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Batman the Philosopher-King: The Juxtaposition of Plato's Ideal City and Batman's Gotham

Kolton Bailey

The city of Gotham is protected by the caped crusader who saves its citizens from criminals and the vicious mob that runs the city. In Christopher Nolan's film adaptation of the popular DC comic, *The Dark Knight*, Batman is faced with the ultimate villain, one without a reason or any motivation for the destruction he causes: The Joker. Batman's goal is to clean up the city and destroy all of the corruption that has started to cause it to rot from within, a rot so deep that it has even made its way into the police force. Although he wants to clean up the city, Batman keeps to a very strict moral code that he refuses to break. His virtues and morals are comparable to the values expressed by early Greek philosophers, namely Plato. Batman is trying to transform the city of Gotham into the "ideal city" outlined in Plato's political theory, making himself the self-appointed philosopher-king of Gotham in the process.

Plato's political theory is closely connected to his moral philosophy, centered in his belief that a city should be representative of the same basic components as the human soul, made of three parts: reason, spirit, and appetite. The first value is reason, representing one's awareness of a goal or value. The second value, spirit, is the drive towards a noble action. The last part of what Plato believed to be the soul is the desires of the body, or the appetitive part (Long, 55). Plato pushes his theory on the human soul onto his idea of a perfect city, to dividing the city into three classes of citizens, directly related to the three parts of the soul. The people are divided into these classes based on their virtues and vices. The craftspeople are represented by the appetitive value and their virtue is temperance, allowing themselves to be ruled by the higher powers. Craftspeople are the everyday citizens of a city. The guardians of the city represent the value of spirit and their virtue is courage, as they need to be able to fulfill their function as protectors of the craftspeople and commoners. The highest class of the citizens are the rulers whose virtues are leadership and competence. Plato

referred to these leaders as “philosopher-kings” and believed that they should know what complete goodness is through education and military service as a guardian before progressing to leadership (Yu). This analogy can be applied to Gotham, the fictional city in *The Dark Knight*.

The normal citizens seen in *The Dark Knight* are representations of the craftspeople, as they fulfill their basic function as workers, providing the services needed to make the city successful. They rely on the guardians to keep them safe from the evils of the city, namely the mob, the petty thieves who lurk in the night, and the maniacal villains like the Joker. Unfortunately, the Gotham police force as a whole does not represent the perfect set of guardians. The ones uncorrupted by the appetitive desire for money or power offered by the mob are the only true guardians. Commissioner Gordon, Harvey Dent, and Batman are representations of what a true guardian should be. In the beginning of the movie, these guardians are in the process of cleaning up the city and ridding it of the evil of the mob, none of them yet reaching the level of leadership required of a philosopher-king.

Batman suspects Harvey Dent of having the virtues necessary to become the leader of Gotham, believing that he cannot be it himself, due to his identity being covered by a mask. Dent convinces Batman that he is the right one to be the leader of the city when he is eating dinner with Batman’s alter ego, Bruce Wayne. Dent says, “Whoever the Batman is, he doesn’t want to do this for the rest of his life. How could he? Batman is looking for someone to pick up his mantle” (Nolan). Dent has shown his virtue of courage as a guardian by publicly going after the mob and successfully arresting some of its members. Plato believes that, “The only real object of fear for the guardian should be fear of moral evil” (Long, 63). However, Plato’s ideal city requires that the guardians own no property and that they are not allowed to be married or have children in order to keep them focused on the fear of moral evil, rather than fear of losing their family or leaving behind a widow. To Batman’s despair the same happens to Dent, as Dent starts to morally slip when he abducts one of the Joker’s henchman because he was wearing a name tag that had his girlfriend Rachel’s name on it. Dent takes the man and tries to torture him for information by threatening his life. The Joker continues to break Dent’s morality when he abducts him and Rachel.

The Joker doesn’t belong anywhere in the classes of Plato’s ideal city. He is a contradiction to Plato’s moral philosophy that ignorance is the reason for evil. Plato is influenced by Socrates’ belief that the appetitive part of the soul is the reason for the ignorance that causes evil, saying that the false presumption that the reward from the wrong act will be worth the risk (Long, 56-57). The Joker is not interested in money, sex, or any other form of pleasure, he is a self-proclaimed agent of chaos. After Alfred tells Batman the story of the gem thief he says, “Some men just want to watch the world burn” (Nolan). The Joker has no motivation besides a healthy dislike of the proper

order of society and a desire to cause total anarchy. He is trying to prove to himself that everyone is just as crazy as he is through the game he created; by giving the two boats the detonators to each other's bombs. Although the people were collectively good and both made the decision to spare the other passengers' lives, Dent is successfully demoted from his guardian status to the level of psychotic behavior displayed by the Joker.

Dent is torn apart, quite literally, by the explosion the Joker caused as a part of one of his games of ethical contradiction. The choice was for Batman to choose between saving Dent or Rachel. Batman was given the addresses for both of their locations and chose to save Rachel, however the Joker tricked him and switched up the addresses on purpose. As a result, Batman shows up at Dent's location. Batman saves Dent from the explosion, but it killed what morality Dent had left and left him a psychotic villain. His half-burnt face, giving him the name Two-Face, represents his new life philosophy: that life should be left up to a fifty-fifty chance of death, as Rachel and his own fate had been left to those same odds. He demonstrates this philosophy by flipping a coin whenever he confronts someone who he felt was responsible for the death of Rachel, killing them if it lands on the burnt side of the coin but sparing their life if it lands on the other. This twisted sense of reason is similar to the Joker's motivation, contradicting the moral philosophy that to know the good is to do the good. Dent being completely turned from the guardian position leaves no one to fulfill the leadership position of philosopher-king, taking away from Batman's hope of restoring order and peace in Gotham.

Batman realizes the severity of Dent's corruption when he is confronted by Two-Face holding a gun to Gordon's son's head. Batman has already fulfilled all of the requirements for the guardian position in Plato's ideal city, having resisted the temptation to kill the Joker and showing absolute courage in facing the evils of the Joker's rampant attempt to burn Gotham to its core. Batman realizes he needs to become the leader of Gotham while keeping his identity still hidden. A virtue needed by the philosopher-king, not mentioned before, is the power to deceive. In order to avoid conflict between the classes of society, Plato theorized that the leaders would need to tell noble lies to the citizens that would deceive them in a way that would create peace and ultimately keep them safe (Steinberger). As Batman saves Gordon's son from Dent, he realizes how Dent's corruption would negatively affect the citizens and police force, or the townspeople and guardians in the ideal city analogy. In order to protect the people from the negative consequences of this information, he decides to take the blame for Dent's actions and instructs Gordon to tell the world that Dent died a hero. The wisdom and use of a noble lie to further save the city from chaos promotes Batman from guardian to philosopher-king, or, as Gordon calls him, the Dark Knight.

While at dinner with Bruce Wayne, Dent predicts his own future stating, “You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become a villain” (Nolan). The lawless influence by the Joker breaks Dent’s will and almost makes Batman break his only rule of not killing anyone. Plato’s ideal city theory is only feasible if the virtues of the city are present in all of its citizens as well. The fragile sanity of people in a situation of panic and destruction and also the existence of lawless individuals, causing chaos without reason, makes the ideal city nothing more than a fairytale. However, the objectively good nature of the citizens on the boats and the willingness of people to put others’ lives before their own, proves that the majority of people in Gotham have a good soul and want peace and order in society. The analogy of Gotham and the ideal city can also be applied to America as a whole. America can never be turned into the ideal city Plato had envisioned due to the presence of evil and corruption its citizens face, however the virtues and morals of a good soul exist in all people and can bring us closer to peace when they strive to be more like a philosopher-king. By practicing a balance of pleasure, courage and the pursuit of wisdom, people can collectively triumph over the corruption and lack of moral values present in any nation. Creating the ideal city starts by the virtues being present in the citizens themselves before it can ultimately affect the entirety of the city and lead to a more peaceful society.

Annotated Bibliography

Long, Joseph. Plato: Moral Philosophy. *Knowledge and Reality*. McGraw-Hill Education, 2019.

The following bibliography was used to show the three parts of the soul that Plato described to make up each of us. It was helpful because it is directly related to how he describes the ideal city. It gave me the virtues for each part of the soul and the balance that leads to being good. The textbook is written in a way that is easier to understand and digest than the actual documents of philosophers.

Long, Joseph. Plato: Political Philosophy. *Knowledge and Reality*. McGraw-Hill Education, 2019.

The following bibliography was the main argument I used to compare the city of Gotham to the ideal city. The information defines each class and the following virtues that are aligned with them. It is written in a way that is easy to understand and grasp. It was my primary source.

Steinberger, Peter J. "Ruling: Guardians and Philosopher-Kings." *American Political Science Review*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1989, pp. 1207–1225., doi:10.2307/1961665.

This bibliography was used to better understand the importance of the noble lie in Plato's ideal city and the confusing difference between guardians and leaders. It was helpful for understanding the concept but was not focused on the right aspects of the analogy that would allow me to use quotes from it. It highlighted the use of the noble lie and was enough evidence to support Batman's lie about Dent.

"The Dark Knight." *IMDb*, IMDb.com, 16 July 2008, www.imdb.com/title/tt0468569/.

This bibliography was used to get facts about the film. I used it to spell check the director and quotes I used from the film itself. The list of actors and actresses also helped me remember who said which quotes. Nolan, Christopher, director. *The Dark Knight*. Warner Brothers, 2009. This bibliography is for the use of the actual film. I used direct quotes and referenced the movie to support my analogy of the ideal city and Gotham. Nolan's directing style and the dialogue throughout the movie made my essay easier to write.

Yu, Kexin. "Unpacking the City-Soul Analogy." *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2017, doi:10.7710/2155-4838.1169.

This bibliography simplified some of the terms and examples of the city-soul analogy. It provided information to support my thesis, but I didn't use any direct quotes from this source. The information was helpful in describing the progression from guardian to philosopher-king.