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Why Not Rule the World?:

Nietzsche, the *Übermensch*, and Contemporary Superheroes

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Senior Honors Project

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In the middle of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche devised the theory of the “*ubermensch*.” This term refers to an individual who transcends petty humanity into something much greater, who is meant to rule the rest of the species like a shepherd rules his sheep. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche makes the bold declaration that “the *ubermensch* is the meaning of the earth” (3). As Nietzsche argues, man has progressed from “the worm” and “the ape” but humanity still has progress to be made. That progress would find realization when the *ubermensch* came into being.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche likewise makes the declaration that “a living thing seeks above all to DISCHARGE its strength--life itself is WILL TO POWER [sic]” (13). Thus, for Nietzsche the strongest goal of life is to seek power, to constantly struggle and constantly transcend one's current state, rising above and taking control of others in the process. However, Nietzsche argues that the *ubermensch* and its related ideologies were thwarted by religion, egalitarianism and envy, the smallness of the average person who is eager to tear down greatness and celebrate the mediocrity of so-called “normal people” in its stead.

Nietzsche never gave up the hope that some day the *ubermensch* and its implacable will to power would prevail. Unfortunately for Nietzsche's ideas, though, the eugenics movement and the horrific results of Nazi Germany largely discredited notions of social engineering and pursuing a “better humanity.” This caused these ideas to almost universally lose whatever popularity they had once gained. The idea of a real *ubermensch* was abandoned. Nevertheless, the idea of individuals of extraordinary ability, morality, and inherent goodness continued to fascinate, and in that fascination grew the genre of the superhero.

Unlike Nietzsche's "supermen," the Superman of comic book fame, along with an ever increasing variety of fellow superheroes, did not seek to control mankind but protect and serve it. Indeed, for decades superheroes did just that, entertaining comic book and television audiences with their daring adventures. They were unquestioning disciples of "good," particularly the American definition, and they sought to thwart evil, malice and anything that would undemocratically change the status quo.

It was not until the mid-1980s when two men, Frank Miller and Alan Moore (with aid from artist Dave Gibbons), began to consider superheroes as beings with serious ethical, political and personal ramifications. For years, superheroes had existed in serial publications rarely changing and rarely challenged by anything but evil itself. But Miller and Moore wondered what would happen if superheroes aged, if they had to operate within a "real" sociopolitical framework and were mortal and human. In other words, instead of a timeless, static world of perpetually fighting the same battles, these heroes were placed inside living, changing worlds with their own living, changing histories. The results were Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Gibbon and Moore's *Watchmen*.

These two works revolutionized the genre. But they also brought questions about the fundamental ethicality of superheroes. Like Nietzsche's *ubermensch*, these beings were envied and derided for their abilities and presumption of influence. And, just as Nietzsche's *ubermensch* was torn down by religion, the common people in these texts turn upon their extraordinary protectors, this time calling upon their governments to restrict the actions of those greater than the common man.

At this point, questions start to arise: Why do the superheroes comply? Why don't they resist? Given their abilities, their resources and their talents, surely they would

stand at least a significant chance of being able to force the average masses of humanity to submit to them, as Nietzsche dreamed. So what stops them?

It is my assertion that superheroes protect the status quo, the dominant hegemony and power structures of their societies, because they directly benefit from them. As superbeings, they do not benefit in the traditional ways of social power, wealth or prestige (or, if they do, these things are not their primary motivators). Instead, protecting the status quo gives them countless opportunities to defend it from attack, and it is this defense that proves to be their true method of fulfillment.

Indeed, Geoff Klock, in his book *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, discusses the tension that occurs as “superheroes are [put] in a position of fighting for a world in which they will no longer be needed” (43). I would argue that superheroes do not actually wish for such a world to come to fruition, as they would lose their source of fulfillment and self-actualization. Instead, they exist in the conservative, reactionary role where they fight criminals instead of crime and evil-doers instead of social evils. Such social ailments are generally accepted by the superheroes as inevitable fact, prompting them to avoid more liberal, systemic changes that might have broader effects and challenge dominant institutions and ideology.

Since it is in their interests to support a system that may not be advantageous to the masses, superheroes do, arguably, embrace a kind of Nietzschean ethics when they presume that, by virtue of their inherent superiority, they have the right to uphold such a system. As mentioned, the common people do often object to such uses of power, just as they would to Nietzsche’s *ubermensch*. However, the texts represented in this paper will show that, unlike the *ubermensch*, superheroes recognize the danger that the masses

represent to them. Instead of confronting the common people, and risking the status quo and their personal safety, the superheroes deceive the masses in order to continue their manipulations of power unimpeded.

Less cynically, it is also true that all of the superheroes in the following texts were raised as products of the communities, cultures and countries they protect, specifically the United States of America (with some fictionalized alterations). Just as a democratic nation's military, with rare exceptions, does not seek to take control of that nation's government even though it has the capacity, superheroes avoid such usage of power as well. Superheroes, and, to continue the parallel, defense personnel, are active negotiators and recipients of cultural ideology. It would be inappropriate to deny the fact that they were raised with certain values and norms that would also challenge notions of pursuing overt dominance and solitary exertions of their will over others inside the same framework.

Nevertheless, this paper argues that superheroes benefit in a variety of ways from the status quo (just as do the military and defense industry). Quite simply, superheroes already have power, to varying degrees. Indeed, power does not seem to be a prevailing concern for any superheroes, largely because it is something they already possess. Instead, they have other desires, and these desires are able to be realized in their roles as protectors of their societies.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this is found in Brad Bird's *The Incredibles*, which details the lives of a superhero family whose now retired and regulated members struggle to cope with normalcy as they pretend to be regular, superpower-deficient people. These attempts fail and, although they succumb to

temptation, their “specialness” is ultimately vindicated, and they are permitted to embrace their abilities as long as they do so secretly.

In Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, a retired Bruce Wayne is consumed by the psychological need to return to his life as a superhero, just as Mr. Incredible is in *The Incredibles*. He eventually does, and his eternal quest for justice (or, arguably, vengeance) is renewed, along with his enjoyment of life. In a twist, Batman’s attempts to restore order to Gotham challenge the current power structure and bring him into conflict with Superman, who overtly supports the status quo due to a desire for self-preservation. Ultimately, Batman is allowed, by Superman, to continue his attempts to bring justice to Gotham as long as he remains hidden.

Chris Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* provides the best example of a counterpoint to this cynical analysis of the hero. The film presents humanity as fundamentally good, offers an “existential threat” in the form of the Joker (Heath Ledger) that necessitates the power of heroes while making promises to limit such power, and ends with the hero allowing himself to be demonized for the good of the common people. Indeed, the Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) in *The Dark Knight* is the ideal hero, one who takes upon the mantle of power not because he wants to, but because he must. However, the film’s resolution points to the fatal flaw in such a rendering, mainly that its view of heroism is a myth consciously denying the grim truths of reality and fundamentally undermining the notion that an individual could truly be a pure hero.

Dave Gibbons and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* serves as a stark contrast to *The Dark Knight* by exposing the superhero as an individual with a variety of motivations, few of which are as selfless as they seem. The psychological and political realism attempted in

the text illustrate the fallacy of believing in unrealistic heroism. Each individual hero in the text represents a refutation of the argument that the superhero is a selfless savior of the common man while also refuting the notion that an individual's sole desire is power or self improvement. The text ends with the greatest deception of any in the works studied, a fundamental assertion that superheroes can only function by embracing falsehoods.

Each of these works involves presumption of influence and power as a result of one's individual talents and a Nietzschean ethic of self-actualization. Unlike Nietzsche's ideal of power as the main goal with the strong leading the weak, though, these individuals almost always find more fulfillment inside the status quo rather than in a political alternative that transcends or challenges it. Therefore, because the superheroes fundamentally reject challenges to the existing hegemony, continuing to aid mediocrity by operating only through deception, and also deny a pursuit of power as their primary motivation, they reject Nietzsche's ethics.

Traditional (Super) Family Values

Brad Bird's 2003 film *The Incredibles* is unabashed in its support of the privileges of the talented and unique. In the beginning of the film, superheroes are public and popular, tirelessly helping and protecting their city's citizens. Mr. Incredible, a man with immense bulk and strength, and Elastigirl, a slender woman with the ability to manipulate and stretch her body into many different shapes, are the protagonists of the film. The opening of the film finds them busily fighting crime and saving various literally powerless common people. In fact, Mr. Incredible is so dedicated to helping people that he is late to his own wedding with the aforementioned Elastigirl.

Indeed, at the beginning of the film, there is little question of the inherent goodness of the superheroes and the ineptitude and pettiness of the common people. Audrey Anton, in the article “The Nietzschean Influence in *The Incredibles*,” makes the case that this represents Nietzsche’s idea of the “master and slave” power structure where the superheroes are masters over the common, non-superpowered, or “slaves.” However, Anton argues that *The Incredibles* twists Nietzsche, for while “Nietzsche insists the nobles ought to use the slaves to maximize their greatness, ... the supers use their greatness to maximize the quality of life of the slaves” (Anton 221). Little is done to explain why, exactly, the superheroes do this, but it is implied that, by virtue of their inherent goodness alone, superheroes dedicate themselves to those who are lesser than they are.

The citizens the superheroes protect, however, do not share the superheroes’ magnanimity. Anton summarizes the backlash by saying, “the more the supers in *The Incredibles* care for and help others, the more they are relied upon and, ultimately, taken for granted” (Anton 221). The common people file lawsuits against the superheroes for various injuries sustained while the superheroes attempt to save lives and stop criminals. Just as Nietzsche claims the slaves used religion to tear down their superior masters, so do the ordinary people in *The Incredibles* use the government to enforce a superpowerless normality.

The theme of ordinary people using the government to interfere and restrict superhero activities is one that pervades each of the texts discussed in this paper. However, in *The Incredibles*, there is little to no sympathy for the citizens from the text itself. The neckbraces worn by the common people as they file their lawsuits are comical

in their cartoonish and clichéd appearance and are made all the more ridiculous as the plaintiffs turn their heads and appear to suffer little discomfort, outside of indignation. “You didn’t save my life, you ruined my death!” shouts the man whose suicide Mr. Incredible prevented and who becomes the first to sue, a darkly humorous statement that is endemic to the tone the film takes concerning the common people’s complaints.

As a result of the lawsuits, the superheroes must go into hiding, permanently assuming the identities of “normal” people. They even take on the last name of “Parr,” a derivative of “par” meaning “average.” This is a change that does not sit well with the family. Both Mr. Incredible and his son, Dash, long to use their powers for fighting crime or pursuing sports excellence, respectively. The mediocrity that the common people have forced upon the superhero family brings nothing but depression and angst. Mr. Incredible grows fat and angry, demeaned by a diminutive employer and largely uninterested in the banalities of his life as a father. He moonlights as a closeted hero, but his activity has the character of a closeted desire, never truly as fulfilling as it once was. Likewise, Dash plaintively asks his mother, “Why can’t I do the best I can do?” to which she responds, “The world just wants us to fit in and, to fit in, we’ve just got to be like everybody else.” In other words, the “Incredibles” have little choice but to be mediocre and powerless.

So, to bring us to the prevailing question of this paper, why do the Incredibles and the rest of the superheroes endure this treatment? Even though they are clearly superior in sense, morals and raw strength than the common people, they still submit to their demands. They presumably comply peacefully with the demands of the populace when they are asked to retire, not showing even a hint of physical resistance. Unlike

Nietzsche's masters, these individuals actually possess physical powers beyond normal men. So why do they not resist?

The answer arguably lies in Mr. Incredible's actions and revelations after his retirement which seem to form the film's moral. Indeed, the film seems to reject a Nietzschean Romanticism that wishes for the strong to thrive while the weak are controlled or culled. Instead, it essentially embraces liberal humanism by supporting the values of self-actualization and the betterment of all of humanity instead of an elite few.

The catalyst for these changes in Mr. Incredible happens when he is paid by a mysterious corporation to hunt down and fight a "rogue robot" that adapts to its opponent's abilities. After continuing for a few months, regaining much of his lost vigor and zest for life as he does, he soon finds it has all been a scheme by a young man who Mr. Incredible scorned due to the young man's foolhardiness and lack of powers.

Formerly called Buddy, the newly revealed antagonist now refers to himself as "Syndrome" and sells high-tech, futuristic weapons to various countries. The parallel to current military power is ominous as he clarifies that it is not just weaponry but "respect" that is sold. As Mr. Incredible later discovers, Syndrome's weapons are responsible for the deaths of a significant number of superheroes. Syndrome, with nothing but the fruits of his "powerless intellect," is able to incapacitate and kill almost all of the superheroes. "Now you respect me, because I'm a threat," he taunts Mr. Incredible, and his words ring true. Syndrome was easy to ignore when he was an inept kid, but because of the physical threat Syndrome poses, Mr. Incredible has no choice but to take him seriously. This represents the first, and perhaps greatest, deterrent to rebellion that "normal" society

offers to the superheroes. If just one individual could do so much damage to the superheroes, it seems highly unlikely that superhero rebellion would prove successful.

Of course, the idea that a rebellion would be unsuccessful works under the assumption that the superheroes would want to rebel in the first place. One reason this might not be the case is that there is a pervading theme of the value of family in *The Incredibles*. The “moral” learned, at the end of the film, aligns itself with contemporary liberal humanism, serving as a testament to the importance of family. Mr. Incredible falls prey to Syndrome’s scheme because he values his own fulfillment over the needs of his family. Had he been more attentive to them and been more resolute in keeping the job he needed to provide for them (since, for a reason not mentioned, his wife does not work), he would have never been tempted into Syndrome’s trap. Likewise, the Incredible family gradually learns to come together as a team, only prevailing over Syndrome’s evil after they join forces and begin to trust and respect one another (one could expect little else from a Disney and PIXAR film). This represents a refutation of Nietzsche’s theory of a “will to power” ethics system, with the importance of family and care for one’s loved ones serving as a more important driving force than one’s need to exert power over another.

Nietzsche is somewhat vindicated by the fact that the Incredibles are also only able to be happy once they are able to truly be themselves, one of the main tenets of liberal humanism, by exercising their powers to their full potential when fighting villains (a hero who does actively rebel against the masses). However, they cannot openly embrace their powers, instead hiding them from the public. Indeed, one of the final scenes is of the family trying to coach Dash through a race, urging him not to win (that

might make others suspicious) but not to fall too far behind either (to ensure that they aren't humiliated by all of those lesser than they are). In other words, the Incredibles make a compromise with the common populace. The populace is not made to feel inferior by the Incredible's presence, but they have gained a newfound appreciation for the need for the superheroes, once again condoning their clandestine behavior.

The Incredibles are quite content with this compromise, for they only truly desire their aforementioned love for each other and an opportunity to be challenged and fully exert their powers. In some ways this driving desire to make full use of their abilities does mirror Nietzsche's will to power. But it is an exertion in the service of lesser beings who, arguably, hold a substantial deal of power over the acquiescent superheroes. Instead of promoting conflict between the two, *The Incredibles* promotes the liberal humanist idea of promoting happiness for all of humanity, not just powerful elites. The status quo is maintained as the superheroes deceive the public of their true abilities and influence while simultaneously protecting them from outside threats and each other. Common humanity practically serves as bait, allowing the superheroes to fully embrace their powers without significant personal risk, all while condoning their culture's dominant values. This provides numerous opportunities for the superheroes to be challenged and find self actualization while also bettering the lives of the common people, a mutually beneficial situation.

Frank Miller's Hidden Giants

In many respects, Frank Miller's graphic novel, *The Dark Knight Returns*, is an inversion of *The Incredibles*. The protagonist, Batman/Bruce Wayne¹ is a talented, yet

¹ For the purposes of this paper, "Batman" will be used to label the Batman/Bruce Wayne individual in discussion of *The Dark Knight Returns* and "Bruce Wayne" will be used to label him in

still very human individual whose “power” outside of that available to normal humanity is his immense personal wealth. The most sympathetic, yet challenging and prevalent antagonist is the original superher, Superman, whose ethics and values more closely mirror the heroes in *The Incredibles* than Batman's. And, perhaps most importantly, Batman's role in the story is one who challenges society instead of upholding it (like Superman), the opposite of the hero's traditional role.

So it is that *The Dark Knight Returns* is an unconventional text in terms of traditional superhero tropes. However, as a result of this, according to Geoffrey Klock, it and *Watchmen* belong in “a superhero mini-canon” serving as “the strongest works in the tradition” (16). For a variety of reasons, many of them mentioned in the introduction to this paper, *The Dark Knight Returns* is quite noteworthy. Klock singles out the text as a “revisionist history” (26) due to the fact that, unlike its decades-long comic book lineage, it negotiates real-world concerns of linear time progression, politics, and human motivations, but these are just a few of the many ways *The Dark Knight Returns* challenges the superhero tradition.

Specific to this paper, Batman, as mentioned, is not superpowered. But His unaltered humanity makes him closer to Nietzsche's ideal, in many ways, because he compensates with many advanced, but not supernatural, human traits. He has cunning, relentless dedication, advanced technology acquired with his immense fortune, and a practiced cynicism that allow him to accomplish his goals by manipulation and deception if his strength and advanced tools fail him. So, too, does the Batman of *The Dark Knight*

discussion of the film, *The Dark Knight*. This is done both for the sake of convenience and also, nominally, because the individual in *The Dark Knight Returns* is significantly more invested in his superhero persona than the same individual in *The Dark Knight*, who is a superhero moreso out of necessity than essential identity.

Returns mirror Nietzsche's ruling elite ethic, particularly in the way he overtly challenges the social order and leads common people to take over when the rest of their protective social power structures crumble.

Despite these similarities, though, Batman falls short of being a true *ubermensch*. He does not act because he wishes to assert power over others or aid humanity's evolution. Instead, he, like the *Incredibles*, is motivated by values instilled in him by his parents and his society, lessons made all the more poignant when his parents were killed in a random mugging during his youth. As Frank Miller himself states in an interview with NPR, "Batman and Bruce Wayne are both characters who believe in sanity, in a sane world, but they believe that it only makes sense when you force it to. ... [Batman] saw the world get ripped apart before his eyes when his parents were killed and he vowed to 'make the world make sense.'" The trauma of Batman's parents' deaths is the primary motivator for his actions, and the Batman persona serves as a coping mechanism.

Batman "make[s] the world make sense" by working outside the existing legal framework, embracing his status as a vigilante who does anything, including breaking the law and violating the civil liberties of individuals, to enforce order upon the chaos of the world. "Nothing matters to you -except your holy war," thinks Superman, (Miller 139) referencing both Batman's unwavering, single-minded dedication and the way Batman establishes his mission as a greater priority than anything else. Ignoring laws and civil liberties does not bother Batman. Superman remembers the legal proceedings and Congressional questioning that eventually led to the regulation of superheroes, comparable to the events in *The Incredibles*, recalling, "You were the one who laughed... 'sure we're criminals,' you said, ' we've always been criminals. We have to be criminals'"

(Miller 137). For Batman, the world must be ordered and, in order to achieve that, one cannot trust democracy or value human rights to the extent that that ultimate order is compromised.

In this way, Batman challenges Nietzsche. Batman does not value power, but order, a traditionally reactionary role and one that does little to achieve the evolutionary power struggles Nietzsche desires. Batman's primary motivation is not in domination of the weak or of gaining power but instead in the desire to deal with the trauma of his parents' deaths, facing and turning positive the internal turmoil that that terrible murder spawned.

In fact, Batman, like the Incredibles, seems to find little satisfaction outside of his adventures fighting crime. The beginning of the graphic novel finds him retired from being a superhero, engaging in dangerous, high speed racing with which he is obviously dissatisfied. "This would be a good death, but not good enough" (Miller 10) he grunts as he ejects from a nearly fatal crash, unfazed. It is not that he wishes to die gloriously, but instead because he still has work left to do, his parents' murders still not quite atoned for. Before donning his cape and embracing the Batman aspect of the Batman/Bruce Wayne dichotomy, he is haunted by images of a giant Batman, seducing and assaulting him in an effort to provoke his return to his dangerous cause, reminding him of his obligation.

Batman resists this inner force, and, after sponsoring the therapy and release of a former villain, Harvey Dent/Two-Face, he attempts to quiet critics by stating, "We must believe in Harvey Dent. We must believe that our private demons can be defeated" (Miller 17). But like government police intervention and peaceful negotiations, psychotherapy, for Miller, is yet another inadequate attempt to counter essential aspects

of human nature and Batman, just like Dent/Two-Face, returns to his old ways. “The rain on my chest is a baptism- I’m born again” (Miller 34) Batman says, after he puts on his costume and engages in his first night of fighting crime in ten years. However, the holy righteousness of his cause is complicated by Batman's reaction after he defeats Harvey Dent. Dent, who has received plastic surgery to remove the external scars that damaged him psychologically and inspired his villainous alter-ego, asks Batman what he sees as Batman looks upon him. After a panel flashes where the corruption appears to return before again vanishing, Batman replies, “I see a reflection, Harvey. A reflection” (Miller 55).

There is some Nietzsche in the idea that an individual has an essential nature that must be realized, especially by living counter to social norms. But Batman, while relishing his powerful alter-ego, also recognizes its darkness. Batman, as a persona and political ideology, is not without his flaws. The mixture of holiness and corruption reveals the “necessary evil” aspect of the anti-hero.

This necessity is accentuated by the presence of the maniacal Joker, Batman's traditional arch nemesis. The Joker awakens from a bland, sedate state in the mental hospital as soon as he hears that Batman has returned to action. Upon this realization, his face gradually creeps from an expressionless gaze to a wide grin as he spits out Batman's name before uttering, “*Darling*” (Miller 41). He, like Two-Face, has also received extensive (and unsuccessful) therapy and immediately begins to manipulate his keepers in order to achieve his freedom.

According to Klock, “every major member of the villain's gallery operates as a kind of reflection of some aspect of Batman's personality or role” (Klock 35). The Joker,

as the foremost of Batman's foes, is the ultimate foil reflecting the absurdity of “life, and all its random injustices” (Klock 53), a fact Batman constantly struggles with and uses for inspiration in his actions as a superhero. The homoerotic subtext (the Joker has masculine and feminine traits, not to mention language, such as the “darling” quote, that pervades the text that is documented by Klock) is yet another way of showing the deep, perverse connection between Batman's order through vigilantism and the Joker's spread of chaos and destruction. This mixture of love and hatred and the confusion of traditional roles, accentuating the forbidden desires repressed by mainstream society, cause one to see the two figures not as opposites but as complementary.

The differences and parallels of the Joker and Batman will be reflected upon more in the discussion of Chris Nolan's film, *The Dark Knight*, but it is important here to note the way the two are linked, feeding off each other while seeking to destroy one another. The Joker's clear goal is domination, but there is little drive towards “power” in the Nietzschean sense. The Joker, like Batman, seems to have a deep, unchangeable psychological drive that primarily motivates him: he simply seeks a different outlet.

It is that psychology that serves as the most significant answer to the question of why Batman seeks to protect people instead of overcoming and ruling them. Along with his upbringing, acting as a superhero serves as a method of combating and coping with the most traumatic moment of his life and fighting crime outside of the law seems to be the best method of accomplishing his goal of “making sense” of the world.

One alternative to Batman's methodology, however, is given a prominent role in the form of Superman. In many ways, Superman is very different from Batman. Superman, unlike Batman, has a wide variety of superpowers. Significantly, Superman is

not even human. He was raised by two parents in a small, rural town and generally reflects a “traditional,” more or less politely conservative American value system. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Superman never retired but instead started working clandestinely with the government. The government is primarily represented in the text by a president who looks like, but is never explicitly labeled, Ronald Reagan. The president is shifty and manipulative, spinning his and his government’s activities and hiding their ineptitude and complicity with the status quo through a folksy, cowboy guise.

With such malfeasance, and Superman's strong moral sensibility instilled in him during his youth, what could be the reason the seemingly invincible Superman follows orders and works within the system instead of simply taking control of society himself? His answer is actually quite similar to Mr. Incredible's. Superman, while reminiscing about the events of years past, thinks to himself, “No, I don't like it. But I get to save lives- and the media stays quiet” (Miller 139).” Superman's thought emphasizes the two key points. One, that he “gets” to help people, as if it is a reward, a sign that he clearly enjoys the activity in and of itself (liberal humanism again). Second, there are still things, such as media exposure, that can threaten him. Superman embraces his role, enjoying his eminent importance, as Batman notes in the panel when Superman is first visually introduced (in a brightly colored, heroically handsome pose), “There's just the sun and the sky and him, like he's the only reason it's all here” (Miller 114). There may actually be some truth to such a claim, but it is obvious Superman has a strong appreciation of himself and his role as protector of civilization as he knows it.

Just as it does to Mr. Incredible in *The Incredibles*, humanity still finds a way to severely weaken and hurt Superman despite his perceived invincibility. Superman is

almost destroyed in a nuclear missile explosion, literally reduced to a skeleton figure. This is to say nothing of the fact that a mortal, Batman, proves that he can defeat Superman with technology and the aid of Superman's notorious weakness, kryptonite. It isn't much, relatively speaking, but the threat to himself and his fellow heroes (whom he indicates that he values greatly) is enough to keep him in check.

It is also worth noting that there is a slight vein of Nietzsche in Superman's approach. He clearly recognizes the threat humanity poses, stating, "we must not remind them that giants walk the earth" as he single-handedly destroys a tank in a striking pose (Miller 130). Like the Incredibles, Superman realizes that jealousy and insecurity inform the actions of the common people, and, if given a chance, "They'll kill us if they can, Bruce. Every year they grow smaller. Every year they hate us more" (Miller 129). So, also like the Incredibles, Superman allows the government to cover up his presence and, in return, he does what they say, eventually leading to the showdown with an increasingly rebellious Batman.

Batman learns this same lesson about visibility, eventually. Knowing he will never stop being hunted, he fakes his own death but only after proving to Superman that, if pressed, the mortal could beat the God. Batman returns, though, in the final scenes, outside of his costume, surrounded by young people in a cavern. He instructs them to begin setting up a camp, and it is clear that, someday, he plans to come out of hiding to truly challenge the powers that be.

In some ways, this is a rather Nietzschean ending. The exceedingly talented and brave individual avoids the ire of the masses and sets plans to destroy the pathetic, mediocre status quo, remaking it to his liking with a cadre of followers at his command.

But Batman does not wish to rule and, indeed, seems to indicate that he only wishes to restore an order that, at one point or another, was lost. Unlike Nietzsche, this restoration is not meant to create a golden age of elite rule and enlightenment. This becomes especially clear in light of the graphic novel's sequel, written by Frank Miller more than a decade later, when it is revealed that the government has been taken over by corrupt and malevolent forces who Batman, and a horde of other heroes, must overcome.

Indeed, Batman is not out to make a new world. He merely wishes to create a world with the same values as the old one but with better leadership. By not seeking to create a radically new system of government or social structure, he ensures that he will always be needed (for even in more ideal times, there were still criminals to fight). Both Batman and Superman find enjoyment and fulfillment, for different reasons, in fighting crime and therefore benefit from a world where crime persists. By serving as heroes and not challenging the status quo, they also avoid significant threats to their safety (Batman risks such a threat, but retreats once it is clear he must). Thus, neither is a true representation of Nietzsche's *ubermensch* or Nietzsche's ethic.

The Dark Knight Brightens

Bruce Wayne in Chris Nolan's film *The Dark Knight* (2008) is a stark contrast to the superheroes from the aforementioned texts. Unlike the Incredibles, Superman, and the Batman from *The Dark Knight Returns*, *The Dark Knight's* Bruce Wayne does not seem motivated by selfish goals. He is not internally tormented, he does not seem to relish his adventurous exploits to the point of excess, and he makes choices that actively prevent him from pursuing his life of crime fighting because he feels it is in the best interests of the masses. He certainly rejects Nietzsche's ideal of the *ubermensch* and

master-slave dynamic to the point where he seems almost Christ-like in his self-sacrifice for those “lesser” than himself.

At the same time, he also serves as a strong counter to the cynical argument, which this paper makes, that heroes are, fundamentally, self-serving. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman embraces his superhero identity because it is the only way he can cope with his psychological demons and demanding morals. In *The Dark Knight*, Bruce Wayne is not exactly reluctant to be an active superhero, but he would seem to prefer that he was not needed to be one. This desire is made tangible in his relationship, or rather lack thereof, with Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal). Wayne and Dawes feel that they are incapable of having a serious relationship while Wayne maintains his role as a superhero. Although he urges her to wait, Dawes moves on with her life and her lingering presence is a constant reminder of the price Wayne must pay to continue as Batman. Wayne has higher priorities than his own personal happiness, and this sense of sacrifice instills within him a troublesome nobility the other superheroes lack.

Indeed, more so than any other text discussed in this paper, *The Dark Knight* provides the strongest defense of the superhero’s methods, character, and ideology. Not only is Bruce Wayne a selfless, courageous crusader for justice, he is also up against arguably the greatest evil of any of the heroes in the other texts. This combination of incredible character and incredible threat serves to establish the essential necessity and goodness of the superhero in a way none of the other texts can or do.

As mentioned, the goodness of Bruce Wayne is accentuated by the evilness he faces. That evil manifests itself in the form of the Joker, just as it does in *The Dark Knight Returns*. However, the Joker of *The Dark Knight* is all the more frightening for a

variety of reasons. He is not a villain Wayne has fought for years but is, instead, a new and unknown threat who denies all attempts at identification or humanization. He has a concentrated agenda of spreading chaos, seeking to make the point that everyone is as corrupt or corruptible as the Joker himself, whereas *The Dark Knight Returns*'s Joker is just another supervillain out to kill people. And he is chillingly portrayed by actor Heath Ledger, who died only months after filming and whose performance won him a posthumous Oscar (*Best Supporting Actor*, 2008).

When the Joker first arrives, Bruce Wayne underestimates him. He assumes that the Joker is out for money or something comparable, meaning that he can be defeated like any normal criminal. His butler, Alfred (Michael Caine), believes differently, saying that some men can't be "reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just like to watch the world burn." Indeed, the Joker is represented as an almost existential threat, with changing explanations of his background, no identification, and particular scenes where he speaks from the darkness or off-camera in a way that suggests he is more than a representation of fear and chaos itself. For instance, after he takes hostages, he films videos which are slanted and shaky, while a scared hostage reads a script and is soon killed. The Joker holds the camera himself, positioning himself outside the frame so that he seems more sinister than another average criminal would. He represents something terrifying, something insidious, and it is this representation as much as his physical presence that Bruce Wayne must stop.

With such a threat and a reluctant hero, it is difficult to fault the superhero in *The Dark Knight*. His motivations are certainly different from Nietzsche's *ubermensch* and, indeed, the film's ideological conflict seems to center around the fundamental worth of

humanity, whether it is truly as corruptible as the Joker thinks it is or if it has an essential nobility as Bruce Wayne believes. No main character seeks power, no main character speaks of greatness, and there is little notion that Bruce Wayne is truly “super.” He certainly presumes a great deal of power and influence but, in the face of such a profound threat, it seems justified.

Any attempt to characterize Bruce Wayne as being personally invested in being a superhero and the status quo would be somewhat forced. It is true that he does not challenge dominant hegemony and actively aids in its perpetuation. For instance, he does not kill the Joker when he has the chance, even though the Joker has proven his ability to escape incarceration. This ensures that the two will likely continue fighting, but it is difficult to fault Wayne for not killing another individual when he can avoid it. Indeed, Wayne is portrayed as a good man willing to turn himself in or have his Batman persona framed for murder if it is for the good of the masses. He, and the film itself, actively defy cynicism.

Nevertheless, this ideological framework itself is problematic and, indeed, the film’s message is arguably self-defeating. The prevailing theme of faith and hope is found in the subplot of District Attorney Harvey Dent, who later turns into the villain Two-Face. Dent is meant to represent hope and faith in the democratic system, in justice through government. Even his campaign slogan is “We Believe in Harvey Dent,” an emphasis upon the faith placed upon him. The Joker’s campaign of terror is largely based upon the notion that such faith is misplaced, and he eventually succeeds in corrupting Dent, turning him into a madman who values only chance and vengeance. Dent kills a number of people before eventually dying as Wayne tries to stop him from

killing more. Wayne decides that the murders should falsely be blamed upon Batman so people can still believe that the system works, even when it clearly doesn't. To explain his motivations for deception he says, "Sometimes truth isn't good enough. Sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded." Batman is able to take the fall because Batman, as a myth more than a man, is malleable. He can make "the right choice" when no one else can, for the good of everyone else.

As inspiring as this may be, when the same argument that faith and hope are more important than truth is applied to the film itself, it becomes quite apparent that the idyllic Bruce Wayne is a comparably deceptive creation. The strength of his character, the undeniable evil of his nemesis, the responsibility and restraint he shows when pushed to almost-excessive surveillance and force all seem like constructs to make the audience of the film have faith that truly good men, true evil, and such genuine restraint exists. The events of the film, however, seem to argue that such things are simply not realistic. Bruce Wayne is just as much of a false creation as the false legacy of Harvey Dent that he seeks to protect. It may be selective hypocrisy, of course, to apply realism to a genre built upon fantasy. But as the next text in this discussion will demonstrate, realism in the superhero genre is not only possible, it manages to problematize both the principled idealism so many superheroes possess and, indeed, the very concept of the superhero itself.

Neither Super, Nor Heroes

In 1985, Writer Alan Moore and Artist Dave Gibbons set out to explore what would happen if superheroes existed in the real world. They wanted to examine the effects a superhero's presence would have on politics, on technology, on war, on peace,

and on essentially every aspect of modern (at that point late Cold War) life. On the other hand, they also wanted to make superheroes more realistic and more human instead of the idealized archetypes of the past. Unlike *The Dark Knight* and countless other superhero narratives, they sought to represent humanity as it is instead of how some would argue it ought to be.

The result is the critically acclaimed graphic novel *Watchmen*. Like *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen* is realistic and troubling in its implications. But unlike *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen* is ambiguous in its sympathies, creating a variety of new characters with well-developed histories placed in potentially compromising situations that require difficult decisions with few right answers. In short, in many ways it is a closer representation of humanity than it is its superhero lineage. Nevertheless, *Watchmen* does draw upon traditional superhero archetypes and motivations, including Nietzschean ethics, to investigate the reasons that would-be superheroes do what they do.

The first character *Watchmen* presents is Rorschach, an individual who represents the darker side of the principled vigilante. His world view can best be summed up in his journal entry which says, “There is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished” (Moore 1:24).² As Batman, Bruce Wayne, and the Incredibles would agree, there are absolutes in the world, and violence is often the only way to confront and thwart true evil. *Watchmen* complicates this principled sentiment, though, by having Rorschach view most of humanity as corrupt, evidenced throughout his misanthropic journal entries. Rorschach clearly illustrates the unfortunate fact that a vigilante is only admirable when he/she shares one’s own values.

² As *Watchmen* was originally released as a series of individual issues, citations for it will be in the format (Author issue: pages).

Rorschach also mirrors Batman in his motivations, although Rorschach's are a great deal deeper. He was raised by a single mother who worked as prostitute and then suffered through a fairly miserable childhood. Already cynical and contemptuous, he experiences his most profound disillusion when he encounters a kidnapper who abuses and then butchers a child, feeding her to the killer's German Shepherds. No longer identifying himself with his human alter ego, as does Batman, Rorschach cites his full conversion into his superhero identity, saying he "felt cleansed" (Moore 6:26) as he watches the home of the abductor burn.

The darkness of Rorschach's world leaves little room for questions of power and human evolution. Rorschach makes his own meaning, and that meaning is absolute justice. The epigraph at the end of the chapter where Rorschach reveals his full trauma cites Nietzsche's famous warning that one should "battle not with monsters lest ye become a monster" (Moore 6:28). Rorschach has, in many ways, become a monster. He despises the status quo, but only inasmuch as he despises humanity. Otherwise, criminal activity gives him purpose in an otherwise minimal existence, even if it is a dark, lonely, monstrous purpose far from Nietzsche's ideals for a superior mankind.

Ironically, the only individual in *Watchmen* with truly super powers is comparably detached from a Nietzschean ethic. Dr. Manhattan, or simply "Jon," is turned into a superhero as a result of an accident in a laboratory that destroyed his body but gave him the power to rebuild himself on a molecular level. Consequently, he reformed his physical self and found himself possessed with the ability to manipulate and transform all matter and see through time (both forward and back). His presence has

immense consequences for the world and is, arguably, the primary way *Watchmen's* world diverges from the real one.

Like Superman and the Incredibles, Dr. Manhattan was initially used as a pawn by the US government. "The superman exists! And he's American" (Moore 4:3) a newsreel proudly pronounces and, indeed, Jon is able to change history by essentially singlehandedly winning the Vietnam War. Gradually, though, Jon becomes increasingly distant from humanity, growing tired of being used, losing touch with his girlfriend, becoming a political target, and losing interest in the trivial concerns of lesser beings.

Unlike Superman, Jon seems to truly be a superpowered individual with no weaknesses. He can manipulate the fundamentals of matter, see the future, and teleport anywhere. If any superhero were to take control of the world and lesser humanity, surely it would be Dr. Manhattan.

He doesn't, though, for precisely the reason he could in the first place: he isn't human. With his humanity gone, his earthly desires fade away. He could literally have and do anything, which makes the world of humans seem as trivial as, relatively, it probably is. Indeed, in the end of the fourth chapter, in the supplemental reading, Professor Milton Glass clarifies the aforementioned quote as "*God* [sic] exists and he's American" (4:31). Jon is more like a God than a human and therefore exceeds even Nietzsche's ideals. Likewise, his motivations surpass Nietzsche's when Jon decides to *create* life, not just overcome and rule it.

So it is that Adrian Veidt, or Ozymandias, truly comes the closest to representing Nietzsche's desires and ethics. As critic Matthew Wolf-Meyer notes, "Veidt is the fulfillment of the genetic promise of humanity" (Wolf-Meyer 498). Wolf-Meyer posits

that Ozymandias is truly the *ubermensch*, successfully brilliant, athletic, and wealthy essentially through force of will alone. Veidt's ambition, too, rivals Nietzsche's, with his plan to fake an alien invasion by killing three million people in order to force the nations of the world to seek peace and avoid a nuclear war. Veidt's presumption, that he (or anyone) has the authority to do such a thing, has to be compared to Nietzsche's *ubermensch*, for Veidt uses his own specialness, his own brilliance as justification for the sacrifice.

Veidt's motives, of course, are rather complex. While he obviously has selfish and egotistic reasons, evident as he triumphantly shouts "I did it!" (Moore 12:19) after his success is apparent, his joy could also reflect his relief that the world has been saved. Not surprisingly, as has been the case in the other three texts in this paper, Ozymandias has pursued his plan under a heavy guise of secrecy. In fact, secrecy is the key to the plan's success: the other characters decide they must keep the secret of the fake alien attack to themselves if they wish for the peace to be sustained and the dead to have not been killed in vain.

That is, the other characters except for Rorschach. Rorschach, the lone dissenter, stands upon his absolute principle that dishonesty is fundamentally wrong, no matter the cost. Whether or not Ozymandias was initially justified in his actions, it is quite apparent that little will be accomplished if Rorschach reveals the deception to the world's peoples. Based upon principles and means, not ends, Ozymandias is arguably the villain of the story and Rorschach its hero. And yet, in the final chapter of the graphic novel, it is the lone individual believing in truth above all else who jeopardizes the world, while the deceptive mass-murderer is vindicated.

With that said, as critic Brent Fishbaugh notes, it becomes clear that even Ozymandias's victory is not ideal, for “It seems that Veidt has taken everything into account- everything but the fact that neither Alexander’s empire nor the works of Shelley’s poetic Ozymandias survived the kings’ deaths” (Fishbaugh 197). Even when the “Smartest Man in the World,” as Veidt is called, constructs a flawlessly executed plan, it still falls short of any permanent change or solution. Nietzsche's ambition of a better humanity, likewise, seems to be a comparably losing proposition. As Jon says to a troubled Ozymandias, “Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends” (Moore 12:29). While this might reaffirm Nietzsche's ideas of eternal recurrence, the doubt in Ozymandias's face in his final frame seems to imply that the Nietzschean ethic does not stand up as well.

Seeming to reject Nietzsche's power elite theory and *ubermensch* ethic, *Watchmen* does offer something of a positive alternative. Ozymandias, Rorschach, and Dr. Manhattan are all significantly flawed, in terms of their relation to common humanity. To counter them, the graphic novel promotes Dan Dreiberger, the somewhat disillusioned, but not cynical, wealthy ex-superhero that *Watchmen* as an individual who is imperfect but ultimately closer to a viable ideal of positive humanity.

Dreiberger cites romanticism as his reason for beginning his life as the crime fighter Nite Owl II, speaking of joining a group of superheroes as if “it would have been like joining the Knights of the Round Table” (Moore 7:8). But, as time passes, he realizes the futility of his efforts. Geoffrey Klock makes the implicit criticism explicit, stating, “Superheroes only make sense in a world where masked opponents support their fantasy, and masked opponents only exist to fight superheroes” (Klock 64). In *Watchmen*, as Dan

finds out, these masked opponents don't exist. If anything, the superheroes themselves are more of a threat to society than the criminals are.

So Dreiberg hangs up his cape, brushing aside his past, saying, "It's all crap dressed up with a lot of flash and thunder. I mean, who needs all this hardware to catch hookers and purse-snatchers?" (Moore 7:8). Unlike his one-time partner Rorschach, Dan gives up his job when asked, opting for a normal, quiet life. And although Dan does, eventually, don his costume again (and, significantly, regains his sexual potency), it is only for a brief time. In the final chapter, his lover asks to unmask him, removing the artificial trappings in a desperate attempt to connect with someone else in the wake of such much deception and destruction.

The last sequence in the novel involving Dan shows him disguised which, as mentioned, is a significant trope in superhero texts. Although Dan is disguised as a normal person, he uses it to pursue a "normal" life instead of the traditional goal of using the subterfuge to continue his life of crime fighting. His appearance is changed, but there is little doubt that he is happy, satisfied with love. The epigraph for the final chapter only emphasizes this point, quoting a John Cale song saying "It would be a strong world, a stronger loving world, to die in" (Moore 12:32).

Dan's conversion to joyful mediocrity and his context within discussions of the merits of power and the continued elevation of humanity seem all the more apt after reading his "article," the supplemental text at the end of chapter eight, called "Blood from the Shoulder of Pallas." The article's primary theme is the way in which a search for absolute truth, absolute perfection, and absolute knowledge often diminishes the inherent wonder and beauty of life. Fishbaugh makes the argument that Dan's "article"

fundamentally represents Dan's view of power, as well, in that humans must remain imperfect in order to maintain their passion and interest in life. Dr. Manhattan serves as a convincing counterpoint as a once engaged, loving man who, after his transformation into the “Superman” opts to abandon the world entirely because it is all so banal. Dan, then, is a “humanized Jon- seeing all the wonder and potential of science but also its risks and responsibilities” (Fishbaugh 198). Dan is able to appreciate the status quo without challenging it by seeking to gain excess power or by risking too much. This appreciation allows him to hide himself in happy normalcy, his own private superhero.

Conclusion

So why don't superheroes rule the world? Why don't our militaries conspire to overthrow every government, why don't our power elite continue to assert unremitting dominance over the lesser beings? Certainly, their influences are significant. If pressed, they might even be able to succeed. Much has been written about the parallels between superheroes and Nietzsche, some of more supportive of the rights of the great over the mediocre more than others. And, certainly, there are many nations in the world where militaries and power elites maintain dominant control. Yet, there rarely seems to be significant analysis of why, with such dominant, ideologically driven forces and real-world counterexamples, the Western world continues to be democratic and free.

Hopefully, this paper has offered some direct analysis of why superheroes and their real-world counterparts do not, in fact, choose to rule the world and thus refute the idea of Nietzsche's *ubermensch*. The simplest answer may be that, generally speaking, superheroes (at least the ones surveyed here) and the power elite are benefactors of the status quo they defend. What the status quo is may change and, indeed, many

superheroes may desire a “return” to a time that was fundamentally not so different from their own but simply better behaved. But philosophies supporting aggressive elite dominance, such as those of Nietzsche, carry too much risk and too much ambition for most superheroes. Their concerns are not with grand change but with their own private desires. Often, this means they find fulfillment in fighting crime, which has a secondary benefit of helping people. Questions of why crime exists are not particularly important, because most superheroes do not seek to stop crime; they enjoy what they do too much.

True, Nietzsche is frequently vindicated in these texts, in terms of the threat the mediocre play for the talented. Thus, many superheroes resort to deception to avoid risk. But they still continue to use their superpowers, propping up existing power structures in exchange for a blind eye from the masses who might otherwise seek to stop them. Indeed, when it comes to the idea of the *ubermensch*, superheroes would be rather disappointing for Nietzsche. In terms of abilities, they might suffice. But, generally, they think too much of lesser beings, the vestiges of their base humanity unshakable.

Whether this mentality is an embrace of liberal humanism or simply self-preserving cynicism varies from text to text, individual to individual. Certainly, myth plays a great role, and it could be argued that superhero texts support an idea of a benevolent or fearful power elite, masking their true reach and control. But within the texts themselves, superheroes do not seem unrealistically dogmatic. Their motivations are understandable and, in most cases, decidedly human. In some ways, this may be naïve, for a power elite ethic may someday prevail. After all, the last chapter on both superheroes and Western democracy has yet to be written. But for now, democratically free nations supported by powerful, but respectful elites remain. The Superman is still American.

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