

# Superheroes and Philosophy

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*Truth, Justice, and the  
Socratic Way*

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## With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: On the Moral Duties of the Super-Powerful and Super-Heroic

CHRISTOPHER ROBICHAUD

Halfway through *Spider-Man 2*, Peter Parker does the unthinkable: he quits being Spider-Man. He throws in the towel, er, costume, in the hopes of salvaging what's left of his personal life, a life reduced to shambles by his exploits as a crime fighter. Peter finds that walking away from wall-crawling improves his social and academic pursuits, but not without a cost.

In the absence of Spider-Man, the crime rate in New York City rises a whopping seventy-five percent. Indeed, Peter can't even stroll down the street without encountering someone who could use Spidey's help. Pleased that his life is taking a turn for the better but troubled by the thought that he's shirking his responsibilities, a frustrated Peter Parker looks out the window of his tiny studio apartment and asks both himself and the city he once swore to protect, "What am I supposed to do?"

### **With Great Power Comes—*What?***

This is a good question. What should Peter Parker do? Uncle Ben famously tells his nephew that with great power comes great responsibility. But what does this mean? Does Peter have a responsibility to use his amazing powers to fight crime and offer help to those in need? Is he obligated to take up the role of Spider-Man? And what are the duties that come with this role? Must Peter always put his personal interests in thrall to it? Is it right for him to deceive his friends and family about his web-slinging escapades? How should he interact with a public that

distrusts him and a city that often seeks to arrest him? And what responsibilities does he have regarding the colorful cavalcade of villains that he battles on a regular basis?

One of the things that make *Spider-Man* such compelling fiction is that it isn't afraid to show us a superhero grappling with these issues. Needless to say, though, Peter Parker isn't the only kid on the block with superpowers. Comic books have given rise to a universe chock-full of people with amazing abilities, and all of them face the same fundamental moral concerns. What should they do? Is it their duty to don a cape, or cowl, or a primary-colored spandex jumpsuit and take up the role of hero? And then, duty or not, for those who do embrace this role, what obligations do they thereby gain?

Notice that these questions aren't asking how super-powerful and super-heroic persons *do* in fact live their lives. To answer that, we don't need to look any further than the chronicles of their adventures. Rather, these questions are asking how they *ought* to live their lives. This makes them what philosophers call normative questions. And normative ethics is the branch of moral philosophy that provides us with the resources needed for answers. We'll begin our investigation, then, by examining what one of the more prominent theories within normative ethics—utilitarianism—has to say about the duties of super-powerful individuals. But first, we need to tackle two hobgoblins.

Any philosophical investigation into moral duties inevitably brings with it considerations of what is good or bad, and what is right or wrong.<sup>1</sup> Two extreme philosophical views would make any such investigation a waste of time. Ethical nihilism claims that moral properties just don't exist. Nothing is really good or bad, and nothing is morally right or wrong. Ethical relativists make the different claim that moral properties are always relative to a point of view, and a set of standards. On this perspective, there are no universal and objective answers to the questions we want to ask.

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<sup>1</sup> Here and throughout, the normative properties I have in mind—properties having to do with value—are moral ones, to be distinguished from, say, aesthetic ones. For example, helping the poor is good and my mother's cooking is good, but only the former is good in the moral sense (saint-like though my mother is, her home cooked food does not fall into the category of things that are morally good).

Fortunately, we can reasonably dismiss these views. Philosophers who have tried to defend them have run into some notorious difficulties. And, on examination, neither of them reflects our ordinary beliefs about these matters. Most of us don't think that actions are never good or bad, nor do we think that actions are good or bad only relative to a limited perspective. On the contrary, most of us believe, for example, that Mother's Teresa's assistance to the poor was objectively good and that Hitler's policies of genocide were actually and absolutely bad. For these reasons, we won't let ethical nihilism and ethical relativism hold us back, and our discussion will just take it as given that both these views are false. Morality is real, and it's not just all relative.

### **Start Stitchin' That Costume, Bub. Duty Calls**

Now, let's dive right in to what is perhaps one of the most famous philosophical views in history, utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that comes in several shapes and sizes. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), its two most famous proponents, offered different versions of its specifics,<sup>2</sup> and contemporary utilitarians have made many further refinements. We're going to bypass a lot of these nuances, though, and focus primarily on Mill's version, or at least an interpretation of it, in what follows.

Utilitarianism builds its account of what makes an act right on its view of what makes an act good. The big picture looks like this. The rightness or wrongness of an act is determined entirely by its consequences; specifically, it's determined by the amount of goodness the act produces. Goodness, for its part, is essentially tied up with happiness, and happiness is taken as consisting both in the presence of pleasure and in the absence of pain. So the rightness or wrongness of any action is a result of the pleasure and pain it produces.

It's the *overall* happiness resulting from an action that determines its rightness or wrongness, not just the happiness produced in the person performing it. This means that the pleasures

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<sup>2</sup> See Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) and Mill's *Utilitarianism* (1861). Sadly, first editions of these philosophical classics are probably worth less than a mint copy of *Detective Comics* #27.

and pains brought about in all beings capable of having such experiences are taken into account when morally evaluating an action. In addition to physical pleasures, there are intellectual pleasures, emotional pleasures, artistic pleasures, and so forth—and likewise for pains. Needless to say, beings who are capable of experiencing pleasures and pains do not always have the same spectrum of experiences available to them. A cat, for example, is capable of enjoying the pleasure that results from eating fine tuna, but is incapable of enjoying the pleasure that results from reading *Watchmen*.

According to utilitarianism, then, a person does the right thing when, of all those actions available to her at the time, she chooses the one that produces the most good, which is determined by the amount of happiness that results from the action. And this is to be judged by the extent to which that action maximizes overall pleasure and minimizes overall pain.

There are several reasons to find this view appealing. Perhaps the most obvious one is that it captures what appears to be a core insight into morality, namely, that the right action in any situation—the action that ought to be taken—is the one that results in the greatest overall good. That certainly sounds correct. If given the choice between two actions that will produce different amounts of goodness, it doesn't seem as if it would ever be right to choose the one that will bring about the lesser amount. Another mark in favor of utilitarianism is that it links goodness with happiness, and happiness with the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain. It's quite plausible to think that good things are good to the extent that they are pleasurable and not painful. And a further appealing reason to endorse this view is that it provides a clear rule to guide our behavior: we should always act to bring about the most overall good.

Let's look at how utilitarianism works. Suppose Clark Kent faces the choice either of representing the *Daily Planet* at a press conference or of rescuing a plane that's experiencing engine failure. If he doesn't attend the conference, he'll lose his job. If the plane crashes, hundreds of people will die. What should he do? Utilitarians answer that he's obligated to perform the action that brings about the greatest overall good. Presumably, then, he ought to rescue the plane, even though that will cost him his job.

What this illustrates is that if utilitarianism is correct, we must be prepared to make difficult personal sacrifices in order to fulfill our moral duties. Of course, a run-of-the-mill reporter wouldn't have been obligated to forgo attending the conference in order to rescue a plane, as rescuing a plane wouldn't even have been an option for him. Utilitarians don't claim that we have a duty to do things we *can't* do. But they still make significant demands on us. When we face the choice of spending a hundred dollars of discretionary income on a pair of designer jeans or of donating that money to charity, these philosophers typically tell us that we're obligated to give the money away.

The theory of utilitarianism lends itself to evaluating broader courses of action. Should you be a teacher? A parent? A rocket-scientist? More relevant to our concerns here, is there a duty for anyone with the proper abilities to become a superhero? Unsurprisingly, utilitarians claim that the answers to such questions are determined by the consequences that would be brought about in virtue of adopting these various roles. On the supposition that taking up such a role is a genuine option (after all, you need a keen mind to be a rocket scientist, and superpowers—or at least very highly developed normal powers—to be a superhero), you are obligated to adopt a particular role in life if and only if doing so will bring about the greatest overall good. Needless to say, this suggests that folks with superpowers have a duty to become superheroes, since it's the very business of superheroes to promote the good of all. So now we have an answer to Peter Parker's query from *Spider-Man 2*. According to utilitarianism, he's obligated to remain our friendly neighborhood superhero. Doing so may cause him great personal pain, but this pain is outweighed by the overall good that his super-heroic activities bring to the world.

### **Aw, C'mon! Do I Have to Save the Day?**

But there's more to the story. Utilitarianism isn't the only philosophical theory on the market, and it faces some serious objections. Can it really be true that Peter *must* be Spider-Man? Is it his duty to be a superhero even if his personal life continues to spiral downward? In general, are people with superpowers always obligated to act in a way that promotes the overall good, even if doing so comes at great personal cost? Before we accept

the conclusions that utilitarianism draws, we need to look at some of its problems.

Any moral theory worth its salt is sometimes going to require us to make personal sacrifices. Utilitarianism, however, demands too much. Suppose Juggernaut is on the rampage again, and Jean Grey has been using her telekinetic powers to slow him down. Juggernaut being who he is, this has not been an easy task. Jean finds herself severely weakened. Juggernaut, in turn, seizes upon an opportunity to get her off his back by knocking a bus packed with people over the side of a bridge. Jean's abilities can bring the passengers to safety, but in her current state, she knows that rescuing them is going to cause her to undergo massive brain trauma and death. Jean no doubt will choose to save the passengers anyway. Let's grant, too, that doing so brings about the most overall good. Surely we'd all admire Jean's selfless action. The problem, however, is that utilitarians claim that Jean would've been wrong not to have sacrificed her life. And that, as philosophers say, is unintuitive. It goes against our pre-theoretical moral beliefs.

Do we really think that Jean would have deserved any serious moral blame if she had made the anguished choice to remain alive rather than to kill herself by expending the last of her mental powers? Surely not. Utilitarianism obliterates the possibility for actions to be *supererogatory*, which means above and beyond the call of duty. Supererogatory acts are acts that are good to do but not bad not to do.

A utilitarian might respond to this worry by suggesting that we shouldn't have assumed that Jean's saving of the passengers would in fact bring about the most good. After all, if Jean were to die saving them, she'd never again be able to save any other lives. And certainly there will be countless people who need to be saved in the future. So if it's the production of the most overall good that we're after, we ought to conclude that Jean shouldn't sacrifice herself for the sake of the passengers. This response, however, poses just as serious a problem for the utilitarian as the one she is trying to address, for now she's committed to claiming that Jean is obligated not to save the passengers. But just as it seems inappropriate to find Jean blameworthy for saving her own life in the situation, so it would seem at least as inappropriate to find her blameworthy for sacrificing her life. Imagine criticizing such selflessness! The bottom line here is that our intu-



itions tell us that the choice of sacrificing herself to save the lives of the passengers, and the alternative of sparing her own life by regretfully letting the passengers die are both permissible actions available to Jean, and utilitarianism simply lacks the resources needed to capture such intuitions about supererogatory acts.

A related problem is that utilitarianism forces us to choose actions that oppose the very core of our character.<sup>3</sup> Consider the following situation. Wonder Woman once more finds herself battling Ares, and the god of war has really outdone himself this time. He confronts her with a little girl and tells her that if she doesn't kill this child, he'll set in motion a global biological war sure to doom millions. Let's grant that Ares is telling the truth and that Wonder Woman cannot, despite her best efforts, stop him any other way. Needless to say, killing little girls runs contrary to everything Wonder Woman stands for. But utilitarianism would demand that she take the girl's life, for clearly that's the act that will bring about the greatest overall good. Wonder Woman, according to this view, would be doing the wrong thing if she spared the child's life. But our intuitions suggest just the opposite: She would be doing something terribly wrong if she killed this innocent child. Again, utilitarianism delivers a judgment that we intuitively reject.

Another problem with a utilitarian philosophy is its handling of justice. In *The Joker: Devil's Advocate*, Joker finds himself on death row.<sup>4</sup> But, wouldn't you know it, he's been found guilty of a crime this time that he didn't commit. We can all agree that letting Joker nonetheless die would bring about a greater overall good than rescuing him from this odd situation. Innumerable future killing sprees on his part would thereby be avoided. But Batman knows that Joker didn't commit this crime, and he has the evidence to prove it. Should he let Joker die for a crime he didn't commit? Utilitarians will say he should. But doing so would clearly be unjust, and no one ought to do what's unjust. Batman knows this, and refuses to let his wicked nemesis be executed on false grounds.

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<sup>3</sup> This criticism is due to Bernard Williams. See J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, ed., *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 93–100.

<sup>4</sup> *The Joker: Devil's Advocate*, by Chuck Dixon and Graham Nolan (New York: DC Comics, 1996).

A remaining issue to raise against utilitarianism concerns its complete emphasis on the consequences of actions. Once more, this leads to unintuitive results. Suppose the Green Goblin decides to grab Spider-Man's attention by terrorizing pedestrians. Speeding along on his bat glider, he spots an appropriate target walking down Fifth Avenue. Lassoing this man with a cable, Green Goblin pulls him along behind the glider as he streaks up and down the street, cackling maniacally all the time. As it turns out, the man is a disgruntled dishwasher who was on his way to the restaurant that employs him, where he planned to unload his handgun on an unsuspecting group of diners. Not only does the Goblin's action interrupt this nefarious plot from unfolding, but the experience so traumatizes the deranged man that, after Spider-Man comes on the scene and frees him, he abandons his murderous plan, destroys his gun, and signs up for an anger-management course. As it stands, then, Green Goblin did something that brought about a greater overall good than if he had just left this man alone. His action prevented twenty or more lives from being taken. So did he do the right thing? Utilitarians are forced by their view to answer in the affirmative. But surely that's not correct. Dragging this man around Fifth Avenue with the intention of traumatizing him and baiting Spider-Man is wrong, even if doing so unintentionally produces great good.

### **I'm a Lover, Not a Fighter!**

These considerations show that utilitarianism faces some formidable obstacles in its attempt to provide us with a viable ethical theory. Of course, many gifted philosophers inclined towards utilitarianism continue to develop arguments in response to the sorts of objections we've raised. But the problems we've highlighted certainly justify us in looking for a different moral framework with which to analyze our question of what super-powerful persons ought to do. So let's explore instead the main alternative available to us in moral theory, a broadly nonconsequentialist ethical stance.

Nonconsequentialist theories, true to their name, deny that the moral worth of actions is determined entirely by their consequences. Kantianism is the most famous of these, and it goes so far as to claim that the consequences of actions don't matter

at all in determining their moral worth. The great philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) maintained that our fundamental duty is to act in a way that satisfies what he called “the categorical imperative,” one formulation of which states that we are always to treat persons as ends in themselves and not merely as means.<sup>5</sup> This comes down to something like always respecting people as having intrinsic value, and never just using them for our own purposes, as if they had just instrumental value. But Kant also emphasized that performing an action in accordance with the categorical imperative is not enough to make it good. Crucially, the action must also be done for the right reasons; that is, you must do it precisely because it’s your duty to do it. On this view, then, our intentions are crucially relevant to the moral worth of what we do. So if an action treats individuals as ends in themselves and not merely as means to attaining further ends, and if a person performs that action because she intends to follow her duty by acting in a way that treats people appropriately, then her action is good, regardless of its consequences.

Most contemporary nonconsequentialists aren’t strict Kantians, but all take their lead from Kant’s system, and we’ll follow suit. Our immediate concern is to determine what a non-consequentialist perspective has to say about the obligations of folks with superpowers. Does it require them to be superheroes, as utilitarianism does?

Let’s begin to answer this question by attending to an important distinction that some nonconsequentialists make between positive and negative duties. Positive duties are obligations to do things that aid people, like tending to the ill or feeding the poor. Negative duties, in contrast, are obligations to refrain from doing things that harm people, like maliciously lying to, or assaulting, an innocent person. They are constraints on our actions. Fulfillment of our positive and negative duties is one way to flesh out the Kantian idea of treating people as ends in themselves and not merely as means. In particular, by fulfilling our positive duties, we treat people as ends in themselves (we show them respect), and by fulfilling our negative duties, we avoid treating them merely as means (we refrain from simply

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<sup>5</sup> See Kant’s *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), translated by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

using them). And just as Kant put more of an emphasis on the importance of not treating individuals merely as means than he did on the importance of treating them as ends in themselves, so nonconsequentialists who subscribe to the distinction between negative and positive duties put more of an emphasis on negative duties than on positive ones.

To see what this amounts to, suppose that Doctor Doom has left two badly wounded people in the wake of his most recent attack against The Fantastic Four. Reed Richards, a.k.a., Mr. Fantastic, can save their lives with one of the many wonderful devices he's built, but these poor people are in such bad shape that he needs certain vital internal organs in order to do so. Is he permitted to kill a nearby pedestrian and use her organs to heal Doom's victims? If a utilitarian were to answer this question, she would say that not only is Mr. Fantastic permitted to kill the pedestrian, he's obligated to do so since, all else being equal, saving the two lives in this case promotes more good than not taking the one life. But our intuitions tell us that Reed Richards most assuredly is not permitted to do this. And the nonconsequentialist agrees. Since negative duties are stronger than positive duties, we are prohibited from fulfilling our positive duties by violating our negative duties. So Mr. Fantastic isn't permitted to violate his negative duty not to kill an innocent person in order to fulfill a positive duty to heal the wounded.

One important upshot of this is that nonconsequentialists often don't come down on one action over another if it turns out that it's not possible to perform both of them, but doing either would satisfy some positive duties while not violating any negative ones. In such a situation, either action is permissible. With that in mind, let's return to the case that began our discussion. On the plausible assumption that no negative duties are violated either by Peter Parker's choosing to be Spider-Man or by his choosing not to be Spider-Man, and assuming that either choice will allow him to satisfy some positive duties (helping people, for example, by doing the things that superheroes do, or alternately by investing his energies in medically beneficial scientific research), nonconsequentialists will conclude that both options are allowable.

Peter, of course, opts to be Spider-Man. Presuming that he does so with proper intentions, nonconsequentialists will go on to claim that his choice is not only permissible, but is good. Had

he chosen not to be Spider-Man, though, he wouldn't have done anything wrong. Indeed, presuming that he made this contrary choice with the right intentions, a decision not to be Spider-Man could also have been good.

According to this perspective, opting to be a superhero is a supererogatory act, one that goes beyond the call of duty. Nonconsequentialists, therefore, don't think that folks with superpowers are obligated to serve the world as superheroes. This means that if Peter wants to hang up his costume to pursue science and the love of his life, Mary Jane, he's permitted to do so. And if Clark Kent wants to give up his powers to be with Lois Lane—a choice he faces in *Superman II*—then that, too, is permissible.

This is as it should be. After all, we think that part of what makes the superheroes heroic is that they don't have to do what they do. It's permissible for them to live ordinary lives. Their choosing to do otherwise is what makes their actions that much more praiseworthy. The great responsibility that comes with their great power isn't a duty to use that power as a superhero, it's at most an obligation not to harm others by misusing it.

An interesting question, though, still remains. For those who do choose to take up the role of a superhero, how should they conduct themselves? We already know that it's the business of superheroes to fight crime, to help the helpless, and to protect people from the twisted machinations of supervillains. Superheroes aggressively pursue these noble tasks, even at great risk to themselves. But they also often behave in ways that might not be morally appropriate. And this is a matter we need to explore further.

### **I Fought the Law and the Law Won**

One issue worth investigating is how superheroes, in their pursuit of criminals, ought to interact with law enforcement agencies. Needless to say, there is at best a relationship of convenience between most costumed crusaders and the police officers who protect the same neighborhoods that they watch over. Batman, for example, though mistrusted by many on the Gotham police force, has an ally in Lieutenant (later Commissioner) Gordon. As a result, he is able to work with the authorities to apprehend criminals. But his methods still raise questions.

Gotham's police officers are legally bound by certain rules. They are prohibited from searching people's homes without legal warrants, from using physical intimidation tactics to gain information, and from arresting people without having evidence against them or without reading them their rights. But Batman isn't a police officer. He doesn't get warrants before crashing into criminals' lairs, he uses physical intimidation tactics all the time to gather information, he often apprehends criminals without having legally sufficient evidence against them, and he surely doesn't read them their rights. Should Batman be doing these things?

It could be argued that Batman's procedures result in a lot of good. And there's no doubt about that. But as we've learned from our examination of utilitarianism, a course of action that produces the most overall good still might be the wrong thing to do. Indeed, building on our discussion of nonconsequentialism, it seems reasonable that police officers are bound to act under certain constraints because the law in this case reflects our negative duties. We all have a negative duty not to barge into people's homes without good reason, not to intimidate them physically, and not to apprehend them without appropriate cause. Acting otherwise would not just be illegal, it would also be immoral. In the absence, then, of circumstances that might override these duties (and most nonconsequentialists maintain that negative duties can be overridden under some conditions), Batman ought to amend his crime-fighting tactics. And so it goes for all superheroes.

But this might come as just too much of a shock. We could easily be tempted to argue that just as super-powerful people can reasonably be thought to take on special obligations when they opt to be superheroes, they also gain special privileges. After all, people who adopt other exalted roles in society sometimes gain privileges by doing so. In Washington D.C., for example, members of Congress are exempt from receiving traffic tickets if they break traffic laws while on official government business. Foreign ambassadors likewise have important forms of diplomatic immunity to arrest and prosecution. So perhaps superheroes, given their extraordinary talents and their willingness to take on perilous risks in their pursuit of criminals, ought to be exempt from some of the laws that bind ordinary officers of the law.

This way of thinking is flawed for two reasons. First, police officers also take on perilous risks in their efforts to fight crime and help people. Superheroes shouldn't gain special exemptions for that reason, then, unless we think that police officers should as well. But, of course, we don't think that. We would therefore need to justify exempting superheroes but not police officers from normal constraints by appealing to the fact that superheroes have greater powers than police officers do. But power alone doesn't justify special legal treatment, for laws are meant to bind both the weak and the mighty. Second, and even more important, the privileges being considered aren't just exemptions from legal duties, they're exemptions from moral ones. And that's a crucial difference.

Let's acknowledge that what's moral and what's legal don't always coincide. Jaywalking is illegal, but not immoral, and lying to a friend is immoral, but not illegal. Often, however, what's moral and what's legal do coincide. Murdering someone is both immoral and illegal. Keeping this in mind, exemptions from some laws might be permissible if those laws don't express our negative duties, which, recall, are the most important moral duties we have. The immunity to traffic tickets granted to members of Congress under certain circumstances is one such example, since exempting persons from traffic laws is not exempting them from their negative duties. But an exemption is not permissible if the law in question does in fact convey relevant negative duties. That's because it's the essence of negative duties that they apply to *all* people, regardless of their roles in society. And as we already agreed, the laws that police officers must obey in pursuing criminals are laws that do reflect their negative duties: it's not just illegal to beat up a person during questioning, it's immoral. So although it might be permissible to exempt Superman from no-fly zone laws, or Batman from traffic laws (the Batmobile goes pretty fast), it is impermissible to exempt them from laws that reflect basic negative duties.

A related topic of interest has to do with the responsibilities superheroes have towards police forces that seek to arrest them. Poor Spidey, misunderstood as he so often is, finds himself pursued time and again by the NYPD. Sometimes this is just for questioning, but other times there's a warrant out for his arrest. Peter chooses to evade the police on such occasions. He figures that either the charges will be dropped once the actual criminals

involved are apprehended—a task he then sets about performing himself—or that the charges are politically motivated and will be dropped anyway in due course. And let's suppose he's right. Nonetheless, is evading arrest permissible?

Doing as Peter does seems to display a rather cavalier attitude toward the state and the entire institution of law. Peter, like the rest of us, is a citizen of his country and therefore subject to its authority. And as Socrates so eloquently argues in Plato's dialogue, *Crito*, all of us have a *moral* duty as citizens to yield to this authority.<sup>6</sup> Of course, there are obvious circumstances in which this duty is overridden, such as when the laws of the state are immoral or when its authorities are corrupt. But Peter doesn't evade arrest because he thinks that the police who are pursuing him are corrupt or that the laws he's accused of breaking are immoral. He knows that he's been wrongly accused, but this fact alone doesn't warrant him in thumbing his nose at the authorities. It seems to be his obligation in these situations to yield to arrest and then to pursue appropriate legal means of exoneration. And for that, he can turn to a great attorney like Matt Murdock.

We've ignored, however, an important response available to superheroes in defense of their evasive tactics. Should they be captured, the thought goes, they would be forced to compromise their secret identities. And those who opt to be superheroes have good reasons to keep the public ignorant of their real identities. As they themselves rightly point out, were their enemies to learn who they really are, these villains would stop at nothing to terrorize, perhaps even kill, their family and friends, either for the purposes of simple revenge, or else for leverage to block their interfering actions as superheroes. So by acquiescing to the authorities in situations in which they've been falsely accused, not only do superheroes jeopardize the lives of their loved ones, they also jeopardize their ability to continue serving as superheroes. This being the case, the serious consequences that would come about from the world learning that, say, Peter Parker is Spider-Man do warrant his evading arrest.

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<sup>6</sup> Translated by Hugh Tredennick in *The Collected Works of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).



This position is perfectly consistent with nonconsequentialism, or at least its non-Kantian varieties (since Kant himself couldn't abide a lie of any sort). Nonconsequentialists, after all, don't claim that consequences *never* matter in determining the permissibility of actions. They simply claim that consequences aren't the only things that matter.

### **But It's Just a White Lie!**

The topic of secret identities brings us to the last of the issues we'll be examining. We've acknowledged that superheroes have good reasons to keep the public ignorant of their true identities. But does the same hold true concerning their families and friends? Superheroes don't usually deny outright that they've adopted the role they have, if for no other reason than because their families and friends don't typically confront them with such questions. Their loved ones do, however, often ask them where they've been and what they've been doing. And this is when superheroes often choose to lie and engage in other deceptive strategies (withholding the truth, allowing false inferences to be made, and the like). But is it permissible for them to deceive the very people they care about the most?

Kant maintained that our negative duty not to lie is absolute and cannot be violated. Whether he felt the same is true for other cases of deception is less clear. Regardless, most nonconsequentialists take a more flexible approach. We can easily imagine cases where our duty not to deceive is trumped by other considerations. Take the case of good-hearted Aunt May. Peter fears that telling her he's Spider-Man would cause her irreparable harm. She just wouldn't be able to handle the news; indeed, learning of her nephew's exploits might literally kill her with worry. In such a situation, it is surely permissible for him to deceive her. One could look at this as a resolvable conflict between two negative duties. Peter has a duty not to deceive his aunt, but he also has a duty not to cause her serious physical harm. The latter duty is intuitively more important than the former, and so he's permitted to deceive the sweet old lady.

But other cases of deception aren't so clear. Clark Kent loves Lois Lane. Is he permitted to keep her ignorant of his role as Superman? (Let's ignore the fact that in *Superman II*, he does tell her that he's Superman, only to wipe out her memory of his

identity by the end of the film, without even so much as seeking her approval before doing so. Yikes!) Clark might reason that if he tells Lois the truth, his enemies most likely will somehow learn his secret identity and her life will therefore be put in danger. Peter Parker reasons in this same way when justifying to himself why he shouldn't tell Mary Jane that he's Spider-Man. So Clark has a duty not to deceive the woman he loves, but he also has a duty not to put her life in danger. The latter duty is more important than the former, and hence Clark is permitted not to tell Lois the truth about who he is.

But does telling Lois that he's Superman really put her life in danger? Admittedly, were the public to learn his secret identity, Lois's life would clearly be endangered. But how does telling her the truth result in the same threat? There can seem to be an implicit and disturbing assumption going on that Lois can't keep a secret—or, in other words, that telling her is equivalent to telling the world. Peter seems to make this same assumption about MJ. But surely the women these men love ought to be trusted in their discretion more than this.

Perhaps, though, there is another harm that Clark and Peter can point to in justifying their deception. Clark may know Lois well enough to realize that, despite her tough façade and professional daring, she would simply worry about him too much if she knew his true identity. As long as she just thinks of him as ordinary Clark Kent, she doesn't have to be constantly on the lookout for Kryptonite when they're together, or always be wondering what new nefarious scheme Lex Luthor has up his sleeve. Peter also may have wanted to spare MJ the worry that when he swings out the window, he'll never return. The idea is that Clark's duty and Peter's duty to avoid inflicting long-term psychological harm on their loved ones outweighs their duty to tell them the truth about who they are. But as well-meaning as this thought might be, it just doesn't hold up. It's more than a bit patronizing of Clark and Peter to assume that the women in their lives couldn't learn to live with their roles as superheroes. Not telling them the truth fails to treat them with the proper respect they are owed as persons. Superheroes, therefore, have a duty in such cases, just like the rest of us, to tell the people they love who they really are.

We've seen that individuals with superpowers face many important ethical questions, and we've done our best to suggest

some answers. Having great power does not obligate a person to become a superhero, but should such an individual choose to adopt this role, there are many responsibilities that come with it. In addition to fighting crime and helping those in need, our super-guardian must also adopt the same standards that the police conform to, and should acquiesce to their authority when it's appropriate. And such a person must also be willing to trust their closest loved ones with the truth. Needless to say, these are but a handful of the ongoing issues that superheroes face. And our discussion, like most philosophical examinations, has reached tentative conclusions at best. But that's the most we should expect. After all, we're not superheroes.