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Heroes and Superheroes

JEPH LOEB and TOM MORRIS

Many writers, artists, and other people who are in the superhero business have taken up this interesting task because we believe that the stories of these characters embody our deepest hopes and fears, as well as our highest aspirations, and that they can help us deal with our worst nightmares. They chart out questions we'll all have to face in the future. And they shed new light on our present condition. In addition, they do all this in such a way as to give us a new sense of direction and resolve as we live our own lives.

Defining a Hero and a Superhero

Let's start with a simple question. What is a superhero? What sets a superhero apart from a normal person? Well, first of all, they tend to look a bit different. Some wear capes and, since the time of Count Dracula, very few other people have donned this particular garb. Some of them have cool gadgets they keep in utility belts. One has metal claws that pop out of his hands. Another is very green and you wouldn't want to be around him when he's angry. There's a lot of spandex involved, and movement high above the ground is common. Hyphenated or compound names ending in "man" or "woman" or "boy" or "girl" tend to be a dead giveaway as well. As a rule, superheroes have powers and abilities far beyond those of ordinary mortals. And to a person they pursue justice, defending the defenseless, helping those who cannot help themselves, and overcoming evil with the force of good.

Some people think that the concept of a superhero is problematic. Understanding a hero as a person who risks life and limb for the sake of others, and taking the prefix "super" to indicate the possession of superpowers, they reason that the more super an individual might be, the less heroic he or she could possibly be, and conversely, the more heroic a person is, the less super they'd have to be. The reasoning is simple. The more powerful a person is, the less he or she would risk in fighting evil or helping someone else. What's so heroic about stopping an armed robbery if your skin is bullet proof and your strength is irresistible by any ordinary, or even extraordinary, street thug? On the other hand, if you're actually heroic in your actions, it must be because you did indeed have a lot to lose, if things had gone badly, which can't be true unless you lack the typical powers that are distinctive of superheroes. If this argument is right, then, at worst, the concept of a superhero, in it's extreme idealism, is an oxymoron, which means that it's literally incoherent, a contradiction in terms. At best, it would follow that the only super-powered individuals fighting evil and working for the good of others who normally could be considered heroic would have to be those on the low end of the power spectrum, with few protections and many vulnerabilities. Superman, for example, would be disqualified from counting as heroic in his normal actions, except perhaps when he faced Kryptonite.

As tempting as this reasoning might seem, it's just based on a simple misunderstanding of the heroic. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "hero" as a term coming down to us from Greek antiquity, and as meaning "man of super-human qualities, favored by the gods." The second definition given is "illustrious warrior," and the third is "man admired for achievements and noble qualities." This third definition is of particular interest.

No level of achievements alone is enough to make someone a hero. That person must embody noble qualities as well. Go look up the word "noble" and you'll find phrases like "of lofty character or ideals" and "morally elevated." The concept of a hero is a moral category. The idea of a superhero is not an oxymoron—a composite concept composed of two incompatible notions: that of an utterly invulnerable being risking personal vulnerabilities (which of course he can't have since he's invulnerable) for the sake of a greater good. That's not the idea of a superhero at all. A superhero is an extraordinarily powerful per-

son, with weaknesses as well as strengths, whose noble character guides him or her into worthy achievements.

But let's back up a moment and look at the fundamental idea of a hero a bit more. There are many heroes in works of fiction, and in the real world, who don't have superpowers at all. The heroes who live and work around us every day include firemen, police officers, doctors, nurses, and teachers. People in these jobs are often able to rise above the universal and altogether natural concern for the self, with its interests, and put the needs of others first on their list of priorities. They fight for human health, safety, growth, and excellence. They are the warriors of everyday life whose sacrifices and noble deeds benefit us all.

But we don't often think of these people as heroes. And that's too bad. Their contributions are so common, and so regular to our experience, that we can easily overlook their distinctive character. We notice such people and recognize them as heroic only when they go far beyond the range of their normally heroic activities and catch our attention in a particularly dramatic way. But if we only understood things more deeply, we would see their normal activity for the drama and true heroism that it often is. In a culture of pervasive self-interest and self-indulgent passivity, where people are often more inclined to be spectators than participants, and typically embrace easy comfort rather than initiating needed change, we can forget the relative rarity of the motivation behind what is actually heroic activity. We like to think about such people and their jobs that, "They do it because they like to do it." And we comfort ourselves that, because of this, "They're really no better than the rest of us."

One of the problems that J. Jonah Jamison, Editor-in-Chief of the New York tabloid, the *Daily Bugle,* has with Spider-Man is that the mere existence of a man who lives for others, who sacrifices important aspects of his private life in an ongoing effort to help and save people he doesn't even know is something like a standing rebuke to the rest of us for our unconcerned inertia, and thus complicity, in the face of the many evils of the world. In some prominent comic-book stories, ordinary people first welcome superheroes as needed saviors, then come to take them for granted, and finally begin to resent them for their heroically never-ending efforts to do what the rest of the population

ought to be doing, too. The superheroes stand out, not just because of their outfits and powers, but because of their altruistic activism and dedication to what is good.

In an interesting way, we can and should extend our concept of the heroic beyond those occupations that obviously require facing personal danger for the good of others, or that involve financial sacrifice in the service of what is socially needed. We should realize that a stay-at-home mother can be a hero, as can a public servant, an engineer, a musician, or an artist. Anyone who stands for the good and the right, and does so against the pull of forces that would defeat their effort, can be seen as heroic. A person can make a heroic struggle against cancer, or some other terrible disease. A young man or woman can fight heroically for their own education, against all odds and expectations. Heroism as a concept should never be diminished by over-application, but at the same time, we do not properly understand it unless we see its application wherever it is appropriate.

This insight can help us to address another worry about the term "superhero." Since the original Greek definition of a hero involved the attribution of "super-human qualities," we might be tempted to think that the word "superhero" intrinsically involves a clumsy redundancy. But as the core concept of a hero has morphed over time from the ancient idea that did involve something like superpowers to the more modern notion that focuses mainly on high achievements and moral nobility, there is need for a term that brings the component of superior power back into the balance. And this is how we get our concept of a superhero. A superhero is a hero with superhuman powers, or at least with human abilities that have been developed to a superhuman level. That gets Batman and Green Arrow, among others, into the fray, where they belong. But remembering the "super," we can never allow ourselves to forget the "hero" element as well. There are limits to the development of superhero psychology on the part of comic-book writers and film writers. There can be darkness in a character as well as light, as there is in any human life, but that darkness must ultimately be constrained by the good and noble, or we have left the realm of the properly superheroic. Not every costumed crime-fighter is necessarily a hero, and not every one with superhuman powers is necessarily a superhero.

How to Be a Hero

In *Superman for All Seasons*, it was important to represent the true nature of the heroic choice that Clark Kent made, and had to continue to make, in order to be the superhero we know as Superman. To serve as many people who needed his help as possible, he had to leave the home of his loving family, the hometown where he had grown up, and the girl with whom he shared a special bond, and a secret, and move away, alone, to launch his mission of service. He had to make real sacrifices. And, when you think about it, sacrifice—along with the ability to make sacrifices—is something like a forgotten virtue in much of modern life. Or at least, it's under-appreciated. We tend to think of it in almost wholly negative terms, focusing on what we're being asked to give up, and losing sight of the value of the goal that cannot be attained without the sacrifice. A sacrifice is always a down payment, or an up-front cost. It's both rational and beneficial when what is being purchased by that cost is of great good, and can't be attained in any other way.

Superman sacrifices a lot in order to be able to do the heroic things he does. So does Peter Parker, in order to serve as Spider-Man. Matt Murdock gives up his nights, and much of his time off, in order to protect the innocent people of Hell's Kitchen and beyond. And all this sacrifice takes self-discipline, which is just about as far off the radar screen as sacrifice is for many people these days, as something good, valuable, and important in the arsenal of human qualities that are desirable to have. Power without self-discipline is either just wasted, or it's dangerous. Self-discipline is a form of focus that helps make the greatest goods possible.

In the *Superman for All Seasons* narrative, Lois Lane is so taken aback by how someone with Superman's powers could use them the way he does precisely because it's so relatively uncommon to see such a thing. The more power we get, the more avidly we tend to serve ourselves, and our own interests. But this is where the superheroes stand apart. They realize that there is no real self-fulfillment without self-giving. They understand that we have our talents and powers in order to use them, and that to use them for the good of others as well as ourselves is the highest use we can make of them.

The concept of a hero is what philosophers call a normative concept. It doesn't just characterize what is, it offers us a glimpse of what ought to be. It has a claim on us. It presents us with something to aspire to in our own lives. The superheroes provide great, fictionally vivid images of the heroic, and are both inspirational and aspirational. When they are developed properly and portrayed well, they present us with something to which we all should aspire. Plato believed that the good is inherently attractive. Unless we are blocked from seeing it and appreciating it for what it is, what is good will draw us in its direction. It will motivate us and direct our steps. That's why the depiction of the heroic in superhero stories is of moral force. From our childhoods and on into adulthood, the superheroes can remind us of the importance of self-discipline, self-sacrifice, and expending ourselves for something good, noble, and important. They can broaden our mental horizons and support our moral determination, while also entertaining us.

We don't necessarily have to say that superhero comics are intentionally instructional, or moralistic in nature. Sometimes, they're just fun. But it's very reasonable to suggest that the superheroes have been around for so long, and have continued to be so popular, in part, because they speak to our nature, as well as to both our aspirations and our fears. We all aspire to make a difference, to have an impact in this world, and to be acknowledged for that impact. The superheroes can keep that flame alive in our hearts as we ponder their sense of mission, and as we see them live it. But their stories can also speak to our fears, and in equally important ways.

Fear and the Superhero Stories

We all fear harm. That's just part of what it is to be human. The superhero stories portray vividly many forms of harm that can conceivably enter into our lives. The mad scientists, the power-hungry politicians, the disaffected loners with a grudge, the organized crime, the terrorism, the businessmen with nothing but profit on their minds, all remind us of the many sources of danger in our world. And, in addition, we are often both fascinated and a little worried about what is out there in the larger universe. Many superhero stories address these fears as well. The superheroes show us that all these dangers can be con-

fronted and overcome. They display the power of character and courage over adversity. And so, even in dealing with our fears, they can be inspirational.

We will all confront adversity in our lives. And that can be dispiriting. We are often inclined to just give up and find an easier path. But the superheroes show us that nothing worth doing is easy. Even with their superpowers, the greatest of the superheroes often prevail against adversity only because of what philosophers know of as the classic virtues, and some neo-classic ones as well, like courage, determination, persistence, teamwork, and creativity. They don't accept defeat. They won't ever give up. They believe in themselves, and in their cause, and they go all-out to achieve their goals. By showing us how even very powerful people have to fight and struggle and stick to that fight in order to prevail, they help us deal with the fears that we all face concerning our own prospects in the world. So, it will be tough. So what? We can do it.

There is even another sort of fear, less obvious, but perhaps just as important, that many superhero narratives bring to our attention. Many of us fear what we may have to do to stand up to the evil in the world. Will we have to resort to force and violence in order to contain or defeat the forces that threaten us and those we love? The superheroes often do, but they know where to draw the line. Will we?

Many great philosophers have understood that we human beings are creatures of habit. Once we resort to violence to solve a problem, we are a bit more likely to do the same thing again on a future occasion—whether that future occasion really requires it or not. We are inclined to do what we have become accustomed to doing, and any single act can begin to accustom us to something new. If we are sent to war in a foreign land, will we return as more violent people? Will it ruin our lives? Will we be forever changed in detrimental ways? That's a real fear for any good person living in the modern world.

Along with our tendency to form habits, we all have something like an ever-rising threshold of expectations that plays out in many dimensions of our lives. The rising threshold phenomenon is a very general thing. The more money people make, the more they want, and the more they think is necessary for a comfortable life. A glass of wine with dinner can over time very easily become two glasses, and then three. The use of force and

violence works the same way. What once was completely unacceptable can quickly come to seem unfortunately necessary, however regrettable, and ultimately even perfectly fine, as you move forward more deeply into new territory. We see this in wartime when accepted forms of violence can give rise over time to terrible atrocities. Good people rightly fear the effects that a use of force or violence could have on their own souls. If it comes to resisting evil with violence, what will that do to me? In violently defeating evil, will I actually have allowed evil to win after all, but in a different form, in my own soul?

The superheroes give us examples of good people who are able to use force when it's necessary, even sometimes taking violent actions, within limits, to defeat and subdue otherwise unstoppable evil, but without letting that get out of hand or rebound in self-defeating ways on their own characters. Batman, Spider-Man, and Daredevil, along with Superman and many others, exercise a great deal of self-restraint, and are careful to draw a line they will not cross. They are able to fight evil without becoming evil. In doing so, they address our common fear that it can't be done. They show us that we can do whatever we have to do, in the face of evil, if we stay firmly in touch with our noblest motivations and our most cherished values. But that doesn't mean that this is not dangerous. It's very dangerous. But good can still prevail.

The Example of the Superhero

Whether he's stopping a purse snatcher, foiling one of Lex Luthor's evil plots, or even deflecting an asteroid from its collision course with Earth, Superman gives us an ongoing example of what a commitment to truth, justice, and not just the American way, but the genuinely *human* way should look like. Many other superheroes show us this as well. We're all meant to be active in our creation of good lives, for ourselves, and for the other people around us. We're supposed to be concerned about our communities and our greater world. There is evil to be resisted and great good to be done. Life awaits our best contributions. The superheroes work for not just people who appreciate their efforts, but often for people who criticize and revile them. They don't do what they do because it's popular. They do it because it's right.

The superheroes are obviously very gifted individuals. In the ancient world, the prominent, and very practical Roman philosopher Seneca once 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."[1] This is literally true of Superman and many others. But all of us are gifted in some way. All of us have talents and powers. If we can follow the superheroes in not allowing what is low and inferior to interfere with our development and use of those gifts, we can bring a little of the superhero mindset into our own lives.

The philosopher Seneca also gave us all a great piece of advice when he wrote:

> Choose for yourself a moral hero whose life, conversation, and expressive face all please you, then picture him to yourself at all times as your protector, and as your ethical pattern. We all need someone whose example can regulate our characters.[2]

And then, again:

> Cherish some man of great character, and keep him always in mind. Then live as if he were watching you, and order all your actions as if he saw them.[3]

Many other ancient philosophers also urged us to do this. And it's very effective. People may carry around in their heads the image of a good parent, an admired sibling, a great teacher, a wise older friend or mentor, or even a noble moral leader like Gandhi, as a touchstone for their decisions and actions. What would my father do? What would my mother do? Would I act like this if my best teacher, or my spouse were watching me? And, as funny as it might seem, the best of the superheroes can function for us in precisely the same way. They are moral examples. Superman can inspire us. 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

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[1] Translation by Tom Morris, in Tom Morris, *The Stoic Art of Living* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), p. 21.

[2] *The Stoic Art of Living*, p. 55.

[3] *The Stoic Art of Living*, p. 56

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 when circumstances are especially challenging.

The heroic path is sometimes lonely, but it's always right. With an image of the superheroes in mind, we may find it a bit easier to stay true to the high moral road that alone will satisfy us in the end. What would Superman do? Go do your version of it. The world always needs one more hero.