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The Dark Knight Rises

Michael McGowan

Fresno Pacific University, Michael.McGowan@aya.Yale.edu

Riley Endicott

Fresno Pacific University, Riley.Endicott@facebook.com

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The Dark Knight Rises

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) directed by Christopher Nolan.

Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* enjoyed financial success, but with Heath Ledger's untimely death in 2008, in *The Dark Knight* Nolan truly resurrected the Batman franchise. Both films earned glowing reviews from critics, largely based on stellar performances, perspicacious scripts, and the relentless search into the age old question of the true nature of humankind: are we fundamentally good or fundamentally evil? Roger Ebert, for example, praised *Batman Begins* for penetrating "to the dark and troubled depths of the Batman legend" and exploring "the tortured path that led Bruce Wayne from a parentless childhood to a friendless adult existence."¹ *Rolling Stone's* Peter Travers asked, "How can a conflicted guy in a bat suit and a villain with a cracked, painted-on clown smile speak to the essentials of the human condition?... *The Dark Knight* creates a place where good and evil – expected to do battle – decide instead to get it on and dance... Ledger's Joker has no gray areas – he's all rampaging id... The Joker wants Batman to choose chaos... He knows humanity is what you lose while you're busy making plans to gain power."²

In *The Dark Knight Rises*, something else is afoot. This film is replete with not only religious imagery, but also (and perhaps more urgently) political imagery. We know that "man is a political animal" (Aristotle), defined not only by an essential nature but also by actions and relationships. This fundamental question – the moral nature of the human being – is central to Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy. Nolan's approach to this question is best seen by comparing his position to two paradigmatic anthropologies: Rousseau and Pascal.

In Rousseau, one finds a theory of human nature in which humankind is essentially good, but enslaved by the societal and social constructs around it. Society is a prison, from the likes of which Bane-figures seek to free us. Rousseau's anthropology is related in very interesting ways

to *The Dark Knight Rises*. Rousseau concedes that humans are self-interested, but he also thinks their aversion to negativity is more intense than their self-interest. While they surely “care about their own happiness,” they are more repulsed “seeing any being perish or suffer.”³ The repulsion overthrows the self-interest. Why? Because people are essentially *good* creatures; they love justice and order. “There is no original perversity in the human heart.”⁴ This does not mean that humans *actually* are good creatures, but rather that they are *naturally* good. In his *Second Discourse*, Rousseau says “men are actually wicked, a sad and continual experience of them proves beyond doubt: but, all the same, I think I have shown that man is *naturally good*.”⁵ The distinction between humankind’s nature and humankind’s existential situation is important, for it points toward that which Rousseau suggested has corrupted the human nature: society. In the *Second Discourse*, he says “we may admire human society as much as we please; [but] it will be none the less true that it necessarily leads men to hate each other in proportion as their interests clash, and to do one another apparent services, while they are really doing every imaginable mischief.”⁶ The problem is that humans fight over ownership of property; in his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality*, Rousseau says the state arose to mediate ownership disputes but when property was privatized, inequalities were created. And when inequalities were created, the state was necessary to arbitrate.⁷ In sum, Rousseau thought humankind is naturally good but society erodes this goodness.

Now consider Nolan’s portrayal of Bane and Wayne, and the religio-political import of the two. Bane talks as if he is the savior who intends to return government to the people. On the surface it seems like a socialist agenda: “We take Gotham from the corrupt! The rich! The

oppressors of generations who have kept you down with myths of opportunity, and we give it back to you... the people. Gotham is yours!” By comparison, Wayne sees Bane (and the Joker or Ra’s Al Ghul) for the evil men they are, and he knows that only through a fight – i.e., competition – will Gotham become stronger. On the surface it seems like a capitalist agenda: “What chance does Gotham have when the good people do nothing?” asks Rachel, implying that Wayne should get involved. As I will demonstrate below, these are superficial interpretations and the real nature of Nolan’s characters is much more intriguing.

In his *Pensees*,⁸ Pascal describes the ways in which humankind is “fallen,” largely based on his theological commitment to Augustine’s theory of original sin. “Followers of St. Augustine,” says Pascal, “examine two states of human nature. One is that in which it was created in Adam, sound, faultless, just, and upright, coming from God’s hand from which nothing can emerge except what is pure, holy and perfect. The other is the state into which it was reduced by sin and the first man’s revolt, through which it became sullied, abominable, and detestable in God’s sight.”⁹ Although humankind was originally created in a pure and uncorrupted state, after the “first man,” i.e., Adam, it is sinful and unable to do good. Says Pascal: “True nature having been lost, everything becomes natural. In the same way, the true good [has] been lost.”¹⁰ The existential state in which humankind finds itself, moreover, has a pedagogical efficacy, as it teaches us not only what we are, but also from where we have come. Though humanity was created good, it fell; though humanity fell, it can be redeemed through repentance, which occasions humanity’s true “greatness.” Repentance is a movement, moreover,

not a static thing. If one does not move, one remains fallen, corrupted. He states, “Our nature consists in movement. Absolute stillness is death.”¹¹

What would Nolan think of Rousseau and Pascal? If Rousseau represents the viewpoint that humanity is naturally good and subsequently corrupted by its surroundings, and if Pascal represents the viewpoint that humanity is naturally evil and subsequently enlightened by God, one may interpret Christopher Nolan’s Batman films as representing a third view. We suggest that the *Dark Knight* trilogy suggests that people are born neutral, neither evil nor good. Neither black nor white, humankind occupies darker or lighter shades of grey depending on their actions in the present. Only in action can we see the true nature of a human being, which is a plastic thing that varies from person to person and from situation to situation within each person. That is to say, for Nolan there is no overwhelming human nature that determines the course one will take, and no outside influence to change one’s predicament. Good and bad things happen only when people take action.

A few key exchanges illustrate the point. In *Batman Begins*, when it appears to Bruce Wayne’s childhood friend and assistant District Attorney of Gotham, Rachel Dawes, that Bruce is wasting away his life on women, money, and leisure, Bruce responds, “All of this... it’s not me. Inside I am more.” Rachel is not persuaded, and replies, “Bruce, deep down you may still be that same bright kid you used to be. But it’s not who you are underneath, it’s *what you do* that defines you.” A parallel comment is made when Rachel encounters Batman in the midst of several heroic acts to save Gotham from impending doom at the hands of Ra’s Al Ghul. Rachel wants to know the identity of the masked figure who saved her life: “You could die. At least tell me your name.” In response, Bruce *qua* Batman replies, “It’s not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me.” Rachel is stunned and immediately recognizes her savior. A person’s

actions define him/her in the *Dark Knight* trilogy, not some natural state or help from the outside. While there may be a preexisting proclivity toward good or evil, these are not determinative; one's *actions* are. Therefore, one cannot speak of being "born" good or evil, since at birth a human has not properly "acted" at all. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Selina Kyle (aka Catwoman) and Bane both represent this view. Early in the film, Kyle's actions brand her a villain, in league with "bad men." It is Kyle who delivers Wayne up to Bane, who quite literally breaks him. Wayne encourages her, however, that there is more to her than meets the eye. She can choose to do the right thing, which she eventually does by the film's end. She is defined by her actions. Similarly, the backstory unfolds to show us that Bane's actions, portrayed throughout as villainous, were rooted in love and the desire to protect a little girl. This does not negate the fact that he is clearly the "bad guy," as his *actions* and not motivations define him.

If people are essentially neutral and their actions define them, one wonders whence comes evil. Nolan provides an answer to this question in all three films, though only a few scenes are necessary to make the theme clear. Beginning with the first scene in *Batman Begins* and running through the climax of *The Dark Knight Rises*, evil is occasioned by one thing: fear. Consider a few scenes:

- Bruce falls into a well and is surrounded by bats, a fear that persists and one that he uses against his enemies: "Bats frighten me," he says to Alfred, and "It's time my enemies share my dread."
- Bruce's father's dying words were, "Bruce, don't be afraid."
- In his training montage, Bruce says that he wants to turn fear against those who prey on the fears of others.
- Mob boss Falconi also recognizes fear as a motivator for evil: "That's power you can't

buy. That's the power of fear. This is a world you don't understand, and you always fear what you don't understand."

- Ra's Al Ghul intends to vaporize a panic-inducing, psychotropic hallucinogen that makes Gotham's inhabitants see whatever it is that they fear most.
- The Joker states that his goal is to "inject a little chaos," and explains further: "You know the thing about chaos... it's fear."
- Using fear as a tool for chaos, the Joker forces people into decisions, e.g., using the threat that he will blow up two ships unless one chooses to blow up the other first.
- As Bane captures the nuclear scientist, he says that fear will come "later."
- Bane does not destroy Gotham as soon as he procures the nuclear threat; rather, he gives Gotham months to dwell on their seemingly inevitable fate.
- The "hero" of the trilogy, it is noted several times in *The Dark Knight Rises*, does "not fear death." He has been uncorrupted by evil.

If humanity is neutral, it only succumbs to evil under the existential state of fear. Regrettably, Nolan does not provide an answer to where the fear itself comes from, only that it exists and that there are those who seek to exploit it (e.g., Ra's Al Ghul, the Joker, and Bane).

What could thinking religionists and philosophers make of the three views on human nature presented here? First, with respect to Rousseau, the notion of humanity being born into a naturally good state does not adequately deal with evil or transformation. If humanity is born "good" there should be no reason why two or more good people would ever become evil, as was the case when the state was created to arbitrate property disputes and enforce laws. Moreover, if humanity is such that it is essentially good, religious people may suggest that this trivializes a central tenet of their worldview, namely, that most religions have something to say with respect

to the transformation of the world from one state to another. According to most traditions, there is a problem, a fundamental flaw (the aforementioned “evil” issue, for example). The “transformation” model in comparative religion also asserts a goal, which is essentially the removal of the problem. Finally, most traditions according to this view suggest a means of transformation from the problem to the solution. If humans begin good, many a world religion is nullified in its efficacy or relevance.

Second, consider Nolan’s view. The notion that humanity is essentially neutral and that actions are the determinative factor in a person’s “good” or “evil” character seems to fail on two fronts. If actions determine a person’s status, what value is education? Moreover, are “shades of grey” intellectually satisfying? It is not always easy to determine the “good” or “best” course of action, so there must be some standard against which those actions are judged and education toward that end. Moreover, Nolan provides no account on the origin(s) of non-understanding. If non-understanding breeds fear and fear eventuates into evil, Nolan needs an account of human finitude vis-à-vis some infinite standard to ground the portrayal of human nature.

In our estimation, Pascal’s view of original sin solves the problems encountered by both views insofar as evil has a source and – without going so far as divine command theory – God’s revelation is the standard against which good or evil actions are recognized as such. In close, we cannot help but think that Nolan has intentionally planted conflicting political themes into his last Batman installment, a picture of two ideologies that may be coming to a head quite soon.

Yet there are, as we have been mentioning, also many religious and philosophical themes. One can point to an intriguing similarity between Nolan’s Batman films and a philosophical/semiotic theme: the utility of a symbol. In his training, Bruce is told that he can “become more than a man;” he can become “a legend.” As he reflects later on this theme, Bruce

sees the necessity of transcending his humanity: “People need dramatic examples to shake them out of apathy, and I can’t do that as Bruce Wayne. As a man, I’m flesh and blood. I can be ignored; I can be destroyed. But as a *symbol*... as a symbol I can be incorruptible. I can be everlasting.” The religionist cannot but agree, and she will point to a view of divine revelation to prove it known as the “symbolic mediation” approach. Religious symbols – like good movies – are participatory: “we must give ourselves”¹² up to their power, and when we do, they open up new “realms of awareness not normally accessible to discursive thought.”¹³

¹ Roger Ebert, “Batman Begins” in *The Chicago Sun Times* (June 13, 2005).

² Peter Travers, “Dark Knight,” in *Rolling Stone* (July 18, 2008).

³ Louis Pojman, *Who Are We? Theories of Human Nature*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 112.

⁴ Passage found in Timothy O’Hagen, *Rousseau* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 15.

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, trans. V. Gourevitch (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 209.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, and the First and Second Discourses* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 113. This progression is noted in Pojman, *Who Are We?*, 113.

⁸ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. H. Levi (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Pagination in this work will reflect the page of this translation and not the section number.

⁹ Pascal, *Pensées*, 217.

¹⁰ Pascal, *Pensées*, 7.

¹¹ Pascal, *Pensées*, 126.

¹² Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 133.

¹³ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 137.

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