous and worth emulating. But how should we decide whether someone actually is morally

⁵ Tim Drake, the third Robin, is a somewhat different case. Tim had a family of his own when he joined Batman; he voluntarily chose to seek out Batman and become his sidekick; and he was only recently adopted by Bruce. Tim has relied much less on Batman as a father figure than the previous Robins did, which is probably why he was never as intimidated by him as Dick and Jason were.

⁶ Incidentally, the problem of vigilantism was also important at the very beginning of Batman's career. In the very early stories Batman showed a far greater disrespect for the law than later in his career, a characteristic quickly removed by his editors. See Will Brooker's insightful discussion of the origin of the Batman-mythos in chapter 1 of *Batman Unmasked: Analysing a Cultural Icon* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000).

virtuous? We cannot simply rely on popular opinion or the advice of others, since popular opinion can be divided and people can disagree. Both James Gordon and Ellen Yindel are highly intelligent people who live in the same country, indeed the same city, and who share many of the same moral beliefs and values. And yet they disagree strongly about Batman's moral status. Both Gordon and Yindel cannot be right at the same time, so how do we decide who is right? And, more important, if we have no clear and unanimous conception of who is, and who is not, morally virtuous, then how do we go about becoming morally better persons? Aristotle's notion of moral education seems to be in trouble.

And in the Other Corner . . . Kant!

These objections to the Aristotelian account of moral education can be traced back to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In his influential book *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant thus criticized the idea that we can use morally exemplary human beings to determine what to do, how to act, and whether a particular action is [260 ►] right or wrong. "For, every example . . . represented to me must itself first be appraised in accordance with principles of morality, as to whether it is also worthy to serve as an original example, that is, as a model."⁷ Kant claimed that this is true even for Jesus, and he would presumably have said the same about Batman as well. Whether Batman actually is a morally exemplary human being, worthy of admiration and imitation, cannot be determined simply by appealing to the fact that most people think he is, or to his apparent authority. We need to directly ask whether Batman embodies the fundamental norms and requirements of morality.

For Kant the most fundamental feature of human existence, and therefore the most important moral value, is freedom. In the *Groundwork* Kant argued that the defining feature of human beings is their ability to direct their lives in accordance with rational, universal principles or laws, which they themselves had chosen. Kant named this ability *autonomy*, and claimed that being autonomous, being able to direct one's own life in accordance with self-chosen or self-legislated universal principles, is what human freedom is: "What, then, can freedom of the will be other than autonomy, that is, the will's property of being a law to itself?"⁸

According to Kant, every human being has the capacity to act autonomously insofar as they are rational.⁹ But not everyone actually uses or realizes this capacity. Some people live their lives not in accordance with principles they have chosen themselves, but by how others think they should live. Kant calls the condition of letting your life and your actions be determined by external authorities or forces *heteronomy*.¹⁰ In *What Is Enlightenment?* Kant gives the following description of what it means to be in the condition of heteronomy and explains why many people never leave this condition: "It is so comfortable to be a minor! If I have a book that understands for me, a spiritual advisor who has a conscience for me, a doctor who

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, in the *Practical Philosophy* volume of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 408. All subsequent references to Kant's writings are to standard marginal page numbers that are found in all decent editions of his texts.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 446-447.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 440.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 433, 441.

decides upon a regimen for me, and so forth, I need [261 ►] not trouble myself at all. I need not think if only I can pay; others will readily undertake the irksome business for me."¹¹

Throughout history, Kant claims, heteronomy has been the default option for most people. Gods, priests, kings, doctors, and politicians have all been busy deciding how human beings should live and have spared little thought for those individuals' own capacity for autonomy. And most people have not protested. Why? Because it is easy and comfortable to let others decide what to think and how to act. For Kant the primary purpose of moral education is to bring people from this comfortable condition of heteronomy to a point where they can effectively exert their capacity for autonomy. And this, Kant thinks, is somewhat at odds with the Aristotelian idea of moral education as primarily a process of imitation and emulation of other people. "The imitator (in moral matters) is without character, for character consists precisely in originality in thinking," as Kant put it.¹² The problem with Aristotle's idea is that by letting the actions of someone else (like Batman for instance) determine how I should act, I seem to submit myself to an external authority: I relegate the responsibility for my own life to someone else and refuse to accept the burden of deciding for myself how to live and what kind of person to be.

The famous (or perhaps infamous) Batman TV series from the 1960s provides an extreme example of what Kant has in mind. One of the most irritating features of this show, even for fans, is the way Robin (played by Burt Ward) always comes off as a cheap copy of Batman (Adam West). Batman has all the bright ideas—Robin merely follows in his wake. Whenever the villain of the week manages to trap Batman and Robin in his surefire, "they'll never get out of here alive" trap, it's always Batman—never Robin—who finds the only, and often implausible, way to escape. Whenever the Dynamic Duo has to figure out some mysterious clue, it's always Batman—never Robin—who manages to decipher it. It's not because Robin does not try; the problem is rather that whenever he tries to [262 ►] show initiative, to think on his own, he fails because he has not acquired an independent frame of mind. He has merely adopted Batman's way of thinking.

Dick Grayson and How to Become an Autonomous Human Being (or Your Money Back!)

So we have a problem. On the one hand, Aristotle's account of how human beings acquire and develop a moral outlook seems quite convincing; we imitate and emulate those we regard as morally admirable, and through our attempts to follow their example, we gradually acquire certain values, norms, and virtues. On the other hand, Kant also seems to be right in insisting that autonomy, the capacity to determine for oneself the principles and norms by which one's life should be structured, is a crucial feature of what it means to be human. The problem is that these two ideas seem to pull in different directions. Aristotle thinks that examples set by other people play an important role in moral education; Kant believes that relying on the actions and conduct of other people to tell us what to do amounts to a denial of autonomy. Who's right?

¹¹ Kant, *What Is Enlightenment?* trans. Mary Gregor, in the *Practical Philosophy* volume of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 36.

¹² Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 293.

Perhaps they are both right, or at least partly right. It seems obvious that most children are not able to consciously direct their own lives in accordance with universal principles, which they themselves have chosen. They simply do not possess the ability to do so. If we take Kant seriously, then one of the most important tasks of moral education must be to provide immature human beings with these capacities. But one way in which human beings acquire the capacities required for full-blown autonomy might very well be by imitating and emulating other persons, in particular, persons who seem to embody important moral virtues. If so, then both Aristotle and Kant may very well be right: Aristotle describes the initial stages in the process of moral education, whereas Kant focuses on **[263▶]** the aim, or end, of this process. Neither Kant nor Aristotle would probably agree with this, but if we accept that they both seem to have gotten something right, then this is perhaps the price we have to pay. In philosophy, as in life, you cannot assume that because someone is right about one thing he or she is also right about everything else.

Once again the Batman-Robin relationship can be used to sharpen our understanding. One difference between the Robin of the 1960s TV series and Robin as portrayed in the comic books is that the former never manages to develop an independent personality and frame of mind (he remains in a condition of heteronomy), whereas the latter does. In the comics, Dick Grayson, the first Robin, gradually develops a life separate from and independent of Batman. He graduates from high school (no mean feat when simultaneously battling supervillains and crime lords next to Batman), leaves Gotham City for college, and cofounds and leads several versions of the Teen Titans. And, at the perhaps defining moment of his career, Dick Grayson actually gives up his identity as Robin and instead assumes a new superhero persona, Nightwing. In at least some versions of the story, this latter decision leads to a heated encounter with Batman, who initially refuses to accept that Dick Grayson/Robin will no longer act as his sidekick. However, Nightwing perseveres and goes on to become the champion of his own city, Blüdhaven.

Dick Grayson doesn't just free himself from Batman's influence and become a respected crime fighter in his own right, he does so using the very abilities and character traits he has acquired and learned from Batman. Most obviously, Nightwing uses the detective skills he has been taught by Batman, and the physical and mental abilities he has developed through their mutual collaboration, in his own war against crime. Equally important, but not nearly as obvious, is the way Nightwing employs the courage, intelligence, and integrity that Batman has helped instill in him, to liberate himself from Batman's influence. **[264▶]** It takes guts to stand up to Batman, as most villains (and many superheroes) will testify, but Nightwing manages to do so and even gets Batman to accept his decision to quit being Robin. And he is able to do this largely because of the moral character he has acquired through his relationship with Batman.

Dick Grayson thus appears to have acquired and developed the capacities needed for him to become an autonomous human being, mainly by imitating and emulating a morally exemplary person, Batman. If this is right, then there is no necessary opposition between Aristotle and Kant. Or at least there is no necessary opposition between the Aristotelian idea that moral education involves learning from and emulating other people and the Kantian insistence on the importance of autonomy, the capacity to direct one's life in accordance with self-chosen or self-legislated universal principles.

This also answers another question, namely how we determine whether a person whom we regard as morally admirable and worthy of emulation actually is morally exemplary. Remember that Kant believed that in order for someone to qualify as a morally exemplary person, he would have to "first be appraised in accordance with principles of morality."¹³ For Kant, autonomy, the human capacity to direct one's life and actions in accordance with self-determined principles, is the most important moral value. Using the Kantian notion of autonomy, we can now say that a person is morally exemplary if emulating her actions and behavior helps people develop the abilities and competencies needed to become autonomous human beings. If what we said about Nightwing is true, then Batman can truly be considered a morally exemplary person.

Leaving the Shadow of the Bat

Dick Grayson's moral development has shown us that Aristotle and Kant can be reconciled. The virtues and abilities we acquire by emulating other people can be a (perhaps necessary) step on [265►] the way toward becoming autonomous human beings who are able to take responsibility for our own lives.

As Kant noted, it is easy and comfortable being in the state of heteronomy, being a person who has relegated the responsibility for her own life to kings, priests, and parents. Taking responsibility for one's own life is not easy, and to be able to do so is an achievement, not something that simply happens. Other people can offer help and guidance, and their lives and actions can inspire us to better ourselves, to become the sort of person we ought to be. But at some point we have to stop being guided by others; we have to stop living our lives through examples set by other people, and start deciding for ourselves what to do, how to act, and what kind of person we ought to be. Batman can inspire us, but in the end we, like Dick Grayson, have to take charge of our own lives and give up the comfort of living in the shadow of the Bat.

¹³ Kant, *Groundwork*, 408.