

Ata Zargarpour

CTMP 2101: Final Paper

7 December 2018

Mythological Hope: *The Dark Knight* and the Secular Apocalypse

The Dark Knight's conflict revolves around two diametrically opposed understandings of the interrelation between apocalypse and societal transformation. For the Joker, meaningful change cannot occur without radical sociopolitical collapse. A ferocious anarchist, he understands existing moral and political structures to be nothing more than hollow postures of authentic good. For this reason, he attempts, through acts of terrorism, to expose their superficiality and inaugurate a violently egalitarian reality. By contrast, Batman strives to induce change not by eradicating existing structures but by subverting them: paradoxically, his vigilantism is an attempt to inspire Gotham's citizenry to work to regenerate their city through fully legal means. These two antithetical approaches to societal transformation—revelatory anarchism and inspirational vigilantism—converge in the heroic figure of Harvey Dent. Because Dent represents the possibility that humans can improve themselves and their societies, he incarnates Batman's hopes for Gotham, while the Joker regards Dent's destruction as the means of annihilating such hopes once and for all. This tension culminates in the film's climax, when Batman suppresses the truth of Harvey Dent's fall in order to prevent the Joker's victory in widespread despair. The Joker is interested in "Apocalypse [as] an unveiling, a revelation [...] a vision of a deeper truth hidden in ordinary life," but only insofar as the revelation is anarchically destructive. In *The Dark Knight*, the

Joker is a decidedly apocalyptic figure through whom Batman's antagonistic relationship to apocalyptic revelation is demonstrated.

Underlying the Joker's anarchic terrorism is a relentless desire to reveal. Throughout the film, he forces people into desperate quandaries that compel them to commit acts of revelatory violence—revelatory insofar as they betray the superficiality and hypocrisy of moral structures. As the Joker tells Batman:

You see, their *morals*, their *code*... it's a bad joke, dropped at the first sign of trouble.

They're only as good as the world allows them to be. I'll show you, when the chips are down, these *civilized* people? They'll eat each other. (*The Dark Knight* 1:28:34)

To this end, he threatens to “blow up a hospital” unless an ordinary citizen murders someone, leading three different people to attempt to do so (1:44:34; 1:45:47; 1:51:10). Later, the Joker threatens to blow up two ferries—one carrying ordinary citizens and the other inmates—unless one of them blows up the other (2:01:54). This “social experiment” aims to obscure the stigmatic distinction between criminal and citizen (2:00:59). Indeed, a sweeping majority of “the sweet and innocent civilians” urge their captain to press the trigger, drawing on simplistic narratives of right-and-wrong to theoretically justify an act of wholesale murder (2:02:02; 2:02:33; 2:07:31; 2:10:20); by contrast, an intimidating convict tosses the trigger out of the boat, refusing to kill (2:11:26). This exposure subverts the conventional moral dichotomy between criminals and civilians; as such, it momentarily reinforces the Joker's fundamental thesis that conventional morality is a sham. As a Gothamite prepares himself to press the detonator, he is overcome with profound shame as he realizes the preposterousness of his purported righteousness: he has justified his decision to murder hundreds with the fact that those hundreds “chose to murder and steal” (2:11:15; 2:10:30).

These revelations serve to expose morality as contingent and superficial. Insofar as this morality forms the basis of sociopolitical institutions, the Joker's revelatory anarchism is fundamentally apocalyptic.

The Joker complicates his commitment to revelation in a crucial moment in the narrative. While he, earlier in the film, morally blackmails Batman into having to "take off his mask and turn himself in," the Joker later revokes this demand, opting instead to stifle the revelation of Batman's identity (43:16; 1:44:24). This is rather bewildering, until we consider the Joker's explanation: "I had a vision of a world without Batman. The mob ground out a little profit and the police tried to shut them down one block at a time. And it was so... *boring*" (1:44:10). In other words, the Joker negates this particular revelation only because the identification and incarceration of Batman would serve to perpetuate the status quo. Importantly, the Joker is apocalyptic before he is revelatory; he is devoted to revelation only insofar as it proves anarchic.

Apart from these revelations, the Joker himself directly targets social and political institutions with the aim of anarchically dismantling society. He murders a judge and the police commissioner; attempts to murder the district attorney and the mayor; orchestrates an elaborate hostage crisis that almost deludes the police into killing innocent civilians; and burns hundreds of millions of dollars simply in order to send the message that "everything burns!" (48:40; 1:02:09; 2:05:58; 1:43:20-58). That the crises he engineers force the police into "taking every possible precaution in urging people not to take matters into their own hands" only underscores their anarchic nature: the very emblems of law and order become desperate to prevent the disintegration of their authority (1:49:32).

The Joker's attacks also take a more symbolically subversive form. For instance, he dons a soldier's uniform in order to assassinate the mayor, thereby causing the frantic dispersion of a crowd of police officers—an imagistic dissolution of order into chaos (1:01:31; 1:02:09). Elsewhere, he wears a nurse's uniform to blows up a hospital (1:47:35; 1:51:52) and sets a firetruck aflame (1:14:50). These sneering inversions of institutional security are designed to undermine their authority. As Randolph Lewis argues in “*The Dark Knight of American empire*”:

The Joker's real enemy [...] is belief itself. His assault on Gotham, and in particular his corruption of District Attorney Harvey Dent, is designed to undermine any faith in the system, its rules, or its heroes. (Lewis, “*empire*” 4)

This implicit derision of conventional authority can be seen in the Joker's physical and verbal mockery of Jim Gordon's promotion to police commissioner (*Dark Knight* 1:24:18; 1:25:47). It helps explain the horror stories he tells people about his scars, which centre around the disintegration of even such sacred institutions as marriage and the nuclear family (50:45; 30:07). Along these lines, the Joker also wears an “I believe in Harvey Dent” political sticker, even as he manipulates Dent into deranged criminality (1:51:30). Crucially, these attacks—whether actual, symbolic, or both—neither promise nor suggest any ultimate fulfillment. The Joker's only commitment is to the revelatory disintegration of a corrupt order—a disintegration that is itself inherently righteous. In other words, the ideal sociopolitical form is, for the Joker, no form at all. As he tells Harvey Dent: “Introduce a little *anarchy*. Upset the established order, and everything becomes *chaos*. I'm an agent of chaos. Oh, and you know the thing about chaos? It's *fair*” (1:50:22). For the Joker, “[t]he only sensible way to live in this world is without rules” (1:29:19); the apocalypse is complete in its

anarchic purity. Because he believes that burning is the perfect righteousness, the Joker wants to “watch the world burn” and revel in the flames (54:58); in a word, he is nihilism incarnate.

Whereas the Joker aims to dismantle society, Bruce Wayne’s vigilantism springs from a desire to empower Gotham’s citizenry to take charge of their city’s well-being; in other words, he breaks the law so that others may be moved to embrace it. Bruce tells Alfred he “wanted to inspire people,” that as Batman he “was meant to inspire good” (13:01; 1:38:14). This desire speaks to Bruce’s fundamental belief that Gotham “is full of people ready to believe in good” (2:14:14). As Batman, he demonstrates this belief during the ferry crisis especially, adamant that neither side will kill the other (2:04:04; 2:11:46); when they ultimately do not, he strikes at the heart of the Joker’s project: “What were you trying to prove? That deep down, everyone’s as ugly as you? You’re alone” (2:12:34). Whereas the Joker terrorizes in order to prove moral hypocrisy, Bruce is committed to the idea of morality as such—especially as it manifests itself in Gotham’s populace. His vigilantism presupposes the capacity to induce change for the better from within present structures. Although as Batman he operates outside the law, Bruce aims to inspire Gotham’s citizens to work to improve their city *intra*-legally.

For these reasons, Bruce sees in Harvey Dent the ultimate realization of his hopes for Gotham. Bruce believes the “day [...] when Gotham would no longer need Batman [is] happening *now*. *Harvey* is that hero” (45:45). As he says this, his eyes gleam with happiness: he is deeply gratified by Dent’s “scourge of the underworld” (43:48) because Dent is a citizen using fully legal means to better Gotham (40:00; 53:35). More fundamentally, Bruce appreciates Dent’s unique significance as a symbol for Gotham. Indeed, Dent is almost

universally regarded not only as a hero (20:25; 1:38:39; 2:21:38; 2:22:27) but as “the biggest hero in Gotham” (1:23:00); everyone from Commissioner Gordon to the Joker recognizes him as “Gotham’s white knight” (17:45; 2:14:54). This heroic stature, however, comes with grave potential consequences. After Dent “locked up half the city’s criminals,” the mayor tells him: “The public likes you. That’s the only reason that this might fly. [But] they get anything on you, and those criminals are back on the streets, followed swiftly by you and me” (45:58; 41:19). Dent’s efficacy as a public prosecutor and a symbol for change, then, depends on his idealized public conception; it necessitates that his image remain stainless. This notion is reinforced by Batman, who, having caught Dent torturing one of the Joker’s henchmen for information, tells him:

You’re the symbol of hope I could never be. Your stand against organized crime is the first legitimate ray of light in Gotham in decades. If anyone saw this, everything would be undone: all the criminals you pulled off the streets would be released [...].
(1:07:51)

Batman recognizes the legal “legitimacy” of Dent’s approach to crime as singularly essential to its efficacy; in doing so, however, he contrasts it implicitly with his own. This difference—as well as its significance—Bruce further underscores by emphasizing that Dent fights crime “without wearing a mask. Gotham needs a hero with a face” (45:59). It is for this reason that Bruce, momentarily dissolving his illusory persona, publicly declares: “I believe in Harvey Dent. I believe that on his watch, Gotham can feel a little safer [and] a little more optimistic. Look at this face: this is the face of Gotham’s bright future” (45:07). Bruce locates in Dent the possibility of Gotham’s revival on the basis of Dent’s potency as an ideal—a possibility that is itself the reason for Batman’s existence. This recognition culminates in

Batman telling Dent: “Gotham’s in your hands now” (1:08:11). Because Dent’s capacity to inspire surpasses Batman’s, Bruce embraces it, recognizing in it the completion—and ultimately the dispensability—of his vigilantism.

The Joker, too, sees in Dent the potential vindication of his thesis; he understands that his destruction of Dent would represent a decided moral and ideological victory over Batman. After killing his fiancé and “blow[ing] him half to hell,” the Joker finds Dent in the hospital and gradually manipulates him into becoming the villain Two-Face (1:38:42; 1:47:30). Towards the end of the film, the Joker reveals to Batman the essentiality of Dent to his project; when Batman affirms the readiness of Gotham’s citizens “to believe in good,” the Joker responds:

Until their spirit breaks *completely*! Until they get a good look at the real Harvey Dent, and all the ‘*heroic*’ things *he’s* done. You didn’t think I’d risk losing the battle for Gotham’s soul in a fistfight with you? No... you need an ace in the hole. Mine’s *Harvey*. (2:14:20)

Dent’s importance to the Joker lies in his heroic stature. Because Dent represents the pinnacle of human ethical potential, his moral downfall is a triumph for anarchic nihilism. By corrupting Dent, the Joker successfully eradicates Gotham’s utmost symbol of hope, thereby condemning the city to nihilistic despair. As Gordon says to Batman following Dent’s death:

The Joker won. Harvey’s prosecution, everything he fought for, undone. Whatever chance you gave us of fixing our city dies with Harvey’s reputation. We bet it all on him. The Joker took the best of us and tore him down. People will lose hope! (2:20:58)

This realization prompts Batman to perform the ultimate sacrifice, and assume the blame for Dent's crimes (2:22:12).

Most analysis of *The Dark Knight*, when it arrives at this moment, condemns it. For instance, R.M. Karthick argues that “the Truth that [the Joker] waved in the face of Batman was combated by a lie, to save the abominable liberal capitalist society that is Gotham” (Karthick, “Fascist?” 1). This misses the point. At stake is not the political integrity of a single city, but the integrity of hope itself. The Joker's anarchic promise, as I have argued, is incomplete; he does not promise a resolution because he does not recognize the need for one. By contrast, Batman is adamant that “the Joker cannot win. Gotham needs its true hero” in Dent (*Dark Knight* 2:21:38). This appreciation of necessity, then, is what distinguishes the two. The Joker terrorizes with truth: he is the architect of revelations that are inherently destabilizing for the human community. Foremost among these is the revelation “that even someone as good as [Dent] could fall” (2:18:37): Dent's destruction as a symbol guarantees nihilism because it condemns the possibility of human improvement. As Batman demonstrates, the only adequate response to such a devastating revelation is to affirm, instead, the human being: his sacrifice is an act of radical compassion because it accommodates the human need for hope. When, in response to this sacrifice, Gordon says, “They'll hunt you,” Batman replies:

You'll hunt me. You'll condemn me, set the dogs on me. Because that's what needs to happen. Because sometimes, the truth isn't good enough. Sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded. (2:22:37)

These last lines accompany Alfred burning Rachel's letter to Bruce, in which she informs him of her decision “to marry Harvey Dent” (1:37:00). Just as Alfred protects Bruce from a

brutal truth in order to preserve him (1:38:53), so too does Batman protect the people of Gotham from a revelation of despair in order to preserve their hope in good. Batman recognizes the singularity of his role in this regard: “I can do those things, because I’m not a hero, not like Dent”; “I’m whatever Gotham needs me to be” (2:22:04; 2:22:17). *The Dark Knight* affirms humanity at the expense of truth; it mutilates the possibility that aspiration is impossible in order to preserve the possibility of aspiration.

Ultimately, *The Dark Knight* accommodates the frailties of human nature. Our need for a figure like Harvey Dent is less veracious than aspirational: the truth isn’t good enough because human beings require mythical figures to sustain them spiritually in their attempts to improve both themselves and their worlds. That this necessitates an act of radical falsification speaks to the tenuousness of human experience in a secular world: we cannot allow the apocalypse to occur because there is no God to redeem it; we must stifle certain truths because unhindered revelation would dissolve society without capacitating its improved reconstitution. Without God, truth neither serves nor redeems human experience; it falls instead to the people to preserve one another from the eviscerating cruelty of reality. Secularity, then, requires that we negate truth in order to preserve the idealistic integrity of our heroes, whose necessity lies in their potency as inspiring ideals. *The Dark Knight* advocates a kind of humanistic deceit, an affirmation of human potential in the face of human frailty, a mythological hope.

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