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A Defense of Superman: Learning Virtue through Popular Fiction

For centuries and millennia, the inhabitants of the Western world have recognized the indispensable role that stories play in shaping moral character.

Human beings are born neither virtuous nor vicious, as Aristotle correctly noted. Rather, both excellence and vice are habits that we acquire by way of imitating others — whether these others are flesh-and-blood beings or works of fiction.

The superhero comic or — as it is more commonly, and accurately, called today, "the graphic novel" — is especially illustrative in this regard.

Today, untold numbers of people from across the country (and the world) pay to pack themselves into movie theaters to enjoy cinematic adaptations of these graphic novels. Unfortunately, though, relatively few people look beyond the action and the glitzy special effects to discern the provocative moral insights supplied by the films' protagonists.

Let's take Superman.

The Man of Steel is the prototypical superhero, the Babe Ruth of superheroes, as it were. Yet not infrequently, and especially as of late, commentators of one sort or another have demeaned this perennial symbol of "Truth, Justice, and the American Way," comparing him unfavorably with, say, Batman.

Batman, as anyone who is at all familiar with DC Comics lore knows, has no super powers, and yet he tirelessly wages war against all manner of evildoers. This, the Superman detractors contend, renders him more admirable than the god-like Man of Steel who is virtually invulnerable.

To look at Superman and see only an immovable object whose campaign to rid the world of evil must be easy and, thus, less than fully admirable, is like looking at the Grand Canyon and seeing only a big hole in the Earth.

Far from detracting from his goodness, the fact that Superman possesses enormous power actually accentuates it.

The historical record is a depressing one on this score, but it is abundantly clear: The greater the power that is concentrated in the hands of a person or group, the greater the danger they pose to others. Lord

Acton famously summarized this point when he said, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely.”

Superman, though, in spite of having at his disposal far more power than the Earthlings among who he lives, chooses to use that power to serve, not his own selfish interests, but the well-being of others — meaning the entire population of the planet. His gifts — his awesome strength; his heat, x-ray, telescopic, and microscopic modes of vision; his “super” hearing; his ability to move at the speed of light; his “super” cool breath; and, of course, his ability to fly — he employs inexhaustibly to save strangers.

Like Jesus Christ, with whom he has been long compared, Superman voluntarily assumes to himself the incredible, and incredibly selfless, responsibility of serving as a beacon of hope, justice, and goodness to the world. Both Christ and Superman could have deployed the enormity of their resources toward the same end — self-aggrandizement — upon which the powerful have been preoccupied from time immemorial.

Yet they refused to do so, instead ordering their very lives as a standing rebuke to oppressors the world over.

What this means, however, is that if Superman is insufficiently heroic or admirable because he is like a god, then Jesus — who Christendom affirms is none other than God — should resonate even less with us.

It will do no good to object that Christian theology also recognizes that Jesus is fully man. Superman too is fully a man (even if he isn’t an Earthling by birth).

Interestingly, there are Christians who seek to re-imagine the Person of Christ by emphasizing His humanity at the cost of de-emphasizing His divinity. This tendency has been particularly acute among contemporary Biblical scholars. Some of these scholars — like those who compose “the Jesus Seminar” — deny that Jesus was divine at all. On the other hand, there are others who concede His divinity while all the same concurring with their unbelieving colleagues that unless we opt for a “lower Christology” — a more human-centered depiction of Jesus — we will not be able to relate to Him.

That our heroes must be relatable and, thus, human, no reasonable person would dare to deny. But what both the detractors of Superman and the proponents of “lower Christologies” fail to notice is that the objects of their critiques are that much more human because of their unimaginable powers and the purposes that they elect to serve with those powers.

Just as the deity of Jesus compliments and enhances His humanity, so too does the awesome power of Superman and his selfless use of it distinguish him as the finest of human beings.

Contrary to their critics, in choosing to devote themselves to serving others, Jesus and Superman do indeed render themselves vulnerable. How could things be otherwise? After all, the readiness with which Christ and Superman surrender themselves for the good of others is a function of their boundless love, and as anyone who has ever loved knows all too well, the price of love — any love — is pain. And the greater the love, the greater does the pain promise to be.

Superman is a fictional character. Jesus is real. Still, there are crucial insights that this analysis yields.

First, neither the power of Superman nor that of Jesus makes them less heroic and worthy of imitation. Quite the contrary, given what they have chosen to do with this power, they are actually the finest specimens of humanity.

Second, though none of us can ever become Superman or Jesus, we can learn from their example and aspire to use what power we have for similarly noble purposes.