Dividing Lines

A Brief Taxonomy of Moral Identity

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IN 1972, UMBERTO ECO AND NATALIE CHILTON PUBLISHED THE SEMINAL ESSAY "The Myth of Superman," a groundbreaking work that looks at the iconic hero as an archetypical protagonist paradoxically constrained in a genre that precludes genuine narratival development. Eco argues that the god-like Superman must be shown to change and grow if the reader is to relate to him as a hero, but the nature of the comic book medium requires that the character of Superman never change significantly enough, lest he become unrecognizable and thereby threaten the continued profitability of his serial publications. Eco contends that this "inconsumable-consumable" tension, combined with the invincible prowess of the superhero, results in a temporally locked narrative that can never advance; as he says, "Superman, by definition the character whom nothing can impede, finds himself in the worrisome narrative situation of being a hero without an adversary and therefore without the possibility of any development."[1] Strangely, across more than eight thousand words, Eco's essay never considers the role of the supervillain.

Although it might be true that Superman's abilities make it more difficult to challenge him in a believable fashion, the array of similarly overpowered enemies in his rogues' gallery have been doing precisely that for decades. And while Superman has been known to battle realistic enemies ranging from bank robbers to Hitler, it is the exaggerated moral duality of the superhero-supervillain relationship that may be at the core of the perennial popularity of superhero stories. According to David Pizarro and Roy Baumeister, the human brain enjoys analyzing and categorizing the moral character of others in precisely the pleasure-eliciting fashion that pro-survival evolutionary developments would predict, but such calculations are difficult and often inaccurate. A fictional world wherein little moral ambiguity exists between the easily identifiable

main characters functions as a moral equivalent of pornography: "Just as sexual pornography depicts a world where the desired outcomes occur reliably and the difficulties and ambiguities of actual life are pleasantly and effortlessly absent, comic books depict a world where desired outcomes occur reliably (good triumphs over evil) and the difficulties and ambiguities of moral prediction are absent."[2] Following this line of thinking, because Superman and Lex Luthor are easily identifiable as hero and villain, the reader can enjoy the pleasurable chemical feedback of that moral analysis with little effort needed.

However, not only does this thesis leave open many questions about the current popularity of supervillains in themselves, but it also torpedoes the possibility of analyzing any character who spans the gap between the two moral poles. With the recent rise of interest in protagonists whose moral identity is shrouded in ambiguity, the pornographic hypothesis must be adapted to consider both the antihero and the antivillain, in addition to the classical hero and villain roles. What follows is a brief taxonomy of these four categories, analyzing their unique characteristics but especially their differences (what distinguishes a villain from an antihero, for example) and, crucially, their interdependencies.

MORAL IDENTITY

When one reads a text, the characters are identifiable by their physical descriptions, historical backgrounds, relationships with other characters, and more, but to label an individual as "hero," "villain," or something else forces the reader to rely on a particular factor of character classification based on normative grounds: moral identity. Sitting at the confluence of psychology and ethical philosophy, moral identity isolates and considers the moral traits within the multilayered matrix of a character's personality, rated both internally via the character's reflective self-conception (as such might be available in the text) and externally via his or her actions and interactions with others, to categorize the moral nature of the character in general.[3] To be able to identify a character as generous, patient, honest, or kind (each an example of a moral trait) requires the reader to consider not simply a single conscious choice that the character makes but rather what the sum total of a series of choices appears to reveal about the character's personality; as Karl Aquino and Americus Reed explain, "moral identity is . . . linked to specific moral traits, but it may also be amenable to a distinct mental image of what a moral person is likely to think, feel, and do."[4] Taken as a whole, moral identity is the field on which any talk of "hero," "villain," or some mixture of the two is played.

However, as a heuristic for literary analysis, moral identity can be limited in its scope; in the absence of an intentionally self-revelatory monologue, internal

information about a character's psyche is often hard to come by. Instead, the reader is primarily left to draw on data external to the character's subjective thought process, typically in the form of the individual's dialogue or physical actions, in order to categorize that person. But if this is the case, then Eco's tension remains problematic: without narratival development, the available data for analysis will inevitably become repetitive, thereby allowing for, at best, a flat interpretation or, at worst, a conclusion anemic in its insipidity. A robust analysis of moral identity requires a variety of data taken in a multiplicity of scenarios; if Superman truly cannot grow, then discussions of him as a character will quickly become listlessly overwrought.

And yet, Superman and many other superpowered characters continue to fascinate and capture the hearts and minds (and wallets) of large audiences. In part, as already mentioned, Eco's suggestion that overpowered individuals are "heroes without adversaries" has been patently debunked by decades of narratives spun around the machinations of similarly overpowered supervillains; though he always prevails in the end, Superman has indeed found balanced matches against plenty of evil characters, even dying at the hands of one (albeit only temporarily). And, although comics may have once functioned with a continuous reset parameter at the end of each issue, the mid-1980s (particularly in the wake of 1985's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series) saw a shift in comic storytelling technique that began to emphasize a continuous setting for the characters that could feasibly carry the consequences of one story over into the next, thereby setting the stage for genuine plot development and the possibility of acquiring a full-bodied picture of a character's moral identity.

HERO/VILLAIN

With continuity comes a library of data for synthesizing an assessment of an individual's moral identity, primarily in the form of that individual's outward activity (though tempered also with moments of internal insight). In the classic dichotomy, the only ultimate question is whether or not a character is a "good person"—is the figure a hero or a villain, based on the general pattern of their actions?

An easily adaptable technique for approaching such an inquiry comes from Aristotle's description of the ethical life: a good person is one who succeeds at living a "life shaped by exercise of the virtues of intellect and character."[5] Although debates about his conclusions (and even some of his terms) continue today, Aristotle's definition of εὐδαιμονία (*eudaimonia*) captures this sense of successfulness: if a person flourishes and cultivates well-being over the course of their life, then that life could be described as eudaimonistic. And while

"flourishing" and "well-being" are two common translations of *eudaimonia*, given that Aristotle also connects the concept with the ultimate purpose of human existence, the arguably most popular rendering of the term is "happiness."

On this view, virtues are the technical, skillful aspects of an agent's behavior that ensure a given action to be performed excellently. Virtues to Aristotle are not merely personality traits to admire but components of actions that must be demonstrated; as D. S. Hutchinson puts it, "only those who make active use of their virtues can be said to be living successfully—just as only those who actually compete in the Olympics can win."[6] Aristotle's skillfully orientated virtues, particularly in a literary framework, are also what were described above as moral traits, but the key from Aristotle is that these moral traits must be exercised in order to accomplish *eudaimonia* and be considered a good person.

With this in mind, the twin elements of (a) moral traits and (b) the application of those traits within an individual's actions offer two key factors for differentiating between heroic and villainous characters. Heroes are not simply good people who happen to possess ideal moral viewpoints or beliefs (as demonstrated through dialogue or omniscient narration), but they demonstrate their heroic character by working out those moral traits in their plot-driving behavior; conversely, villainous characters both possess and demonstrate the opposite. These bilateral touchstones function in tandem and might be diagrammed as in table 1. Therefore, characters like Superman, Sam Gamgee, and Luke Skywalker are heroic in virtue of their approach toward Aristotelian *eudaimonia* insofar as they develop ideal moral traits as revealed through their actions; villains like Voldemort, Saruman the White, and Joffrey Baratheon, drenched in vicious moral traits applied to nefarious ends, are necessarily precluded from Aristotle's conception of the "good life."

TABLE 1	Acts Morally	Acts Immorally
Possesses Moral Traits	Hero	
Lacks Moral Traits		Villain

A final point from Aristotle's work is instructive: it is only once a character's story is complete that their moral identity can be best assessed.[7] This helps to explain how villainous characters might redeem themselves prior to their death, demonstrating with finality (particularly in the case of redemption-through-sacrifice) that their moral identity is defined ultimately by virtuous and not vicious traits. Whether thanks to a diegetic moral epiphany (such as in the case of Darth Vader) or the device of an unreliable narrator (as with a character like Severus Snape), villains can become heroes when they reveal an underlying commitment to virtuous activity, even after a pattern of immoral behavior, through a particularly noteworthy moral act.

ANTIHERO/ANTIVILLAIN

In his magnum opus, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn laments the complexity of moral identity in the real world: "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"[8] Much like Pizarro and Baumeister's pornographic thesis, Solzhenitsyn's observation strikes at the heart of a perennial issue with heroic—particularly superheroic—characters: they are jarringly unrealistic, not simply thanks to their gravity-defying powers of flight or their unfashionable proclivity for skin-tight spandex, but as recognizable people to whom an audience can relate. Perhaps this explains the rise of characters whose moral identity is cloudy with paradox: the antihero and the antivillain.

Superman's invincibility elevates him not only above the average villain but above every actual reader to a degree that undermines what J. R. R. Tolkien called the "Secondary Belief" necessary for any fantasy story to function properly: "Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say *the green sun*. Many can then imagine or picture it. But that is not enough. . . . To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft."[9] As Eco points out, omnipotent characters can transfix audiences only temporarily: "An immortal Superman would no longer be a man, but a god, and the public's identification with his double identity would fall by the wayside."[10] However, an ardent antihero who lacks moral traits or a chivalrous antivillain who fails to act morally cannot help but pique a reader's interest precisely because of the character's seemingly contradictory nature.

Antiheroes are characters who act morally, but typically for reasons disconnected from an inner sense of virtue; antivillains are their complementary counterparts, characters who retain moral traits while failing to put them into practice. Examples range from Han Solo to Anne Rice's Lestat to the Punisher for the former, with the latter's ranks filled with characters like Magneto, Captain Nemo, and Milton's Lucifer; in each case, the character appears to possess a given set of virtuous or vicious traits, but then performs actions that run contrary to what might be reasonably expected. The Punisher rightly seeks to rid the world of evil, but has no qualms about committing murderous actions to do so; Nemo unhesitatingly destroys another ship, but not before demonstrating congenial hospitality to Aronnax and his friends. This complexity of moral identity is difficult to explain based on a simple bivalent framework—even

scalar models that would rank "antihero" simply as a "less heroic" form of hero fail to capture the nuances of the bilateral concerns drawn above from Aristotle.[11] However, these two contradictory forms of moral identity can easily be mapped into the quadrants left empty in table 1, as shown in table 2. In this view, an antihero fails to cultivate moral traits, but still (for a variety of possible reasons) seeks to accomplish otherwise good ends; similarly, an antivillain maintains a personal sense of morality, but either applies that code toward immoral ends or fails to apply it whatsoever.

TABLE 2	Acts Morally	Acts Immorally
Possesses Moral Traits	Hero	Anti-Villain
Lacks Moral Traits	Anti-Hero	Villain

To further explore this complexity, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's two-part philosophy of identity is instructive. Ricoeur distinguishes two forms of identity akin to the two senses of the passage of time for a person: the external, objective sense that passes identically for a group of people versus the internal, subjective sense that can make time feel shorter or longer than it really is for an individual. To Ricoeur, these two senses of time lead to two ways of talking about a character's identity through time. The external data Ricoeur dubs the *idem*-identity of a subject, which comprises everything seen from a third-person viewpoint—what has been discussed above as the visible external actions of an individual. The internal perspective Ricoeur calls the *ipse*-identity, and this first-person sense of selfhood captures the subjective perception of an individual's character—what has previously here been mentioned as the inner moral traits of the person.

For Ricoeur, one's *ipse*-identity changes and grows, fluctuating over time as a person learns and reacts to events in the world around, but always remaining essentially constant in a conscious sense: the individual having the differing experiences maintains a certain cohesive sameness throughout that perspectival change. *Ipse* substantiates what is often taken to be the natural sense of self-identity: a subject's personal view of the world. Conversely, the *idem*-identity never fundamentally changes, for it is always the totality of the external observations about the activity of a character as would be told by an impartial witness. In short, Ricoeur sees *ipse*-identity as the answer to the question "Who am I?," whereas *idem*-identity answers, "What am I?" (where that "what" is most easily marked as an object acting in the world). Crucially, these two components are necessarily overlapping and ultimately inextricable. Ricoeur explains: "This overlapping, however, does not abolish the difference separating the two problematics: precisely as second nature, my character is me, myself, *ipse*; but this *ipse* announces itself as *idem*."[12]

Therefore, the Ricoeurian element of *ipse*-identity can function to explain the first-person beliefs, emotions, and properties that make up the list of an individual's moral traits previously discussed; similarly, the notion of *idem*-identity is comparable to the external view of the person's chosen actions (see table 3). The benefit of this exercise comes in Ricoeur's ultimate conclusion about the union of the *ipse/idem* contradistinction, insisting that the "suturing" of these two elements together creates a robust sense of one's "narrative" identity that can encapsulate both who a figure is and what he or she is like; as Kim Atkins describes, "Ricoeur argues that the narrative model provides the means for creating such a temporally continuous, conceptual whole by bringing the elements of life into relations of 'emplotment,' just as a story's plot configures its constitutive elements to create a unified entity."[13] In general, Ricoeur wanted to adapt hermeneutical concepts to describe real-world experiences of identity as if they were stories; what is proposed here is essentially a recursive application of Ricoeur's own concepts back into a hermeneutical context.

TABLE 3	Moral Idem	Immoral Idem
Moral Ipse	Hero	Anti-Villain
Immoral Ipse	Anti-Hero	Villain

This injection of Ricoeur's narratival identity into the conversation about antiheroes and antivillains allows the reader to juxtapose the charted bivalent conditionals in a manner that was precluded by the simple dichotomy from earlier. A character might well possess an *ipse*-identity marked by villainous moral traits, but if their external *idem*-identity appears heroic, then this tension need not be described as vaguely belonging to a somehow lesser form of hero, but simply to someone categorized separately as an antihero. Similarly, if a villain appears to possess an honorable moral code within their *ipse*-identity, that does not excuse their ultimately villainous actions carried out as a part of their *idem*-identity. Such an approach avoids collapsing these complex tensions into an oversimplified rating and instead maintains the distinct concerns of internal traits and external actions.

THE DIVIDING LINE

Finally, a Ricoeurian look at the moral identity of characters allows a final suggestion to explain the appeal of the antitypes: they are, potentially, the most realistic characters possible. To Ricoeur, the term "character" "designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized. In this way character is able to constitute the limit point where . . . *ipse* becomes indiscernible from . . .

idem, and where one is inclined not to distinguish them from one another."[14] The ideal situation—Ricoeur's variation of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*—is when one's inward life and outward life come to be marked in an identical moral fashion, just as in the case of the hero. Both the antihero and the antivillain are progressing toward this goal, albeit along different tracks, but each still carries profound moral flaws—in precisely the same way that the audience of the work inevitably will and will recognize.

Not only do these flaws maintain a reader's interest with their familiarity, but the excitement of the story likewise captures what Tolkien calls the hopeful "recovery" that fantasy stories engender: "Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view. I do not say 'seeing things as they are' and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them'—as things apart from ourselves."[15] Such characters allow a reader to easily reflect on his or her own moral identity precisely because antitypes are far from morally pornographic; they apprehend and present a realistic picture of a conflicted moral agent who is often uncertain and inconsistent in their choices.

Notably, several of the critiques Eco makes in his original essay have been answered naturally as superhero comics, in particular, have matured over the intervening decades since its publication. Not only have the supervillains that Eco ignored become a mainstay in the medium, but various methods of introducing flaws into the heroes' stories have been tried, just as Eco recommended (it is particularly noteworthy that roughly twenty years after Eco joked about an immortal Superman, DC Comics saw fit to have the character killed—even if only for a limited time). But the resurgence of interest in antitypes stems, perhaps, from Eco's original point: if a character requires an adversary in order for the narrative to advance, then the internally conflicted antihero or antivillain will never fail to motivate the story. These realistic characters can be their own adversaries and, precisely because of the ubiquity of Solzhenitsyn's dividing line, they can be our entertaining mirrors as well.

Notes

1. Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman," trans. Natalie Chilton, *Diacritics* 2, no. 1 (1972): 16. This essay is also available in Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, eds., *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

2. David A. Pizarro and Roy Baumeister, "Superhero Comics as Moral Pornography," in *Our Superheroes, Ourselves*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 33.

3. This definition relies heavily on Karl Aquino and Americus Reed II, "The Self-Importance of Moral Identity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83, no. 6 (2002): 1424, although it is here adapted to relate more specifically to fictional characters (who, for example, must only be observed and cannot be directly interrogated).

4. Aquino and Reed, "The Self-Importance of Moral Identity," 1424.

5. C. C. W. Taylor, "Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 237.

6. D. S. Hutchinson, "Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 199.

7. See Aristotle's treatment of Solon's thesis along these lines in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1100a–1103a.

8. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 168.

9. J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 61. To Tolkien, Secondary Belief in a reader surpasses a mere suspension of disbelief to achieve a consistent atmosphere of imagined realism within the constraints of the fictional world. Just as in the real world, the internal logic of a fantasy setting must be valid given whatever parameters are defined as "normal," even if those parameters are vastly different from those of the real world.

10. Eco, "The Myth of Superman," 16.

11. For one such example of a scalar model, see Travis Langley, "Our Superheroes, Our Supervillains: Are They All That Different?," in *Our Superheroes, Ourselves*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 99.

12. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 121.

13. Kim Atkins, "Narrative Identity, Practical Identity, and Ethical Subjectivity," *Continental Philosophy Review* 37, no. 3 (2004): 348.

14. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Author*, 121.

15. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 67.