

How Does Any One Film Explore Moral Problems Associated with Choice?

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Abstract

The Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, 2008) focuses on Batman Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale): the dark knight, and Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart): the white knight as Gotham's prosecutor, who work together to fight the criminal Joker (Heath Ledger). Harvey Dent was a prosecutor who defended the law, upheld justice, and put many criminal organizations in prison in Gotham. But in the process of confronting the Joker, Harvey Dent gradually became "Two-Face" who committed multiple murders. This ultimately left Batman with a difficult choice: whether to reveal the crimes committed by Harvey Dent and therefore release all the prisoners that led to Harvey's arrest, or to take all the crimes upon Batman himself and disappear from Gotham, leaving the legal system established by Harvey Dent to continue to work in Gotham. Although Batman ultimately chose to take the blame for Harvey's crimes, perpetuating the legal system established by Harvey Dent, and making Batman's identity disappear as a result. However, Batman's choice still raises many moral problems.

Moral problems are related to the rights and wrongs of our actions, and how to distinguish morally right and morally wrong is "the primary question posed within ethics" (Karofsky & Litch, 1963, p. 145), in other words, moral philosophy is ethics. According to Downing and Saxton, "Ethics [...] is a process of questioning" and "designates a way of responding to the encounter between the self and others" (Downing & Saxton, 2010, p. 3), this illustrates that a question about ethics is approached from different people or different perspectives. This also dictates that when it comes to an action as morally right or wrong, it must be approached from a different perspective. At the same time, "Film as a medium of "ethical experience: through which conflicting, clashing, or incompatible ideas, commitments, or beliefs can be revealed" (Sinnerbrink, 2016, p. 6). This explains that film, as a medium for the display of behaviour, can reveal the different characteristics present in the act, providing a space for the viewer to make a moral judgement. Therefore, this essay will base on Amy Karofsky and Mary M. Litch's categorical discussion of ethics, specifically analysing the moral problems associated with Bruce Wayne's choices at the end of *The Dark Knight*.

Keywords: ethics, moral judgment, commit a crime

1. Moral Relativism

According to Amy Karofsky and Mary M. Litch's study of ethics, they divide ethics into two categories: moral relativism and moral objectivism. Among these, moral relativism means that moral judgments depend on a particular person or group of people, and it can be divided into three different views: moral subjectivism, cultural moral relativism, and moral nihilism.

"Moral subjectivism is the view that moral judgments are true or false relative to an individual's moral standards" (Karofsky & Litch, 1963, p. 148). This indicates that it is only the individual involved in the event and the moral code espoused by the individual that can determine morally right and morally wrong. And cultural moral relativism "is the view that moral judgments are true or false relative to the actor's culture's moral

standards” (Karofsky & Litch, 1963, p. 148), this view emphasises that judgments about moral problems are not related to the individual but are influenced by the dominant culture in the country, nation or region in which the person lives and that the individual’s moral judgments may be wrong. In addition, proponents of moral nihilism argue that “the very notion of evaluating actions on moral grounds makes no sense” (Karofsky & Litch, 1963, p. 149), this illustrates the view that moral judgments about an action are meaningless. At the same time, since most of *The Dark Knight* film takes place only within Gotham, it does not involve a clear collision of different cultures, such as countries or regions, this paragraph will only analyse the moral problems associated with the choice of Batman through moral subjectivism and moral nihilism.

According to the description of the moral subjectivism perspective above, judging the right action or wrong action is determined by the moral standards of the individual. In *The Dark Knight*, when Gotham’s prosecutor Harvey Dent eats at a restaurant later with his girlfriend Rachel, he stumbles upon Bruce Wayne, who is hiding his Batman identity, with ballerina Natascha, and the four end up having dinner together. In this scene, the existence of Batman is also talked about when people talk about the city of Gotham, but Harvey Dent and Natascha have different opinions. During the conversation, Natascha said to Harvey Dent, “Gotham needs heroes like you, elected officials...not a man who thinks he’s above the law”. She thinks that even though Batman fights criminals, he is still against the law, so Batman should not appear from a legal perspective itself. Meanwhile, Harvey Dent argues that Batman is an honour to Gotham, “an ordinary citizen standing up for what’s right”, and he believes that Batman’s presence is justified by the fact that Gotham’s current laws are ineffective in deterring criminals, hence the emergence of a vigilante like Batman. But Harvey Dent adds, “Batman is looking for someone to take up his mantle”. This would suggest that while he agrees with Batman’s actions, he believes that Batman’s approach to fighting criminals is not a permanent solution and that a successor is needed. Therefore, the two have different attitudes to the question of whether Batman should exist, which each discusses the moral issues raised by Batman’s existence from their own personal perspectives, and as such, this reflects moral subjectivism. But at the same time, both from Natascha’s point of view: Batman should not exist from a legal perspective, and from Harvey Dent’s: Batman needs a successor, which does not mean another vigilante, but also another way of deterring criminals, such as a better legal system. Both moral attitudes point to the same ending Batman is eventually going to disappear. At the same time, Batman is sitting across from Natascha and Harvey at this point as Bruce Wayne, and both people’s attitudes towards Batman ultimately influence Batman’s choice in the end.

According to the view of moral nihilism, it is meaningless to give an action a moral judgment. Midway through the film, after Batman, Gordon, and Harvey Dent have worked together to capture the Joker and lock him up in the police station, Gordon discovers that the Joker has kidnapped Harvey Dent without anyone’s notice. At this point, Batman also arrives at the police station to interrogate the Joker, and during this confrontation, the Joker’s lines show his moral values. When the Joker refers to the actions of the policemen of Gotham, he said, “their morals, their code ... is a bad joke”. This statement also directly indicates his disagreement with the existence of morality. And after this, the Joker said that “They’re only as good as the world allows them to be [...] When the chips are down, these civilized people, they’ll eat each other”. This line also reinforces his attitude towards morality, that what people think is right is hypocritical and that any existing moral standards are meaningless. Besides, when Harvey Dent is treated in hospital for petrol burns, he is approached by the joker, who wants Harvey to abandon the law and his moral standards. So he said, “I just do things [...] I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are [...] Introduce a little anarchy upset the established order and everything becomes chaos [...] and you know the thing about chaos? it’s fair”. This means that the Joker does not only act without a plan but also without any moral standards. Thus, the Joker’s views show the idea of moral nihilism. In addition, the Joker’s views are not simply making Gotham chaotic or driving Harvey Dent mad. The purpose of all the acts he commits is reflected in the talk with the mob in the earlier part of the film, that is, to make Batman disappear from Gotham. It is the Joker’s series of actions that turned Harvey Dent into “Two-Face”, thus turning Gotham’s “the White Knight” into a criminal, forcing Bruce Wayne to choose to make Batman disappear from Gotham.

2. Moral Objectivism: Consequentialism

Moral objectivism holds that “there are moral facts — facts about what is morally right and morally wrong” (Karofsky & Litch, 2015, p. 148), this view suggests that moral judgment does not depend on individuals or groups. At the same time, moral objectivism can be divided into two views: consequentialism and nonconsequentialism. Among them, the view of consequentialism believes that “what sets morally right actions apart from morally wrong ones has to do with the consequences that result from the action” (Karofsky & Litch, 2015, p. 153), in other words, actions that produce good consequences are morally right, and actions that produce bad consequences are morally wrong. Consequentialism can be subdivided into act utilitarianism and moral egoism, which have different interpretations. Among them, “Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness” (Mill, 1979, p. 7). This shows that

in the view of act utilitarianism, the total happiness produced by an action determines the moral correctness of this action. In addition, moral egoism refers to “the only person whose happiness matters in determining the moral status of an action is the actor” (Karofsky & Litch, 2015, p. 160), this indicates that if an action brings happiness to the actor himself, then this action is morally correct, and the judgment of this action morally does not relate to others. This paragraph will analyse the moral problems associated with the choice of Batman in the film *The Dark Knight* based on the two viewpoints of act utilitarianism and moral egoism.

According to the description of act utilitarianism above, the total amount of happiness produced by action can judge how morally right that action is. And in the view of act utilitarianism, the process of whether an action can be judged morally right can be divided into three steps:

- 1) Enumerate all the alternative actions from which the actor has to choose.
- 2) For each alternative, figure out the total amount of happiness that would result if that alternative were chosen. (This sum total is referred to as the alternative’s utility.)
- 3) The alternative with the greatest utility is the morally right thing to do under the circumstances. Any alternative with less than maximal utility is morally wrong (Karofsky & Litch, 2015, p. 155).

So when these three steps are used to analyse Batman’s choice at the end of *The Dark Knight*, it follows, 1: When Harvey Dent was released from the hospital by Joker, he began to track down people related to Rachel’s death. He bypassed judicial methods and decided the life and death of people related to Rachel’s death by flipping a coin, and kidnapped Gordon’s wife and children. Although Batman finally rescued Gordon’s family, it indirectly led to Harvey Dent’s death. At this time, Batman has two alternative actions. One is to reveal the truth to the public, and Harvey Dent is defined as a criminal. Afterwards, all the criminals arrested by Harvey Dent as a prosecutor are released. The second is to tell the public that it was Batman who killed Harvey Dent and to take the blame for all of Harvey Dent’s crimes and keep the criminals Harvey Dent arrested in prison. According to step 2, if Batman chose the first alternative action, Batman would have no crime, but all the criminals arrested by Harvey Dent were released. At this time, the only people who can get happiness are the criminals who are released. Batman will return to the endless criminal attack again, and the citizens of Gotham will once again live in a city controlled by gangs and face the pain brought by a city with a high crime rate. If Batman chose the second alternative action, then Batman would take the blame for Harvey Dent and disappear forever. Harvey Dent is still “the White Knight” in Gotham, and the criminals he arrested can continue to be held in prison. At this time, not only Gotham citizens can live peacefully and happily in Gotham, where the crime rate has been greatly reduced, but Bruce Wayne has also completed his initial intention to crackdown on Gotham’s criminal behaviour through legal methods. Therefore, according to the analysis of the total amount of happiness produced by Batman’s two alternative actions in step 2, Batman chose to shoulder Harvey Dent’s crime and disappeared from the public’s sight, the total amount of happiness he can get from this action is far more than his action of exposing Harvey Dent’s crime to the public. According to step 3, the actions of a large amount of happiness are morally right, so Batman’s final choice is moral.

Another view of consequentialism is moral egoism. From the definition of moral egoism, judging whether an action is moral or not is mainly determined by one’s happiness, which is not only current happiness but also long-term happiness. At the end of the film, Batman chose not to expose Harvey Dent’s crimes to the citizens of Gotham. Although after this choice, Batman would take the blame for the crime of killing Harvey Dent and disappear forever. But for Bruce Wayne, who has the identity of Batman, his original aim was not to become Batman but to use his role as a vigilante to fight crime and give the citizens of Gotham a stable life. Thus, Batman’s disappearance not only allows the citizens of Gotham to continue to live in a safe and stable city but also satisfies Bruce Wayne’s desire to save Gotham at the beginning. Therefore, from the perspective of moral egoism, Batman’s choice in ending satisfies all his purposes, so Batman’s final behaviour is morally right.

3. Moral Objectivism: Nonconsequentialism

Nonconsequentialism is another view of moral objectivism, which mainly holds that “it is something other than consequences that are important in distinguishing right from wrong” (Karofsky & Litch, 1963, p. 153). In other words, judging whether an action is morally right or wrong depends not on the result of the action, but on something besides the result. According to Karofsky and Litch, nonconsequentialism can be divided into three different perspectives: Kant’s ethical theory, Divine Command Theory, and Theistic Natural Law Theory. Among them, Kant’s ethical theory states, “that an act is morally right if the general principle the actor is following in performing that action is a principle” (Karofsky & Litch, 1963, p. 162). This shows whether actions are right in morals is mainly judged by whether the actor has the intention of conforming to the general principles. In addition, Divine Command Theory view insists that “an action is morally right if that action is in accordance with God’s will” (Karofsky & Litch, 1963, p. 165), that is when God enables the actor to do the act, then the act is right. And Theistic Natural Law Theory shows that “Its key features are that right and wrong are grounded in

the natural order of things [...] which is ultimately grounded in God's purposes" (Karofsky & Litch, 1963, p. 166). This indicates that whether the behaviour is morally right depends not only on God's instructions but also on the laws of nature. From the above analysis, it is clear that both Divine Command Theory and Theistic Natural Law Theory are based on theism, but *The Dark Knight* is a film that does not explicitly involve elements related to theism. Thus, this paragraph will only discuss the moral problems associated with the choice of Batman based on the view of Kant's ethical theory.

According to the above explanation of Kant's ethical theory, judging whether actions are morally right depends on the intention of the actor, and this intention should conform to the general principle. At the end of the film, Batman is faced with a conflict between two general principles when he is faced with a choice. One is telling the truth, and the other is that criminals should be punished through legal methods. If Batman finally chose to tell the public about the crimes committed by Harvey Dent, all the criminals arrested by Harvey Dent would be released. But Batman can not tell the truth to the public if he wants to continue to punish the criminals Harvey Dent caught as a prosecutor by law. Therefore, these two general principles conflict with each other, and it is impossible to say whether one general principle takes priority over the other. Therefore, with the interpretation of Kant's ethical theory, it is complex to judge whether Batman's final action is morally right or wrong.

Besides, there is another way to explain Kant's ethical theory, "[Act so] as to treat humanity, whether in [your] own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end ... never as a means only" (Kant, 1987, p. 58), this means that if the actor regards others as a means to achieve his goal, instead of treating people as a subject with rationality and humanity, then this kind of action is morally wrong. Batman chose not to tell the public about Harvey Dent's crimes in the end, although it was for the sake of Gotham citizens to live in a safe city. However, Batman finally wanted to keep the criminals caught by Harvey Dent alive from being released, so he did not tell the public about Harvey Dent's crimes to maintain the image of Harvey Dent "the White Knight". Therefore, Harvey Dent's role at this time is a means to ensure that prisoners in prison are not released. Thus, in Kant's ethical theory view, Batman's choice of this action at the end is morally wrong.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, according to Amy Karofsky and Mary M. Litch's research on ethics, this essay analyses the moral problems involved in the choice made by Batman at the end of *The Dark Knight*. Finally, in the framework of moral relativism, according to the view of moral subjectivism, the character Natascha in the film thinks Batman is an outlaw, so Batman's actions are all morally wrong. But Harvey Dent thinks that Batman's existence is reasonable, but Batman is also looking for his way to strike criminals, so he has not made a clear moral judgment on Batman's actions. And according to the analysis of moral nihilism, Joker thinks that all Batman's actions are morally meaningless. In the framework of moral objectivism, Batman's choice of ending is morally right according to the view of consequentialism, regardless of the view of act utilitarianism or moral egoism. According to Kant's ethical theory in the nonconsequentialism view, it is complex to make a clear judgment on whether Batman's final choice is right morals.

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