

13

The Joker's Comedy of Existence

DANIEL MOSELEY

Dick Grayson . . . explained to me once that the Joker and I are forever linked in constant battle. That in some sick way, the Joker exists because of me. How I represent the order that is necessary to live in Gotham City and the Joker is the chaos that disrupts that order.

—*Batman* #614, in *Hush*, Volume 2

Batman doesn't understand the Joker and Batman needs the help of others to get insight into both the Joker's motivations and Batman's own relationship to him. In *The Dark Knight* Alfred warns Bruce that, like the mobsters who hired the Joker to kill Batman, Bruce may not understand the man he is dealing with: "Some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn."

In *The Killing Joke* a more experienced Batman echoes his frustrated attempts to understand the Joker: "I've been trying to figure out what he intends to do. It's almost impossible. I don't know him, Alfred. All these years and I don't know who he is any more than he knows who I am. How can two people hate so much without knowing each other?"

Batman expresses this idea again in his deadly conflict with the Joker in *A Death in the Family* (where the Joker kills Jason Todd, the second Robin): "We've been linked together so long, neither of us truly understand the bond."

One challenge facing any discussion of the Joker involves determining which representations of the Joker are relevant. "The Clown Prince of Crime" and the Dark Knight Detective have been at war with each other since the Joker's first appearance in *Batman* #1

(1940) and their fighting has no end in sight. Batman and the Joker have been depicted in myriad, and not always consistent, ways in comic books, graphic novels, television shows and movies since their first encounter. Adam West and Christian Bale present radically different versions of the Dark Knight, and Cesar Romero's portrayal of the Joker does not fit with any depiction of the Joker that has appeared in film or print since 1985.

We'll focus on depictions of the Joker in *Batman #1* (which was recently reprinted in *The Joker: The Greatest Stories Ever Told*), the movie *The Dark Knight*, and the graphic novels, *A Death in the Family*, *The Killing Joke*, and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. If you consider these stories as an integrated narrative, they present a compelling and coherent picture of the Joker. The picture that emerges from this narrative presents us with a perspective that you probably could not safely encounter face to face in the real world. The Joker was right when he said in his first appearance that if you're playing with the Joker, you "had best be prepared to be dealt from the bottom of the deck."

Batman's Struggle to Understand the Joker

Batman's crusade against crime is motivated by a vow: "I made a promise on the grave of my parents that I would rid this city of the evil that took their lives." In the epigraph to this chapter, Batman reflects on how he represents the order that is necessary to live in Gotham and the Joker represents the chaos that disrupts that order. So the Joker represents the evil that the Caped Crusader has sworn to eliminate from Gotham City and the Joker also represents the chaos that disrupts the order that is required to live in Gotham.

Political stability, public safety, and moral order are some of the key ingredients to having at least a minimally decent life in any city. The moral order that is required for such a life involves, among other things, at least protecting the basic rights of the citizens of that city and it also involves protecting public welfare. Batman represents the kind of order that is necessary to live in Gotham: an order that is established and maintained by *morality* and *reason*. The Dark Knight Detective is often praised by Alfred and others for his amazing reasoning skills and Batman is traditionally represented as embracing a reasonable and morality driven perspective (for an alternative depiction of Batman check out *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*).

The Joker personifies the evil that took the lives of Batman's parents (Tim Burton's 1989 version of the movie *Batman* illustrated this point by making the Joker the man who murdered Bruce Wayne's parents—"Have you ever danced with the devil in the pale moon light?"). The Joker also embodies the chaos that disrupts the moral and political order that is necessary to live in Gotham. In *The Dark Knight* the Joker's wave of terror pressures Batman towards his decision to violate the privacy of the citizens of Gotham by tapping their cell phones in order to track down the Joker. So, the Joker's terrorism pressured Batman to violate the privacy rights of the citizens of Gotham in order to promote public welfare and political stability. The Joker has a talent for creating conflict in Batman's life and in the lives of everyone else in Gotham. The Joker represents evil and irrationality.

Not only does the Joker represent evil, the Joker is an evil person! To give a sense of what I mean by saying that the Joker is *evil* it helps to consider some examples. Examples of evil actions and evil people abound in history books, literature, movies, the daily news and graphic novels. Stories of serial killers, rapists and genocidal fanatics provide relatively uncontroversial examples of evil.

The Joker's life is loaded with examples of it. He has driven Harley Quinn and Harvey Dent insane. He shot Barbara Gordon in the spine, took pictures of her injured, naked body and then used those pictures in a terrifying circus show that was intended to drive Jim Gordon insane—Jim Gordon kept his sanity but Barbara's injury ended her career as Batgirl. The Joker also murdered Lieutenant Sarah Essen (Jim Gordon's wife) and he's murdered untold thousands of other people. The Joker has played the role of domestic terrorist: during his rein of terror in *The Dark Knight* he blew up a hospital, shut down Gotham City and placed two ferries in a twisted prisoner's dilemma. The Joker has also tried out international terrorism. In *A Death in the Family*, the Joker replaces emergency food supplies going to starving people in Ethiopia with his laughing venom: "Just imagine the surprise when one of your bleeding heart social workers opens any of these cartons. Each box contains enough gas to cover a four acre stretch. Just consider it my little contribution to the war against hunger." Kidnapping, torture, terrorism, rampage murders . . . the Joker has done it all.

Since it's so obvious that the Joker is evil, why does Batman have so much trouble understanding the Joker? It seems that Batman could easily explain the Joker's motives and character by

pointing out that he is an evil villain or that he is insane. One reason that Batman is probably not satisfied with these explanations is because it's just too easy to explain the Joker's character and motives by saying that he's evil or insane. There are different ways of being evil and there are different ways of being insane. A more specific characterization of the Joker's motives and evaluative outlook would help us (and Batman!) to understand the Joker. What's the nature of the Joker's insanity? How is his insanity related to the types of evil and chaos that he represents?

Desiring the Bad

You might think that the Joker is not evil, because, from his perspective, he thinks that his own actions are good. This suggests that the Joker does not simply choose to do things because those things are evil; rather the Joker has his own values and reasons for doing things. It's true that the Joker has his own system of values and those values rarely abide by the standards of conventional morality. However, a person does not have to think that their own actions are evil in order for those actions to be evil. Some people are *morally ignorant*: when they act, they think that their actions are good and morally permissible when in fact those actions are immoral. For instance, Harvey Dent may think that he has a moral obligation to shoot an innocent child if his coin lands bad-side up, but he is mistaken about what his moral obligations are—there is no moral justification for murdering a child over a coin toss.

The Joker does not seem to be morally ignorant because he knows that many of his monstrous deeds, such as mass murder, are evil. He seems to devise many of his diabolical schemes *because* they are evil. He brings a more difficult kind of case into view. The Joker presents a character that one might call a *moral monster*: moral monsters know that what they are doing is wrong, but they go ahead and do it anyway. Moral monsters *knowingly* choose to do things that are evil. Moreover, moral monsters are different than sociopaths. Sociopaths have no conception of right and wrong; they have no conscience. By contrast, moral monsters have a *corrupt* conscience.

The Joker seems to be a moral monster because he seems to do many things, for instance: kill an audience of hundreds of people with his Joker venom, because doing so is an evil thing to do. The Joker seems to be a moral monster and there is a puzzle about

moral monsters that makes them particularly difficult to understand. This puzzle pertains to the challenging philosophical topic of *desiring the bad*. The puzzle asks, "Do moral monsters want to do what is evil because they think that their actions are bad or do moral monsters want to do what is evil because they think that their actions are good?" In other words, do evil people want to do what is evil *under the guise of the bad* or do they want to do what is evil *under the guise of the good*?

The most plausible answer that I see to this question draws from the arguments of the philosophers G.E.M. Anscombe and T.M. Scanlon. Their arguments suggest that desiring something consists in having a tendency to regard that thing as good. So, if I want to read *The Killing Joke* tonight, then I tend to regard reading *The Killing Joke* tonight in a positive light. So, evil people want to do evil things *under the guise of the good*. Evil people find some positive value (that is, they do see some good) in their actions. For instance, the Joker tends to attribute positive value to the pleasure that he gets from watching his victims' faces freeze into a demented smile from his Joker venom.

However, the goodness (or positive value) that evil people see in their action is not a form of *moral goodness*. As Satan of Milton's *Paradise Lost* cried, "Evil be Thou my Good!" Some moral monsters choose to do what is evil because they embrace a type of aesthetic perspective that attempts to bring non-moral and higher forms of goodness into the world via acts of cruelty or sadism. Moral monsters who have this type of aesthetic outlook often see the world as completely meaningless and devoid of value, or perhaps they see the world as full of mediocre forms of value. If the Joker is a moral monster, then perhaps he too has an inverted scheme of values and a rationale for having them!

The Joker and the Comedy of Existence

If the Joker has a rationale for his twisted values, then that means his actions will exhibit a certain kind of consistency because his actions will be motivated by those values. So what pattern of consistency is exhibited by the Joker's actions? One possibility is a love for showmanship. From the Joker's first encounter with Batman all the way back in *Batman #1* to his campaign of terror in *The Dark Knight*, the Joker uses the media to announce to Gotham City that he is going to perform some horrible crime. Many versions of his

origin story describe the Joker using the media to publicize his shocking crimes. True to his persona as a *clown*, the Joker's acts of violence are performed out of a spirit of showmanship—a spirit of showmanship that unfortunately has also been displayed in actual cases of “rampage killers” (such as the Zodiac killer).

Although the Joker likes to draw a huge audience to witness his “artistic” endeavors, he also hates “the crowd” and their mediocrity—that is probably why he also usually tries to kill off his audience. He seems to strive towards a conception of his own personal excellence and he consistently attempts to overcome mediocrity, which is part of what his fans love about him. The Joker *embraces* the fact that ordinary people think that he's a freak, and he in turn rejects their conventional morality and conventional conceptions of justice.

The Joker aspires to what the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche calls “higher values” and he calls for a “revaluation of values.” The Joker, in his own way, asks us to think of *evil* as good and think of *justice* and *morality* as bad. The Joker also affirms the value of creativity and the value of his own authenticity. He is committed to his own conception of beauty and artistic values and he thinks that those values outweigh any considerations of morality and justice.

The Killing Joke provides us with an eloquent statement of the Joker's aspirations for “higher values.” During an attempt to drive Jim Gordon insane, the Joker says:

Ladies and Gentleman! You've read the newspapers! Now, shudder as you observe, before your very eyes, that most rare and tragic of nature's mistakes! I give you . . . the average man! Physically unremarkable, it has instead a deformed set of values. Notice the hideously bloated sense of humanity's importance. The club-footed social conscience and the withered optimism. It's certainly not for the squeamish is it? Most repulsive of all, are its frail and useless notions of order and sanity if too much weight is placed upon them . . . they snap. How does it live, I hear you ask? How does this poor, pathetic specimen survive in today's harsh and irrational world? The sad answer is “not very well.” Faced with the inescapable fact that human existence is mad, random, and pointless, one in eight of them crack up and go stark slaving buggo! Who can blame them? In a world as psychotic as this . . . any other response would be crazy!

Here we get a glimpse into why the Joker strives for “higher values” and a “revaluation of values”—he thinks that human existence

is irrational and insane! The Joker is trying to drive Jim Gordon insane in order to prove his point that human existence is irrational and insane.

Many philosophers have explored the idea that human reasoning is incapable of grasping reality and that our attempts to understand the world with reason are *absurd*. Albert Camus is frequently associated with the early twentieth century existentialists, but he considered himself an “absurdist.” In his famous study of the Absurd called *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes, “The world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.” The Joker affirms this idea and he imbues his life with meaning by embracing irrationality and trying to foil Batman's attempts to have Gotham make sense.

Camus says, “There have always been men to defend the rights of the irrational,” and the Joker is definitely one of those men. (Another might be the Comedian from *The Watchmen*.) Once again, in *The Killing Joke* (my favorite Joker story!), the Joker unleashes a direct and focused attack on reason:

Memory's so treacherous. One moment you're lost in a carnival of delights with poignant childhood aromas, the flashing neon of puberty, all that sentimental candy-floss . . . the next, it leads you somewhere you don't want to go . . . somewhere dark and cold, filled with the damp, ambiguous shapes of things you'd hoped were forgotten. Memories can be vile, repulsive little brutes, like children, I suppose. Ha Ha. But can we live without them? Memories are what our reason is based upon. If we can't face them, then we deny reason itself! Although, why not? We aren't contractually tied down to rationality. There is no sanity clause! So when you find yourself locked onto an unpleasant train of thought, heading for the places in your past where the screaming is unbearable, remember there's always madness. Madness is the emergency exit... you can just step outside, and close the door on all those dreadful things that happened. You can lock them away . . . forever.

There are two important philosophical points here. First, the Joker is asking us to abandon our memories and voluntarily choose insanity. The Joker claims that memory cannot be relied upon, because it is unreliable and it can lead us to horrible thoughts that should not be remembered. (This point makes you wonder what the Joker has been through. Similarly, in *The Dark Knight* the Joker

tells inconsistent stories about where he got his scars. Wherever and however he got them, it must have been horrible.) Perhaps the Joker's own memory is unreliable, but that is very weak evidence for thinking that either everyone else or most other people have unreliable memory. If you have somewhat reliable memory, then the Joker's point does not apply to you. Also, most of us have memories of our past that make us who we are, in an important sense, and those memories give our lives meaning. Memory is required to sustain our friendships and other bonds of loyalty. How could the Joker maintain his relationship with Batman if he *completely* forgot his past?

Second, the Joker's argument is interesting but it is self-defeating. If the Joker is trying to convince us that reality is irrational and that we cannot rely on the power of reason, why has he given us an *argument* for that claim? By providing arguments for his claim that reality is irrational and crazy, he is using *reasoning* to make his point. One general problem facing any philosophical defense of irrationalism is that philosophical defenses require *arguments* and good arguments require good reasoning. If you believe that reality is irrational, then it is hard to see how that belief could be justified and if the belief is unjustified (and irrational) then you have no reason to believe it. Like many other aspects of the Joker's personality, this defense of absurdism is at odds with itself.

The Joker's Obsession with Batman

The Joker's irrationality also manifests itself in his obsession with Batman. This obsession fragments the Joker's will. When Batman foils one of the Joker's heists in *Batman #1*, the Joker yells, "I'm going to kill you!" and in *The Dark Knight* the Joker is hired by Gotham City's top mobsters to kill the Batman. Usually the Joker tries to kill Batman when the opportunity arises. However, the Joker also seems to love Batman in a sick kind of way—the Joker's struggle with Batman imbues his life with value and meaning. After Batman abruptly ends a conversation with the Joker in *A Death in the Family*, the Joker says, "Gone! I hate it when he does that. But he does make life worth living." The Joker also alludes to the deep significance he finds in his struggle with Batman in *The Dark Knight*.

I don't wanna kill you! What would I do *without* you? Go back to ripping off mob dealers? No. No. You *complete me*. . . .

You won't kill me because of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness, and I won't kill you because . . . you're just too much fun. I've got the feeling that you and I are destined to do this forever.

So, here we see that the Joker has an irrational set of desires. He wants to kill Batman and he wants to keep fighting with him forever. The Joker's relationship with Batman is a type of volitional inconsistency—he wants to kill Batman and he wants to continue fighting Batman forever. But doesn't everyone have inconsistent desires? If so, are we all irrational and insane? Everyone probably has some inconsistent desires. I want to eat the cupcakes in my kitchen and I also do not want to eat them (I'm on a diet). However, this type of volitional inconsistency is not clearly irrational or insane. (Determining the nature of irrationality and insanity are challenging philosophical issues. Are certain desires inherently irrational? Or, is irrationality primarily a matter of the relations between desires? Which forms of irrationality are also forms of insanity?) One reason that the Joker's volitional inconsistency seems irrational and insane is that it involves a tension between his *deep* desires, which are desires that are involved in his understanding of who he is and what matters most to him. The Joker's obsession with Batman is a particularly problematic form of irrationality, because his obsession involves conflicting desires about the most important thing in his life—his relationship with Batman.

In the Dark

Why does Batman remain in the dark when it comes to understanding the Joker? These reflections suggest that Batman's overly rational and moral perspective prevents him from seeing the essential *irrationality* of the Joker's point of view. The Joker's disdain for mediocrity, his rejection of naive convention and his desire to see the world as it really is are the wellspring of his villainy but they are also the qualities of great philosophers. On the other side of the coin, does the Joker understand Batman? The Joker often tries to show Batman the *absurdity* of the Caped Crusader's own costumed and illegal vigilante war against crime. Occasionally the Joker gets through to Batman: consider the laugh that Batman and the Joker have together in the last two pages of *The Killing Joke*. However, Batman usually remains in the dark about their relationship.

How will things end with Batman and the Joker? *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* describes one, particularly grim, possible future for the Dark Knight and the Clown Prince of Crime. There Batman does finally end his relationship with the Joker by non-fatally breaking his neck. In his final act of will the Joker finishes the job and kills himself in order to make sure that Batman is blamed for his death. Once the Joker is dead, Batman's despotic streak emerges as he creates a vigilante league whose purpose is to keep order in Gotham City. Without the Joker in the picture, Batman's desire for order seems to devolve into a desire for tyranny. Perhaps the Joker serves as a kind of mirror image for Batman: the Joker keeps Batman's uncompromising rationality in check and Batman checks the Joker's irrationalism. These issues may be difficult to resolve. However, as Batman says at the end of *A Death in the Family*, "That's the way things always end with the Joker and me. Unresolved."¹

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14 Mutation and Moral Community

NOAH LEVIN

In the coolest scene in the *X-Men* movie series, Magneto extracts liquid metal from the blood of his prison guard and escapes in a way that would probably amaze even the dead guard if it wasn't happening to him. Wolverine can heal instantaneously, Mystique can shape shift, and Professor X can read thoughts. Because of these amazing powers, Magneto claims that mutants are morally superior to non-mutants. In the "I, Magneto" back story published in *Classic X-Men* #19 (1988), Magneto himself best describes his views:

Little man, have you no notion who you're dealing with? I am *Homo superior*—the next generation of humanity, heir apparent to this paltry planet. As Cro-Magnon supplanted Neanderthal . . . so shall we, you . . . You are like children—intellect and power without the maturity to use either responsibly, unfit to rule lives or world. Better to be *ruled* instead . . . by one who shall make sure you know—and keep—your place . . . It is *I* who shall lead my people to the glory they deserve. I, *Übermensch*. I, *mutant!* I—MAGNETO!

Are mutants actually superior to non-mutants or are they just a little different, and what exactly *does* it mean to be superior? Are you superior if your mutant power is just making someone smell bad or stand on their head? Would having such a power make someone *morally* superior? All that matters to Magneto is that one belongs to the mutant species, but he might think differently given a little philosophical reflection on biology and morality.