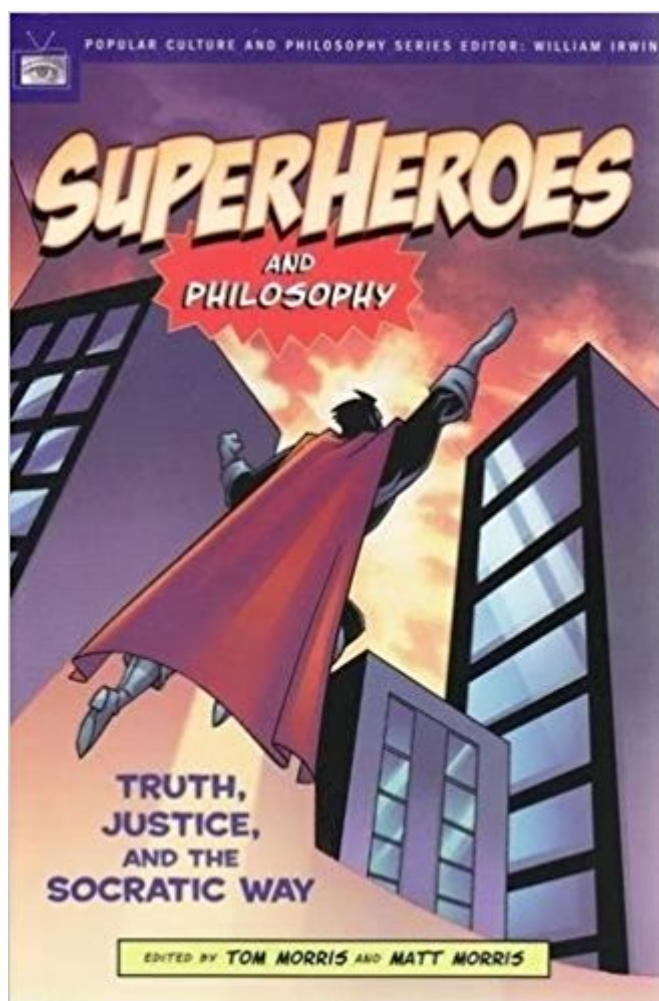


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# Superheroes And Philosophy: Truth, Justice, And The Socratic Way (Popular Culture And Philosophy)



## Synopsis

The comic book narratives of superheroes wrestle with profound and disturbing issues in original ways: the definitions of good and evil, the limits of violence as an effective means, the perils of enforcing justice outside the law, the metaphysics of personal identity, and the definition of humanity. *Superheroes and Philosophy* tackles these and other philosophical questions in an intellectual yet engaging way suitable for any comic book fan.

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## Customer Reviews

"Superman's costume always bugged me when I was a kid; So you need a secret identity & cool. But what's the deal with all the rainbow-hued Spandex masks and costumes?... I found the answer to this great metaphysical dilemma in the book *Superheroes and Philosophy*, edited by Tom Morris and Matt Morris. In various essays, college philosophy professors and others ruminate on profound issues raised by the superhero lifestyle, such as how Batgirl reflects Nietzsche's moral perfectionism." &#150; Rick de Yampert, Daytona Beach News-Journal, December 15, 2006

Tom Morris is the former Notre Dame philosophy professor whose classes became a campus legend, and whose nationwide speaking engagements have electrified the boardrooms of corporate America. His best-selling popular philosophy books include *If Aristotle Ran General Motors* and

Philosophy for Dummies. Filmmaker and comics aficionado Matt Morris is a survivor of Harvard and UNCChapel Hill. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I did not realize there is an entire series devoted to the philosophical aspects of popular culture until I read this interesting and thought provoking (Superheroes and Philosophy edited by Tom Morris and Matt Morris)book. There are numerous writers and contributors involved in creating this book.This 281 page text is organized into four parts covering a wide range of topics. Part one: The image of the superhero has four essays. The real truth about superman: and the rest of us, too, heroes and superheroes and two other articles. Part two: The existential world of the superhero has seven essays. Some of them include God, the devil, and Matt Murdock, the power and the glory, myth, morality, and the women of the X-Men, Batman and friends: Aristotle and the dark knight's inner circle. Part three: Superheroes and moral duty has five essays and I admit to finding some of the material disturbing from a philosophical and psychological perspective. I realize the purpose of philosophy is to ask deep questions about why do superheroes do good and choose this over being bad, but if there is no real OBJECTIVE and RATIONAL standard, than I guess anything goes? The final part covers identity, and superhero Metaphysics. There are several contributors in this section. I found these essays somewhat interesting and thought provoking.In conclusion, if you are into philosophical dialogue about popular culture such as this volume (Superheroes and Philosophy) you may want to check out this book. I intend to purchase other books in this series in the future.Rating: 4 Stars. Joseph J. Truncale (Author: Season of the Warrior: A poetic tribute to warriors)

Might be more of a skim-read to some readers since the whole thing does pan on a tad too much at times. I got this as a personal gift for a friend of mine who was not only into philosophy but the Superman character and it hit the spot for him quite nicely. I mainly found this section intriguing in terms of how it covered real-life parallels as well as various adaptations and comic book versions of the character and their philosophy, without seeming tacky, vague or like a cheap cash-in, much like some of these other "Philosophy and [insert famous movie title/character]" books that have been coming out lately.

Two books on superheroes and philosophy very much go together; and because they intertwine quite a bit, I'm reviewing them together for my posted reviews of EACH book: SUPERHEROES AND PHILOSOPHY ("SAP"), and also BATMAN AND PHILOSOPHY ("BAP"). There's a whole lot of

stuff and mental somersaults in these books, and by many authors. So following are summaries of some of the high points I think are meaningful and worthwhile, and also some of my comments along the way. The summary points are pretty much verbatim quotations from each book.

SAP1. What sets a superhero apart from a normal person? First, a hero is someone admired for achievements and noble qualities. Someone with lofty character or ideals, morally elevated.

2. A hero realizes there is no real self-fulfillment without self-giving.

3. A superhero shows us the WORST IMAGINABLE harms and adversities and fears can be confronted and overcome. We are shown the power of character and courage over adversity, and so we are inspired to deal with our own difficulties.

4. The superheroes give us examples of good people who are able to use force when it's necessary, and within limits, to defeat and subdue otherwise unstoppable evil... Superheroes also exercise a great deal of self-restraint, and are careful to draw lines they will not cross. They are able to fight evil without becoming evil. Means are always critically important. Superheroes' ends never justify their means!

5. They don't do what they do because it's popular. They do it because it's right.

6. The Roman philosopher, Seneca, said: "No man of exalted gifts is pleased with anything low and inferior. A vision of great achievement calls out to him and lifts him up... Cherish some man of great character, and keep him always in mind. Then live as if he were watching you."

7. Batman can keep us going even when the going is very tough. Spider-Man can help us understand that the voice of conscience is always more important than the cacophony of voices around us, who may be condemning us, belittling us, or just dismissing what we think of as so important. Daredevil can remind us that our limitations need not hold us back, and that we all have hidden strengths we can draw on... The heroic path is sometimes lonely, but at a super-level, it is always right.

8. WHY does Superman do what he does? What possible reward could public service hold for him, when he could have all that he wants and stay out of the public eye and media scrutiny? When he could wring lumps of coal into diamonds anytime he wants? When he can accomplish most any physical thing that he wants and maintain enormous invulnerability?

9. A key to understanding Superman's motives is to realize that he is the sole survivor of his race. He is an alien being, really more alone in this world than anyone has ever been -- and he needs to belong!

10. Kal-El knows instinctively that it is only when he puts his gifts to use that he truly feels alive and engaged. Only by acting to his fullest potential, rather than hiding on the sidelines can he genuinely participate in the world around him. When he brings his distinctive strengths into the service of others, he takes his rightful place in the larger community, in which he now genuinely belongs and can feel fulfilled.

11. A superhero acts from the belief that damage to a single innocent person cannot be outweighed by creating greater goods for the majority. When presented with a choice between saving an innocent individual and

saving a group of people, the typical superhero is incapable of making such a choice. Indeed, perhaps even more than the superhero's powers, the refusal to make this choice is what finally defines what it is to be a hero. It is what the hero does next that raises him or her to superhero status. He or she saves both the innocent individual and the group. The superhero is always focused on the intrinsic value of the individual person, and is still able to defeat the evil foe that treats all other entities as expendable.<sup>12</sup> In Plato's *REPUBLIC*, Socrates argues that the man who lives a life of virtue and justice, even if unrewarded with honor or wealth, will be happier than the one who falls into injustice -- even if the unjust man both prospers and manages to avoid paying for any consequences of his evil acts. Both Batman and Spider-Man are often vilified by authorities and the press -- with their good deeds reinterpreted and "spun" so as to make them appear opposite to what they are. But as Aristotle argued, "There is nothing worth having in life except the exercise of virtues."BAP1. In the BAP book, writers and philosophers argue that Batman is the most complex character ever to appear in comic books and graphic novels.<sup>2</sup> An opening question is, does Batman always do right? Why won't he kill the Joker, when he can be virtually certain he will save many innocent lives if he does?<sup>3</sup> If we said to the Caped Crusader, as many have, "If you don't kill the Joker, the deaths of all his future victims will be on your hands," he could very well answer, "No, the deaths that the Joker causes are his responsibility and his responsibility alone. I am responsible only for the deaths I cause."<sup>4</sup> Most superheroes, even unintentionally, play a subversive role because very few are officially licensed or commissioned by the state to use coercion to guard public order (except, for example, Captain America during WWII). However, even if Gotham is safer because of the Batman, it is no more "orderly," since it has explicitly accepted the idea that one individual can legitimately use violence outside the law. This opens the possibility for copycats with lesser abilities and questionable motivations -- such as Azrael, for example -- to do great harm and subvert the legal system.<sup>5</sup> The Batman is born into a city where the state fails at its most basic responsibility of maintaining public safety, where the "social contract" between citizen and state is most essential.<sup>6</sup> Batman always violates criminals' civil rights, since he has no authority to act as an agent of the law, and Commissioner Gordon knows that, but he does not place rights and the law before justice and order.<sup>7</sup> The personal, informal relationship between Gordon and the Batman is essential. Batman will not mete out punishment, and Gordon cannot rely on his police to maintain order and to rein in supervillains. In the process, they install and maintain a precarious order that the reader comes to believe is right or at least legitimate. This reviewer argues, however, that Batman makes citizen's arrests -- except he escapes accusing and facing criminal suspects, and exercising his citizen's responsibilities in a court of law, because he would have to reveal his identity. Batman

leaves all that up to Commissioner Gordon and the District Attorney.<sup>8</sup> Bruce Wayne's oath upon the graves of his murdered parents anchors his mission to the past; his commitment to keeping this promise gives him a BACKWARD-LOOKING moral reason to carry out his mission -- he must keep his promise. Batman's enemies fear his great resolve more than they fear his appearance or his strength. Batman ALWAYS keeps his promises, and that makes him more than a man in the eyes of his foes.<sup>9</sup> But much about Batman's mission looks toward the future: he wants to make Gotham a safer and better place to live -- a place where children don't lose their parents as he lost his. Batman thus has FORWARD-LOOKING moral reasons for his war against criminals. But are those reasons sufficient to justify his actions?<sup>10</sup> Some chapters focus on the question of whether Joker should be held morally responsible for his crimes if he truly is "insane." A great deal of BAP's effort is spent -- and IMO squandered -- on trying to figure whether the Joker is insane, and therefore not guilty and spared by reason of insanity. It's more a question for psychiatrists than philosophers, and the answer -- after much meandering and blabbing in the book -- is yes.<sup>11</sup> Another section focuses on the morality or immorality surrounding Batman's use of teen sidekicks in life-threatening situations. This issue of embroiling teen sidekicks in life-threatening situations is far more complex and challenging, because youths cannot be considered responsible for even volunteering for such duty -- until they reach 18 and society considers them fit for warfare, forcible maiming and death. Batman agonizes over this moral conundrum -- torn by his need for a son and crime-fighting colleague, versus what is best and most nurturing and right for a child. But is keeping this (especially gifted and dedicated) child out of the fray really best for him? In Batman's defense is the fact that this teen sidekick can overcome even the most foreboding and villainous enemies -- when well guided, trained and assisted. And that can be very heartening and inspiring to children that they need not be helpless in a scary world. In a scary and extremely threatening place like Gotham, where the authorities fail miserably at protecting even children. And so the Batman shows that kids -- who are at least mentally and physically gifted and determined -- can defend themselves, and can even take the initiative when helped by very capable adults. And so kids need not be so helpless and vulnerable to even the most despicable evils. Maybe that's another reason why Robin has always been so popular with kids, even ever since his introduction way back in April of 1940.<sup>12</sup> The philosophy of UTILITARIANISM says to do those actions that will bring about the greatest good, or least amount of evil, for the greatest number of people, and assumes that all people are morally equal. But this reviewer argues this thesis is flawed because it assumes people are interchangeable, and that their individual identities do not matter. As seen above with SAP, a superhero will not accept the Utilitarian thesis for his or her actions.<sup>13</sup> When the law fails justice, as

it sometimes does, Batman supersedes the law so as to restore the balance between justice and the law, crime and crime-fighting. But if Batman does this to excess or irrationally, then he undermines and destroys the whole concept of justice under law. So again, there is a tremendous weight of moral responsibility on Batman's thinking, will and conduct. And how does he fare under this weight?<sup>14</sup> In the pantheon of comic book superheroes, few characters are more focused and determined than Batman. Since the mid-1980s, many writers have pushed Batman's single-minded dedication to such extremes that he has seemed a borderline psychopath -- driven not by an intention to create a better world, but by an insatiable compulsion for vengeance rather than justice.

**REVIEWER'S CLOSING COMMENTS**<sup>1</sup>. I have selected various passages from the SAP and BAP books, and have by no means comprehensively summarized these extensive books. However, both SAP and BAP seem outdated in a number of respects with philosophical positing and theorizing. There's a lot of faulty, circular-reasoning in both books concerning areas of values and ethics. Problems like: what's good and right constitutes what is virtuous. And what is virtuous? Well, what's good and right, of course! Both books provide no non-value anchoring principles for either or both concepts, in order to escape their circular reasoning, and so they ultimately lead to a lot of uselessness in those respects. Even the 20th century saw some amazing strides in values and ethics areas, where for the first time such concepts of "good" and "evil" were defined and logically well-defended in non-value terms -- thus overcoming the circular reasoning problem in ethics. So both SAP and BAP seem quite out of date in not presenting and applying those advances; and we all lose out on more valid philosophical analyses that could have been applied to superheroes and Batman, and were not.<sup>2</sup> I think the BAP point about Batman's having become more of a brutal avenger, rather than a guardian and builder of a better Gotham, is valid. But only for the time being. This is why I want DC to return to portraying Batman's **COMPASSION AND PROTECTION** as a Dark Knight, rather than simply a vicious crime-fighter and grim avenger who often stops just short of killing evildoers.<sup>3</sup> Both the SAP and BAP books fail to address **WHY ARE CHARACTERS SUCH AS BATMAN AND SUPERMAN SO LOVED?** I think SAP comes closer to looking at the issue, by at least pointing out admirable qualities of superheroes, but it still doesn't delve deeply into why these superheroes are so loved. So after conferring with a few other superhero enthusiasts, here are a couple thoughts:(a) One answer lies in wish fulfillment. We want the same things the superheroes want. We want a better world. We want justice. Since the world is unable to give us those things, we admire the characters who can. They help us believe that such things remain **POSSIBLE**, even if they are not presently **ACTUAL**. And they prompt many of us to do a little more to try to make the world a better and more just place.(b) Halloween 2011 in an American small town showed more

first-hand reasons why little kids and youths and adults so much love the Dark Knight. Winding through the crowds, the Gotham Guardian hailed folks with waves and cheerful greetings in a best effort at imitating Kevin Conroy: including simple and hearty remarks and waving: "Hi kids!" and "Hello, folks -- are you having a great Halloween!" And then picking kids up and raising them high, while they would laugh with joy. And one thing seemed to sink in: here is this big, black demonic figure -- not a demigod or someone with superpowers, but just a man. But JUST a man? No, much more than that: A man who will go up against the most hideous villains or psychopaths or demons or evil deities, and defend humanity -- and successfully -- against them. A smart and resourceful and resolute fighter in behalf of even the most downtrodden and discouraged. A Bad A\$\$ who champions the good and the best in humanity. A relentless scrapper who never gives up! An irresistible force who wins in behalf of all fellow human beings. And so we need not be afraid or cowardly or timid in the face of the most horrific threats. Because there's somebody who can look as bad and threatening and stand up to the worst of them. And so we admire this dark creature of the night, this lone figure who will protect us from our most dire terrors -- or at the very least go up against them and never back down. And we thank him, and bless him, and love him.

You had me from the word "superheroes." I was expecting Philosophy Lite - and that's what I got. But I was surprised by how interesting and thought-provoking the essays ended up being. Those about morality, identity, and time travel were especially good. Plus what's not to like about basking a little in the history and lore of the superheroic (although the book has something to say about the term)?

Needed for school, but has turned out to be a very entertaining and insightful book. Learned alot!!

did it's job .... EDUCATION ... GET IT WHEN YOU CAN ... DONT WASTE YOUR MIND!!!

This is probably the most painless "textbook" I have had to buy/read for college.

Perfect - exactly as expected - arrived on time and well packaged.

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