

WHO AUTHORS THE AUTHORITY? A DISCUSSION OF WATCHMEN AND RIGHTFUL RULE

Jason Monroe on Understanding the Role
of Authority

Since their origin, superheroes have captured our imaginations. They embody many things that we revere: strength, power, confidence, justice, and love. It goes without saying that a child stands in awe as Batman confidently appears from the shadows to rescue a helpless victim from her attacker. Most kids are especially drawn to Superman: he embodies that deeply-intuited archetypal character, the Hero; therefore, kids seem naturally to grasp what he stands for. The admiring child may not be able to explicate what makes

Superman so super, but he still may — interestingly, by default — respect and trust Superman’s authority and abilities. Like the child’s lack of incredulity at Santa Claus’s existence, he will stand amazed as Iron Man swoops above a parade crowd: no analysis needed — only simple acceptance and reverence.

But as children grow, they tend to abandon bald adoration and awe, replacing it with a more “rational” way of life. Perhaps this is akin to the rejection of the Divine Right of Kings for (what is widely thought to be) more democratic, sensible, mature versions of governance. Children inevitably become adults and, almost as inevitably, lose their intuited wonder for superheroes. Why? Part of the answer is found in one motivation behind *Watchmen* — directed by Zach Snyder and based on Alan Moore’s graphic novel. Among other themes, the film presents “a deconstruction and satire of the comic book super hero.”¹ Essentially, it asks the same as Juvenal’s ancient query, “Quis custodiet ipsos custodes” — “Who will guard the guards themselves”; or, in the iconic words of the film,

¹ Peter Aperlo, *Watchmen: The Film Companion* (London, Titan Books, 2009), 16

"Who watches the watchmen?"^{2 3} *Watchmen* is a sort of *Adult Guide to Superheroes*: it is a disenchanting journey through follies and flaws of anti-heroes who do not merit praise but deserve derision. Because some of the characters represent various types of authority, their inherent imperfections betray them and topple the associated authoritative idea. I'll examine a few of *Watchmen*'s critiques of authority, but will not leave it at that; I will also offer what I think is a solution to the issues the film raises regarding authority.

Alan Moore was a mystic, many of whose beliefs paralleled those of fantasists such as J.R.R. Tolkien and George MacDonald. Despite this tendency, which is often aligned with sympathy toward authority, he was wary of authority, whether human or divine. Although differing from the graphic novel in some ways, *Watchmen* still leaves one questioning the legitimacy of authority. The earlier "Minutemen" and the later "Watchmen" in the story are extraordinarily gifted (yet fallible) men and women. So should they be considered "above the law" — an alternate moral species, so to speak? Should they receive a double standard? Via the

2 Juvenal, *Satires*, 6.346-348.

3 *Watchmen*, directed by Zack Snyder (Legendary Pictures, 2009) DVD (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009)

portrayal of vulnerable, fallen, perhaps even insane superheroes, *Watchmen* presents a possibility — that those we deem super-leaders in society may not perhaps be so super after all.

Watchmen offers a diverse deconstruction of different authority types embodied in various characters by illuminating their flaws. We will survey a few of them before offering a positive alternative.

Order is crucial to a society's functionality and health, and if the law fails to maintain peace, vigilantism may not seem so illogical. Batman's inconspicuous, lone-wolf modus operandi could be admissible in response to a highly unmanageable crime level. He would sometimes work hand-in-hand with the law, funneling outlaws into jails to give them chances at reform. In contrast, *Watchmen's* Rorschach (a sort of darker Dark Knight), adopts a stance that was no longer "too soft on criminals": he no longer "let them live."⁴ His vigilantism unsympathetically, yet willfully, wanders into the anarchic; he is his own ruthless law. Despite the Keene Act, which legally prohibits vigilantism, Rorschach continues solitarily to hunt

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criminals, following his duty-bound conviction which heeds no law but its own.

Watchmen visually portrays the seeming sociopathy of Rorschach in imaginative ways: his mask constantly, a bit creepily, displays churning and morphing Rorschach Test configurations. He intends for this true "face" to elicit a revealing of others' true faces. The Rorschach is a psychological test meant to extract unconscious emotions and thought processes of which the patient is unaware or secretive. And Rorschach's method, when in collaboration with violence, achieves his ends. He strikes fear into the hearts of his enemies, giving him the advantage in confrontation.

Rorschach's need for his "face" demonstrates his retreating from the common commerce of human community. Not surprisingly, normal people shudder at first encountering him, since he has voluntarily become to them more of an idea or a concept than a person. The same could go for someone's introduction to Rorschach's deontological ethics — his Kantian Categorical Imperative to live "a life free of compromise."⁵ His rigid, arbitrary morality is difficult to defend, philosophically. The main issue is his Armchair

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Ethics: he doesn't consult a group of thinkers or the democratic process; assuming the roles of judge, jury, and executioner is his expedient. His moral rigidity could be altered by a small or great degree, but that does not make it any truer than another system that comes along. *Watchmen* eventually demonstrates the bankruptcy of his isolated, deranged deontology. The critique also applies to capricious leadership enforcing a narrow code with an iron fist. Sure, there is something to be said for Rorschach's clean conscience in the end; but he is still outdone by Veidt's genius and overpowered by Dr. Manhattan.

If Rorschach's alienating ideology is too sociopathic to underpin a theory of authority, perhaps we should consider the more intellectual, polished, utopian outlook of Ozymandias (Adrian Veidt). Harkening back to Pete Morisi's character, Thunderbolt, Veidt is as generously endowed mentally as he is physically — a genius as well as a warrior. Veidt epitomizes the well-dressed, tactful, polite politician who externally appears a great guy and a strong leader but harbors ulterior motives. Unlike Rorschach, he doesn't get his hands dirty. His grand scheme is to destroy major cities by detonating energy reactors, making Dr. Manhattan a scapegoat and blaming him for "killing millions."

Conveniently, he justifies his plan as an expedient "to save billions," since it unites the world's superpowers against a common enemy.

After some patience, Ozymandias' machinations achieve his ends: and ends, regardless of means, are his program. He is Rorschach's foil — the consequentialist. He dismisses Kantian categories and works in the vein of the Utilitarians — such as Bentham or Mill — by the axiom, "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."⁶ Veidt is aligned with that type of authority which sees survival of the species as the highest goal, to be achieved at any cost. To him, without the existence of man, there is no meaning; so he will do anything to keep mankind extant. But his consequentialism does not lack ramifications: he becomes emotionally numb in the end. Resulting from his behavior, he suffers another (albeit different) manifestation of Dr. Manhattan's social isolation and dislocation. Ironically, Veidt shifts from his earlier belief ("criminals monopolized evil"), to siding with Rorschach that, "Humans are savage in nature, no matter how much you try to

⁶ J. Robert Loftis, in *Watchmen and Philosophy*, ed. Mark D. White (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2009), 66.

dress it up . . . to disguise it.”^{7 8} He believes humanity’s inherent evil vindicates the extreme measures needed to materialize his goal.

Ultimately, the film portrays Veidt’s view as flawed in that he loses part of his humanity. He becomes depressed and apathetic and cold toward others. None of the other characters approve of his plan, yet after its fruition they must keep it secret lest they get disintegrated like Rorschach or (if they escape to expose Veidt) upset the newly established world peace.

Dr. Manhattan, the genius physicist who gained superpowers following a laboratory accident, is also not exempt from imperfection. His invulnerability and limitless control over matter assist the US government in winning the Vietnam war (*Watchmen’s* story occurs in an alternate history). The victory ostensibly results in an American global political hegemony. People believe Dr. Manhattan’s sheer presence will deter nuclear war. However, eventually the opposite scenario brews: many realize that Dr. Manhattan “represents, like the atomic bomb, this ability to save us and destroy us

⁷ Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: Warner Books, 1987), 18.

⁸ *Watchmen*, directed by Zack Snyder

at the same moment.”⁹ A commentator who is interviewed in the film reports that Dr. Manhattan's presence “hasn't stopped the Soviet Union from stockpiling record amounts of nuclear weapons.”¹⁰ Just because there is a virtually omnipotent, omniscient force guarding the populace, there is no guarantee of perfect trust in him and perfect peace.

Some have compared Dr. Manhattan to God. He is so far above the law that he starts disregarding its legitimacy. He has either, according to philosopher Jesse Prinz, lost the “moral emotions” necessary to “have the concept *moral rightness*;¹¹ or, he has intellectualized away the petty issues of mankind as an insignificant blip on the radar of existence. Either way, in a fashion unlike the Christian God, he is imperfect, passible, and succumbs to the emotional strain of dealing with mankind's myriad flaws. In the Comedian's words, he does not “give a damn about human beings.”¹² So Dr. Manhattan is also deficient as an authority — eventually emotionally withdrawn and reluctantly allowing Veidt's atrocities. To him, people become merely “shadows

⁹ Peter Aperlo, *Watchmen: The Film Companion*, 47.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jesse J. Prinz, “Moral Relativists Gone Wild,” (OUP, 2017), 3, http://personal.victoria.ac.nz/richard_joyce/acrobat/joyce_2009_review.prinz.pdf

¹² *Watchmen*, directed by Zack Snyder

in a fog," and Silk Spectre observes that when he looks at things, "it's like he doesn't remember what they are."¹³

The Comedian harbors an absurdist view of the universe — one that does not take humanity seriously due to (what is to him) its inherent insanity and irrationality. Since he cannot change warped human nature, he will mock it, deride it, and become the hardened cynic. After violently snuffing out the demonstration of a crowd of protesters, his dialogue with Night Owl is telling of his brand of authority: Night Owl asks, "How long can we keep this up?" The Comedian responds, "Congress is pushing through some new bill that's gonna outlaw masks [superheroes]. Our days are numbered. Until then, it's like you always say: we're society's only protection." "From what?" "Are you kidding me? From themselves."¹⁴

As expected, *Watchmen* pillories The Comedian's philosophy, and any authority based thereon, by showing how his conscience haunts him. In a quite uncharacteristic moment, he weepingly reveals his remorse to his old archenemy, Moloch: "I did bad things to women: I shot kids."¹⁵ His feeling of

¹³ *Watchmen* directed by Zack Snyder.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

emptiness is to be expected, since such a nihilistic view inevitably will round back to its source — Nothing — not only resulting in a metaphysical, but an emotional void.

Having crossed the desolate, parched ethical wasteland left behind by the corrupt characters of *Watchmen*, we can propose the proper soil from which valid authority can bloom. A primordial or archetypal authority from which all other authorities proceed not only makes sense, but must exist. Without a transcendent, foundational authority, there could be no earthly, human authority. Something changeless, perfect, and self-sustaining must precede and support something mutable, imperfect, and contingent. An ancient exemplar of this argument is Plato, who argues that his perfect Forms are the originals from which all copies in nature come. St. Augustine's formulation brings the principle closer to a Christian home: "thou art the God and Lord of all thy creatures; and with thee abide all the stable causes of all unstable things, the unchanging sources of all changeable things, and the eternal reasons of all non-rational and temporal things."¹⁶ Therefore, temporal authority should emulate and build upon eternal

¹⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.6.9

authority; failure to do so leaves the earthly edifice on sand and forgets the very source and justification of any right to authority, whatsoever.

The Christian view is that governments should acknowledge that their authority comes from God and that natural law is their guiding light. They comprise men and will never be perfect, but to strive for justice they must be devoted to an objective standard. St. Paul points out that “there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God.”¹⁷ Rulers claiming that divine source as their justification at least will start on the right foot — hopefully constantly improving. Humility to learn and a correct aim must be present as the apprentice will only improve under the oversight of his master.

There is good reason for the perfection of an authority from which all other authority comes. To chase anything less than a perfect standard is to commit to something not worth wholesale devotion. If only partial devotion is warranted, how does one know when that devotion should cease — when it breaks down? This may result in futilely debating finer points *ad infinitum*. It is only toward an authority meriting total devotion that one can

¹⁷ Romans 13:1 (NABRE)

firmly state, "That, or, he is a legitimate authority."

The characteristics of a perfect (therefore legitimate) authority are not embodied in the characters of *Watchmen*, and Zack Snyder demonstrates this imperfection skillfully. He still provides in the film some space for a partial theodicy: Rorschach, supporting free will in his conversation with a detective, comments that, "God didn't make the world this way; we did."¹⁸ Correctly, he does not blame God for evil, even though he fails to credit God with any desire to assist hurting humanity. Recognizing that Rorschach says, "God didn't seem to care" about injustices, is perhaps putting one's finger on the source of his cynicism.¹⁹ Excluding God from the picture, it is no wonder Rorschach allows his vigilantism to grow to morbid proportions. Acknowledging the divinity behind natural law would preclude the necessity to become one's own law.

The key is to find a just, moral basis to counter the flaws portrayed then flayed by the film. To some degree, governments and leadership will always be prone to the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the aforementioned anti-superheroes. To avoid

¹⁸ *Watchmen*, directed by Zack Snyder.

¹⁹ . . .

rejecting authority outright, and slipping into mere anarchy, a State of some fashion must be admitted. Professor Anthony Esolen provides good foundations for a just State:

The State's role is to observe the moral law, to promote by general laws the conditions wherein people of ordinary virtue and industry can thrive, providing assistance in extreme cases, and to restrain its ambitions, honoring the independence and the interdependence of human beings in families, parishes, churches, guilds, fraternities, sororities, and other unions created for mutual help and the common good.²⁰

Critics will clamor for details to fill out Esolen's outline, but the present discussion is limited to a general appraisal. Key words like "moral" and "virtue" and "law" must be axiomatic, rock-bottom obligations or a just government is impossible. A helpful starting point for a successful authority in response to *Watchmen* requires that these concepts be taken for granted and not thought relative, or worse, dispensable.

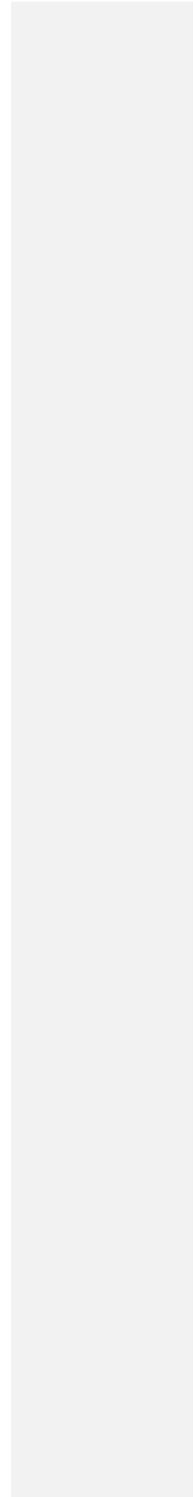
There is always a place for critics of authority and of facets of society that people may take for

²⁰ Anthony Esolen, *Reclaiming Catholic Social Teaching* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2014), 162-163

granted, but without something positive to embrace, skepticism can easily become the dominant mindset. There is no reason to deny any ideology a fair hearing; common sense is breached if the law oversteps and punishes those refusing to read their Bibles or attend church. Nevertheless, there should exist a fixed beacon of hope amid the confusion and despair that often results from cultural and moral relativism. For the most part, contradictory ideals of authority can coexist harmoniously, but they cannot carry an equal weight of truth. We have found that Christianity offers an authority which remains a strong tower amid the aftermath of *Watchmen's* ideological demolition. If the Christian concept of authority had been included in this impressive film, it would have been left standing after the dust of the toppled secular philosophies cleared.

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