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Of Batcaves and Clock-Towers: Living Damaged Lives in Gotham City

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> "My parents taught me a different lesson…. Lying on this street—shaking in deep shock—dying for no reason at all—they showed me that the world only makes sense when you force it to." Bruce Wayne in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*[1]

> "I made a promise to my parents that I would rid the city of the evil that took their lives."
> Bruce Wayne in *Batman: Dark Victory*[2]

In Darwyn Cooke's *Batman: Ego*, we are given an account of a young Bruce Wayne's Christmas day and evening. The day starts nicely enough with gifts, family cheer, and Bruce's excitement over his new Zorro action figure. However, at Christmas dinner, Bruce's father, Dr. Thomas Wayne, receives a phone call updating him on a patient's health. He decides he must go visit the patient and has Bruce ride along with him. The patient dies and as Dr. Wayne is covering the body, Bruce walks into the room and sees the dead body. Back in the car, Bruce expresses his confusion following his first experience with death, and the following exchange occurs:

> BRUCE: Are you and mom going to die?
> DR. WAYNE: Well, yes we will, Bruce. Everyone passes on. But not before our time. And that's a long way away.
> BRUCE: Promise?
> DR. WAYNE: I promise son.[3]

The sequel to this part of the story is well known: a few weeks later the Wayne family goes to a movie and, after the show, Dr. and Mrs. Wayne are shot and killed by a robber leaving Bruce an orphan. Dr. Wayne was unable to keep his promise. This story points out the fact that promises are remarkably fragile human actions: ones made to specific people in particular circumstances, and which envision a future that may or may not come to pass. So, for example, one need only think about the high divorce rates in western industrialized societies to recognize how 'utopian' promises can be and how recalcitrant reality can be in knocking down the future envisioned by promises.

In this essay, I want to try to juxtapose the stories told by some comic books, those set in Gotham City and involving Batman, Batgirl, and Catwoman, with issues raised by this fragility intrinsic to promises. I want to argue that these comic books provide us with an image of what I will call, following J. M. Bernstein, "fugitive ethics," that is, a kind of ethical action of which promises are paradigmatic.[4] While a positive description of what such ethical actions are will be available at the end of this essay, for now it is sufficient to note two of their central features. First, fugitive ethical actions are actions that are available to us only under the conditions of late modern capitalism. As a result, fugitive ethical actions are ethical actions that are available to lives that are best characterized as damaged in a sense still to be specified. In what follows, I first characterize the understanding of modernism relevant for my discussion, and then proceed to consider the ways in which lives lived under the conditions of modernism can be called damaged. After that, I will turn to a more extensive description of fugitive ethics. Throughout this essay, I am providing an approach to the relation between philosophy and popular culture, one that points to a very close convergence of the aims certain forms of philosophy possess and those aims certain forms of popular culture possess.

I need to offer one methodological consideration before proceeding. Umberto Eco has talked about the dream-like quality of superhero comic books, referring to the fact that there is always something more to be said with each new issue, while, nonetheless, 'before' and 'after' remain hazy.[5] There is a kind of eternal present involved in the experience of reading comic books. This makes talk

about 'continuity' between comic books very difficult. Geoff Klock has extended Eco's insight about comic book continuity by pointing to the way that "strong work comes to define truth."[6] In other words, certain comic books within a series tend to take on additional weight due to a variety of factors such as their especially high quality, their disproportionate influence on subsequent issues in the series, and their reception as canonical for a series. Many of the comics I discuss below have managed to attain to this level of strong work as generally recognized by the community of comic book writers, artists, and readers. Without disputing the account of strong works within a series, I would add this point: what constitutes strong work can be indexed to the concerns the reader brings to the texts. Thus, I have chosen these comics in part because they help illustrate my point, in part because they are generally recognized as among the best recent work in comics, and in part because of my experience of them. In Eco's dream-like world of the history of comics, I am certain I could have found other books to illustrate my argument, just as I am sure there are comic books that point in a direction I do not follow here. More importantly, though, the comics I discuss here are comics that have made a strong impression on me, that have come to define a 'truth' for me about the universe in which these comics take place and the light that universe sheds on our universe.[7] Yet, while the selection of comics to be discussed is thus ineluctably personal, that fact does not make the conclusion I want to draw idiosyncratic, though I recognize that as a promise to the reader that I can hope to fulfill only by providing the following discussion.

I: Gotham City and Modernism

At the beginning of *Batman: Year One* (Miller, et al., 1987), we see Lieutenant James Gordon, newly appointed to the Gotham City Police Department, arriving in the city via train. Paralleling his arrival, we see the return of Bruce Wayne via airplane to Gotham City after an absence of twelve years. Gordon's arrival is drawn in black and white— grey sky, grey train; it's all wires, bridges, trestles, and train tracks. His internal thoughts in this first panel: "Gotham City. Maybe it's all I deserve now. Maybe it's just my time in Hell." In the second panel, we see the interior of the train: it's overcrowded, people standing in the aisle, luggage weighing down the caging that is overhead. Gordon

continues: "Train's no way to come to Gotham…in an airplane from above, all you'd see are the streets and buildings. Fool you into thinking it's civilized." When we see Bruce Wayne, it's from outside his plane. We see him as if he were alone without any of the overcrowding of the train. His thoughts: "From here, it's clean shafts of concrete and snowy rooftops. The work of men who died generations ago. From here, it looks like an achievement. I should have taken the train. I should be closer. I should see the enemy."[8]

I now want to develop a conceptual apparatus that will help us to understand these two scenes and that will set the stage for a discussion of life in Gotham City. I begin with a definition of modernism. Since any such definition is likely to be contentious, I simply want to stipulate one for purposes of discussion, though it is one with which I agree. I borrow the description of modernism from John Patrick Diggins:

> What, specifically, is modernism? As a way of reacting to the modern world, modernism is the consciousness of what once was presumed to be present and is now seen as missing. It might be considered as a series of felt absences, the gap between what we know is not and what we desire to be: knowledge without truth, power without authority, society without spirit, self without identity, politics without virtue, existence without purpose, history without meaning.[9]

There are two aspects to this account of modernism that I want to emphasize. First, Diggins mentions a series of absences that cluster around the fact that meanings previously available to human beings are no longer available. One characteristic way of discussing these absences is by talking about the "disenchantment of the world."[10] As we shall see, the traditional resources for moral evaluation and commitment are among the most prominent of our losses and foster our disenchantment in a particularly significant manner. Second, while Diggins does not try to provide any content for the rather neutral term "feeling" it seems worthwhile to have at our disposal a thicker, more descriptive, understanding of the feeling generated by the absence of meaning. In fact, Diggins subsequently speaks of the "intellectual wounds of modernity," and I want to draw attention to that phrase.[11] Certainly, 'wound,' conveys content considerably less neutral than

"feeling," and it seems right that the feeling engendered by the disenchantment of the world be characterized by this richer, less neutral, term. Moreover, this richer term begins to provide us with some sense of what is at stake in modernist understandings of our predicament.

For his part, Bernstein has delineated the ways that the good life as traditionally understood is no longer possible for us under the conditions of modernism. On his account, our lives as we currently live them are damaged.[12] There are two situations that stand behind this claim, one having to do with the social conditions in which we must live, the other having to do with the way in which the scope of ethical action has been increasingly "privatized." The foundational description of the social conditions under which we must live our lives privileges Weber's concept of rationalization, and the most obvious success story of rationalization is science. Science is masterfully effective and successful, and this effectiveness bestows on science an aura of authority. The success of science breeds more success until, finally, we come to believe that anything can be understood in principle, that is, that "we can master all things by calculation."[13] This rationalization process is a key factor in the disenchantment of the world so keenly described in modernist thought. The second situation leading to damaged lives is Weber's famous "bureaucratization" thesis wherein social relations are rendered calculable in accord with the ruling ethos of science. Under this condition, no social relation remains uncontaminated by considerations of efficiency, calculation, and the like. Indeed, these considerations concerning efficiency coupled with the disenchantment of the world account for Weber's description of the "iron cage" of rationality that ensnares us all, warping our experience of the world and trapping us in a set of social relations that can only be described as 'wounding.'[14] Given this understanding of disenchantment, it makes perfect sense for James Gordon to express skepticism towards the idea that Gotham City is "civilized," and perfect sense for Bruce Wayne to view the city as "the enemy."

II: Damaged Life

If Gotham City can be viewed as representing a rationalized world—one that wounds—then it should follow that its inhabitants are

leading damaged lives. How, though, can we best represent the notion of a damaged life? Bernstein presents a compelling framework for this task by focusing on what he calls 'affective skepticism': "…a systematic separation between the rational and universalistic norms of a rationalized practice, on the one hand, and the concrete, unique agent-specific motivation for pursuing that practice on the other."[15] In Alan Moore's famous *Batman: The Killing Joke*[16], we can see a representation of such affective skepticism.

This comic gives us an origin story for the Joker, one of Batman's most famous foes. In a series of flashbacks, we learn that the Joker, whose real name we never learn in the comic, was a down on his luck would-be stand-up comedian before the series of events that turned him into the Joker. He was married, and there was a child on the way; he had left a "good job" as a lab assistant at a chemical plant in order to pursue his dream of becoming a comedian; and he was thus forced to prove himself as a husband and father. To try to provide for his family, he has involved himself with a couple of low level criminals who are planning to rob a playing card company. The most direct access to the Playing Card company is through the chemical plant where the future Joker once worked. On the day of the robbery, the future Joker is told that his wife had a fatal accident at home. His two criminal cohorts force him to continue his part in the robbery. When the robbery goes wrong, his two cohorts are shot by the police. At that moment, Batman arrives, has the cops stop shooting, and goes in pursuit of the soon-to-be Joker. Batman pursues him until his only possible escape is to jump into a vat of chemicals. When he is flushed out of the vat into a sewer away from the plant, thereby escaping Batman, he discovers the chemicals have left him permanently disfigured: his skin white, his hair green, and his face permanently disfigured. This "one bad day" creates the Joker. The conjunction of his disastrous attempt to prove himself and the accidental death of his wife is more than he can take. He describes the result of this one bad day: "When I saw what a black, awful joke the world was, I went crazy as a coot."

The idea of proving something recurs in the Joker's criminal plan unfolding in the book's present, with equally disastrous results. His plan is to prove to Batman that he and Batman are no different—

indeed, that any person is simply a series of bad events away from craziness. This radical contingency is continually represented by imagery of cards and card playing, especially the joker card—what happens to us, it seems, is accidental. Without some master narrative to tell ourselves about the world and its sense, there simply is no sense; and The Joker has lost any narrative that could make the world sensible. The Joker mocks Batman in their final confrontation in an abandoned amusement park: "You have to keep pretending that life makes sense, that there's some point to all the struggling."[17] Before arriving at this final point, he had gone to Commissioner Gordon's apartment, shot his daughter Barbara, stripped Barbara of her clothes as she lay paralyzed on the floor, took pictures of her, and kidnapped the commissioner. Later in the abandoned amusement park, he tortures Gordon and shows him pictures of his naked, helpless daughter in an attempt to drive him mad, thereby proving his point that we're all just one bad day away from insanity. When Batman arrives at the park, he discovers that Gordon has not gone crazy, that, indeed, Gordon is determined the Joker be brought in "by the book" to "show him that our way works." Batman confronts the Joker, who argues his case: "It's all a joke. Everything anybody ever valued or struggled for. It's all a monstrous demented gag. So why can't you see the funny side? Why aren't you laughing?" Batman responds: "Because I've heard it before and it wasn't funny the first time."[18] Once defeated, the Joker, former failed stand-up comic, tells a joke to explain why he can never let Batman help him:

> See, there are these two guys in a lunatic asylum…and one night, they decide they don't like living in an asylum anymore. They decide they're going to escape! So, like, they get up onto the roof. And there, just across this narrow gap, they see the rooftops of the town, stretching away in the moonlight. Stretching away to freedom. Now, the first guy, he jumps right across with no problem. But his friend, his friend daren't make the leap. Y'see…y'see he's afraid of falling. So then the first guy has an idea…he says, "Hey! I have my flashlight with me! I'll shine it across the gap between the buildings. You can walk along the beam and join me!" B-but the second guy just shakes his head. He suh-says…he says, "Wh-what do you think I am? Crazy? You'd turn it off when I was halfway across."[19]

The comic ends with both The Joker and Batman laughing at this joke.

It is clear that The Joker has succumbed to affective skepticism on a rather massive scale. If it makes sense to say that there can be a coherence in madness—and Joker's perfectly "rational" plan to prove that everyone is "one bad day" away from being like him certainly seems coherent—then the only motive he has for acting comes from features internal to his madness. And yet the proof he's offering bears all the hallmarks of an experiment. The Joker may be mad, but he understands and accepts the rudiments of rationalized thought. More formally, The Joker has lost touch with any values external to his practice, as is evident from his willingness to kill, wound, and torture people in an effort to prove his point. As an interpretation of the joke at the end of the story, I read the asylum as representing the disenchanted world that we all live in as a result of rationalization and bureaucratization. The challenge we face can be summed up nicely by recognizing that while it is possible to escape the asylum by various forms of flight, those forms are at the same time remarkably unstable strategies. The fear of falling is real, but the strategies available to us in a rationalized, disenchanted world are only various forms of fantasy, about as stable as a flashlight's beam.

One concrete way that Bernstein shows the damage done to us in our living lives under the conditions of modernism argument involves the debate between internalists and externalists in moral theory[20] In brief, externalists hold that justifying reasons for moral actions and motivating reasons for such actions are in principle distinct while internalists hold that they ought to converge. The externalist will try to justify a moral norm by appealing to abstract principles that are universally applicable in an attempt to show that a) such moral norms apply to everyone and that b) they transcend self-interest. Thus, in condemning theft, the externalist might provide reasons that work on an abstract level, say, respect for property or maximization of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, but still leave me wondering why *I* should not steal. Part of the problem here is that, as Bernstein points out, any such justification aimed at everyone is likely to be "agent neutral;" but if the reason is not compelling to an agent, it need not be compelling to *me*. Moreover, it is simply part of our intuitive notion of morality that it should provide reasons that go beyond what may currently motivate me to act. Thus, the argument

against theft should work even for those who are inclined to steal; but, again, that means there will be a disconnect between the set of beliefs and desires that motivate me to steal and the argument against stealing. It is difficult to see how to connect those two sets of reasons. Internalists argue that the only way to do so is by rejecting the externality of justificatory reasons. That is, any reason for action must be one that motivates me from the inside, as it were.

A standard objection to such a view is that any reason that is internally motivating to me must be one I can *already* accept, thus limiting my moral point of view to that sphere within which I have comfort, or, to put it another way, all my moral reasons would be ones that do not challenge *me*. The potential for a self-satisfied morality is all too clear. Bernstein's move, at this point, is very interesting. He essentially denies that there's any substantive moral difference between these two views, pointing out that pretty much any set of external reasons can be internalized:

> The fundamental objection to externalist theories, which in fact supports the claim that they are external, is not that they cannot in principle be incorporated into individuals' motivational sets (almost anything can) but that they are representative and functional components of a generalised experience of disenchantment and societal rationalisation that *hurts*.[21]

In other words, internalism as a position in moral theory is best viewed not as a theoretical demand, but as an expressive response to the disenchantment brought about by rationalization, a response that is necessary because the gap between motivational reasons and justifying reasons hurts us as we try to make our way through the world in morally responsive ways.

Given this experience of hurt, which is manifested philosophically in moral theory as a need for justificatory and motivational reasons to converge, it might be useful to think about responses to this experience of hurt. Bernstein mentions several expressions of this hurt brought about by disenchantment. Direct expressions of the pain we feel include disillusionment, alienation, boredom, and anger, while indirect expressions of this hurt manifest themselves in cynicism, focusing on one part of life in an attempt to

make the whole meaningful, religious fundamentalism, obsessive consumerism, and a valuing of pure experience of an erotic or aesthetic sort (Bernstein 2004, 19-20). Returning to *Batman: Year One*, it is worth noting what we see in the panels immediately following the ones that introduce us to Gordan and Wayne: Gordon is accosted by a religious cultist as he's getting off the train, while Wayne, the rich, single playboy is accosted at the airport by television reporters. Here we see two of the most obvious forms of flight associated with the hurt of modern rationalized society: religious fundamentalism and an obsession with life-style.

Even if, we can view Gotham City and its problems as the work of disenchanted reason, a further question remains. Why does scientific thought result in a disenchanted world? The answer to that question comes down to the fact that the overwhelming tendency of reason is to advance what Bernstein calls "identity thinking." The central feature of such thinking involves subsuming particulars under universals, where universals have the function of simplifying, making coherent, explaining, and unifying particulars. The dangers here are pretty obvious, since particulars are always richer than the universal under which they are subsumed. That is, universals, whether they take the form of concept terms or scientific explanations, leave out something about the particular that resists unification and identity.[22] Two items may be identical as they fall under a universal, but they are not identical as particulars. The tension, then, turns on whether one wants to criticize scientific rationalism for its omission of the relevant non-identity characteristics of items, or accept science and lose the particular characteristics. Obviously, criticizing scientific rationalism is a risky act. If you focus, for example, on the way in which scientific rationalism has some non-rational foundation—a focus central to much twentieth century philosophy from Heidegger to Kuhn—you simply fail to close the gap between justificatory and motivational reasons for acting. So, for example, if you want to say that the legitimacy of science rests on some historical accident, or the way in which it is inextricably tied to a discredited onto-theology, then motivational reasons will be *reasons*, but ultimately irrational. That is, the two sorts of reasons are not connected. But if that is the case, then motivating reasons are still subject to criticism from reason, that is, affective skepticism still looms as a likely result.[23] Of course, the other

possibility that awaits is Joker-like: simply accepting the irrationality. Batman may laugh at the Joker's joke, but it is clear that he is the one who has jumped across the gap between the asylum and the world. How might he have done this, and, more importantly, how might he have done this while not giving into madness?

One possible response canvassed by Bernstein is that we may criticize rationality not because it is rational, but because it is not rational enough:

> Only an expansion of reason, rationality, and cognition will answer the dilemma of disenchantment; and if this expansion is to be keyed to the diagnosis of scientific rationalism as a process of systematically negating particularity in favor of universality (the movement of rationalization as identity thinking), then the direction of expansion will be the inclusion in reasoning of ineliminable moments of dependency and particularity.[24]

The features of dependence and particularity are crucial. By making reason recognize the contours of the world in ways that block identity thinking, it might be possible to rescue the intrinsic rationality of motivating reasons, that is, it might be possible to connect justification and motivation. However, the generality of this suggestion is problematic. What we need are examples of "ineliminable moments of dependency and particularity." One place to find such examples is by considering human actions that are irreducible to general principles and their application. The practice of promising is one such type of action.

III-Promises, Promises

In *Batgirl: Year One*[25], we find out how Barbara Gordon becomes Batgirl (this is the same Barbara Gordon who, after retiring from her duties as Batgirl is shot by The Joker). She is a successful, very bright young adult who is living a very unsatisfying (to her) life as a librarian. Her days behind a bank of computers at the library are hounded by a paralyzing tedium. She is misperceived routinely by others, that is, others are failing to see her particularity by their focus

on her job, or her height, or even her status as daughter. She tries several ways to break out of her constrained life—she applies to the police academy and the FBI—but is rejected by both. She is looking for "anything that will get me out of where I am. Where I don't want to be."[26] For a costume party, she decides to go wearing a female variation on a Batman costume. By the end of the evening, she's been dubbed "Batgirl" and has come to the attention of Batman. When asked why she wants to be a costumed crime fighter, she responds: "You may have all the tools of the trade, but you don't have a monopoly on wanting to help. I'll tell you why, you big scary goon. Because I can." And she immediately adds: "I can see Gotham's future. And without people like you and pixie boots and me, this place doesn't have much to look forward to."[27]

On the surface, this portrayal of Barbara Gordon's motivation for becoming Batgirl would seem to contrast starkly with Bruce Wayne's story. When young Bruce Wayne saw his parents brutally murdered by a robber, he promised that he would rid Gotham City of such evil. For a long time, he saw this as a necessity forced upon him; something about which he had no choice. In his internalization of such an external demand, Bruce Wayne is the very embodiment of the damage done by a disenchanted world. Eventually, though, he came to see it as a choice he made: "I thought I didn't have a choice about being the Batman. That Gotham City chose me to protect her. That is wrong. Ever since the night my parents were taken from me, *I* made the choice. It is a *good* choice."[28] The circumstances under which Bruce Wayne came to see that he had made a choice involved the renunciation of a chance at a romantic relationship. In denying one future, he claims the present and its future for himself. In short, I think there is a nice parallel here between the choice Barbara Gordon makes ("Because I can") and the choice Bruce Wayne makes. Why I think this is significant will take a bit of working out, but will involve two points, one having to do with the purely human status of Bruce Wayne and Barbara Gordon, while the other has to do with the intension of the word "can" in Barbara Gordon's motivation for her decision.

One way into the first issue is to ask why it is that Bruce Wayne and Barbara Gordon choose to help in the way that they do. After all,

they have no superpowers, but are purely human. That is, it's not the case that by their very nature they somehow cannot fit into standard roles and practices. Bruce Wayne could become, say, a policeman. His choice to protect Gotham City takes, let's face it, a pretty counter-intuitive and bizarre form: dressing up like a bat and working outside normal legal channels. So too in the case of Barbara Gordon: why this choice and not some other? If we remember the context of their choices—living damaged lives in a disenchanted world—it is easier to see what might be going on. In addition, we must keep in mind the ineliminable particularity of Bruce and Barbara as agents. While the police *can* protect and serve, and while policemen *can* be honest and trustworthy—although the *Batman* comics give us many examples of corrupt cops—nonetheless, the police, indeed, the entire set of justice institutions, are complicit in the rationalized, disenchanted world that is Gotham City. If Batman were a policeman, he would be doing little more than offering consolation to the citizens of Gotham City, when what they need is the promise of something more, the promise of some sort of experience that is not deformed by disenchantment and that holds out some promise for hope. In a crime-ridden and corrupt city such as Gotham City, it is clear that traditional authority has lost its luster; what else could be expected in a disenchanted world? As we saw Diggins point out, the absence of authority and its replacement with power is a basic condition of modernity. Thus, what the disenchanted world needs is the re-establishment of authority without its juridicolegal context, which would render that authority prey to skeptical reason. Batman and Batgirl can be seen as sources of authority precisely by the choices they make that set them outside the legal context.

But there is another lesson, I think, that can be learned from Barbara Gordon's story. After all, she becomes someone with not only one superhero identity, but two. *Batgirl: Year One* tells the story of Barbara's becoming Batgirl, but also points to her future, one that she has no way of perceiving at the time of *Batgirl: Year One*. The reader knows that Barbara Gordon both is and is not "divining" her future in her taking on the persona of Batgirl. In the dream-like world of comic continuity, the Batgirl who comes to be now also is the Batgirl who is shot and permanently paralyzed by the Joker in *The Killing Joke* and later emerges as Oracle, information gatherer and crime fighter, She

even becomes a lead character in her own comic series *Birds of Prey*. While Barbara may not know her future, the book is filled with references to it. She starts by talking about the nature of Cassandra's oracles, portending a future that she was powerless to have an effect on. In trying to anticipate her own future, Barbara states: "I have to find another path. Divine my own future. One uniquely mine. Not a page from someone else's book. Not a fate that begins and ends on page one… To dad, I'm all talk about digging for information. I won't be some glorified "answer lady" for the cops. I want to be in on the action. Anything that will get me out of where I am. Where I don't want to be" (Beatty, et al., 12-13). In the very panel in which Barbara expresses her desire to be anywhere but where she is, we see her sitting behind computers in the library, looking out through a window in a scene that clearly calls to mind her bank of computers in the clock tower where she lives and operates as Oracle.

One way to understand a promise is to recognize it as consisting of three elements: a) it takes place in the present and its context; b) it imagines a future that is not imaginable from the present except by the very fulfillment of the promise; and c) it is powerless in relation to what might happen in the future (Bernstein 2004, 436). In Barbara' Gordon's story, we have the very nature of a promise playing out in front of us. Her promise ("Because I can") does in fact take place in the present, imagines a future (one in which she helps), and is nonetheless powerless in relation to what reality, in the form of the Joker, has to offer. The fragility of promising is made concrete in the fragility of Barbara Gordon in the face of the Joker's bullet. Her "because I can" thus doubly represents "hopefulness in the teeth of intransigent reality" (Bernstein 2004, 436). Her promise to become Batgirl is at the very same time her promise to find ways of keeping that promise when the promise has been thwarted by reality. Within her promise to be Batgirl, her promise to be Oracle is inscribed as well. Both the nobility of the promise and its fragility are held up for the reader's inspection.[29]

IV-Fugitive Ethics

Bernstein plausibly argues that the only way authority can be experienced is on the back of fugitive ethical acts: "Certain empirical

events have the status of both actualizing a possibility and in so doing making a promise about the future…. Since such events both flee from ordinary empirical experience and are intrinsically ephemeral and transient, I consider them "fugitives""[30] That is, what would give Batman and Batgirl authority, as opposed to the power of the police, is precisely the way in which their actions embody a fugitive character, one that is represented concretely by their working outside the law, but can be philosophically explicated in the convergence of motivating and justifying reasons.[31] This convergence manifests itself in their promising. In considering one more example from the Batman universe, I hope to tie together all the threads of my discussion.

Consider Selina Kyle, the once and future Catwoman. In Darwyn Cooke's *Selina's Big Score*[32], we see Selina trying to pick up the pieces of a life that had spiraled out of control, leaving her no choice but to fake her own death. On returning to Gotham City, she meets Chantel, the girlfriend of a mobster named Falcone. Chantel has overheard Falcone talking about a big chunk of money and she wants Selina to help her "to rip these fools off."[33] After some questioning by Selina, her motives become clear:

> Me? I know who I am…what I am. I'm not ashamed of it, right? 'Cause when it's time, everybody does what they have to to get over. I look at you and I know you hear what I'm sayin'. You spent some time at it, but you got clear—and that's what I want…to get clear…clear of this pig Falcone. I want to erase every sickening thing I've had to do to hold it together. I could feed you a pile about my kid, but that's none of your nevermind. I could blubber about my old sick mama and get all country and western on your ass, but the stone truth is it's me. I'm sick of it. Like I'd rather die, right? So maybe by doing one more really bad thing I can make something good happen. For me, for my little girl. I'm not talking about right or wrong. I'm talking about basic human dignity.[34]

These words remind Selina of a time when they were spoken to her. Over the course of the book, which inaugurated a new Catwoman comic series, Selina commits to a new sort of life while trying to understand the idea of basic human dignity. While this new life is not one of conventional morality, to be sure, it is one committed to helping others, especially those in the East End of Gotham City. When she

15

returns to Gotham City after killing off her Catwoman persona, she has a particularly harrowing adventure capturing a man who had been killing hookers. It is then that she's able to reclaim her Catwoman persona, but for a different purpose. Her words:

> For a long time, all I could think about was pain—my own and my family's. And that pain defined who I was, and ultimately just caused more until there was nothing left for me beyond that. But today I'm not thinking about the crooked cops and politicians. I'm not thinking about the wife-beaters and rapists, the mobsters. I'll get to them eventually. No, right now, all I can think about is how good I'm going to feel when that sun goes down. And you can't argue with happiness, can you?[35]

What is so compelling about Selina's story is that it provides a perfect representation of a disenchanted, damaging world in which the major ethical feat available to humans is not being crushed by others. At the same time, these passages and their accompanying images promise the realization that while futures may be grim and lives may be damaged, moments of true happiness are possible and moments of genuine ethical acting are available. As Bernstein states, "The world is disenchanted, but it is not utterly closed in on itself: there are moments of happiness (and not just pleasure or illusory happiness), and there are the fragmented and heterogeneous that do not fit with the course of the world."[36]

Indeed, I think it striking that despite the difficult and damaged lives led by Bruce Wayne, Barbara Gordon, and Selina Kyle, one of the most notable features of the comics I'm talking about concerns their happiness. In almost every book, this happiness takes a specific form: the characters fly through the air, literally defying gravity. The expression of freedom on their faces and the joyousness of their flight are repeatedly depicted in the face of the monstrous and irrational crimes they see enacted and try to prevent. Fugitive ethical acts are acts that can cause happiness in otherwise damaged lives. Yet at the same time, there are reminders that the happiness and the acts that cause it exact a price. The price is most visible in the fact that none of them maintains a long-standing relationship; they have given up the usual forms of private satisfaction. Also, it is notable that none of them

live in ordinary places: Batman spends more time in his cave than in Bruce Wayne's mansion; Selina lives at the top of an abandoned tenement in Gotham City's seedy East End, and Barbara Gordon, no longer Batgirl after being shot and paralyzed by the Joker, now lives in a clock tower where she helps Batman and others as Oracle. But, of course, this graphical depiction of happiness is just that—a graphical depiction of the happiness that results from doing what is in accord with "basic human dignity," or to put it another way, the experience of having one's motivational and justificatory reasons coincide, or, to put it another way, by making a promise—"because I can."

By way of conclusion, I will point out a lesson this essay discloses. I've shown that the lives of Bruce Wayne, Barbara Gordon, and Selina Kyle, as graphically represented in some comic books, are representation of lives led in possibility, a possibility that transcends current practices. Thus, while their lives are represented as lived under the conditions of modernism, with all the damage and hurt entailed by those conditions, they also are represented as exemplifications of promise; exemplifications of the possibility of fugitive ethical acts. While recognizing the fictional nature of these characters, and the problems of continuity, what remains from my reading of these books is the claim that these characters' actions are revelatory of an experience of possibility. Of course, on one understanding of philosophy, the revelation and explication of this experience of possibility is also one of philosophy's tasks.[37] Indeed, in a disenchanted world, the representation of these possibilities in popular culture may be one of few chances for us to view them in a thematic and not merely fugitive manner. Yet the very oddity of the medium's characters—superheroes—reinforces how out of the ordinary such experiences are these days. And while the characters in *Batman* related comics are not represented as *explicating* this experience of possibility, they can be read as *revealing* it. In this way, at least, a task of philosophy can be performed in a medium of popular culture.[38]

Notes

1 Frank Miller, Klaus Jansen, and Lynn Varley, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986), p. 192.

2 Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale, *Batman: Dark Victory* (New York: DC Comics, 2002), p. 388.

3 Darwyn Cooke, *Batman: Ego* (New York: DC Comics, 2000).

4 J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 437-451.

5 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Exploration in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 141. This passage is cited in Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2002), p. 5.

6 Klock, p. 31.

7 It will become clear to the reader that in my discussion of selected comic books, I am not providing a theory of comic book heroes, nor am I providing an in-depth analysis of particular comic book heroes, say, Batman. Indeed, given the issue of continuity across decades, or, more accurately, the notorious lack of such continuity, this would be something of a fool's goal. And, as William Irwin points out in his essay for this volume (p. ????), it is not a task of the philosopher to provide insight into the intention of the creators of popular culture.

8 Frank Miller, David Mazucchelli, and Richmond Lewis, *Batman: Year One* (New York: DC Comics, 1987).

9 John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 8.

10 Charles Taylor provides a very clear genealogy of the process of disenchantment over the last 300-400 years in his book *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

11 Diggins, pp. 9-15.

12 Bernstein, pp. 14-21. Bernstein's book is an attempt to reconstruct an approach to ethics consistent with the writings of Theodor Adorno. For my purposes, though, nothing hinges on whether Bernstein's account of Adorno is accurate. Bernstein's book is attractive to me not just because of its positions, which I find persuasive, but also because it is reconstructive and systematic. At the same time, I am not unaware of the irony of using an ethic founded on the work of Adorno to discuss comic books in a positive fashion since Adorno is typically taken to have been a stark opponent to the pleasures of popular culture. In his essay for this volume, Richard Shusterman (p.????) provides some representative passages from Adorno in support of this understanding of Adorno.

13 Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation, "quoted in Bernstein, p. 7.

14 Bernstein, pp. 9-16

15 Bernstein, p. 11.

16 Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, *Batman: The Killing Joke* (New York: DC Comics, 1988).

17 *Batman: The Killing Joke*, p. 38.

18 *Batman: The Killing Joke*, pp. 39-40.

19 *Batman: The Killing Joke*, p. 45.

20 Bernstein, pp. 10-15.

21 Bernstein, p. 15.

22 Bernstein, p. 30.

23 Bernstein, pp. 30-32.

24 Bernstein, p. 31. In his essay for this volume, Michael Bauer (pp. ????-????) makes a similar point about the deficit of rationality as it relates to self-critique. At the same time, if the world is as disenchanted as modernist thought suggests, Bauer may be a bit too sanguine about the possibility of achieving radical self-critique.

25 Scott Beatty, Chuck Dixon, Marcos Martin, and Alvaro Lopez, *Batgirl: Year One* (New York: DC Comics, 2003)

26 *Batgirl: Year One*, p. 13.

27 *Batgirl: Year One*, p. 94. 'Pixie boots' is Batgirl's nickname for Batman's partner, Robin.

28 Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale, *Batman: Haunted Knight* (New York: DC Comics, 1996), p. 86.

29 I have treated the representation of this promise in more detail in my essay "Barbara Gordon and Moral Perfectionism,"in *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way*, ed. Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), pp. 89-101.

30 Bernstein, p. 419.

31 In language used by Gareth Matthews (p. ????) in his essay for this volume, the actions and identities taken on by Batman and Batgirl are "subversive" in precisely the sense that they call into question the "epistemological authority" of rationalized and bureaucratic society.

32 Darwyn Cooke, *Catwoman: Selina's Big Score* (New York: DC Comics, 2002).

33 *Catwoman: Selina's Big Score*, p. 15.

34 *Catwoman: Selina's Big Score*, p. 16.

35 Ed Brubaker, Darwin Cooke, and Mike Allred, *Catwoman: Dark End of the Street* (New York: DC Comics, 2002), pp. 134-135.

36 Bernstein, p. 438.

37 Bernstein, p. 443.

38 In making this claim, then, I am not quite saying that these comic books *are* philosophy—a claim that Irwin warns against in his essay for this

volume (p. ????)—but I am saying that they do more than provide examples for philosophy. I'd like to thank William Irwin and Jorge Gracia for comments on an earlier version of this paper, and Kelly A. Wilson for her efforts in pulling me inside the world of comic books.