Superheroes and Philosophy

Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way

Edited by
TOM MORRIS
and
MATT MORRIS

OPEN COURT
Chicago and La Salle, Illinois

1

The Real Truth about Superman: And the Rest of Us, Too

MARK WAID

Superman, the grandfather of all superheroes, is a cultural institution. Even the most elite and insulated intellectuals have been exposed to enough pop culture to be familiar with the Man of Steel and what he stands for. He fights a "never-ending battle" for truth, for justice, and—still enthusiastically after all these years, despite the fact that no one can define it any more—for "the American Way." Consequently, he is as close as contemporary Western culture has yet come to envisioning a champion who is the epitome of unselfishness. The truest moral statement that can be made of Superman is that he invariably puts the needs of others first.

Or does he?

Preparation for a Surprise

Some people adopt astronomy or entomology as their life's study and can identify the most prominent Magellanic nebulae in the cosmos or the least visible aphid in the garden. Others devote their time and energy to analyzing and cataloguing, in excruciating detail, anything from Welsh folk tales to the box scores of the 1969 Mets. Me, ever since I was a boy, I've been fascinated by the mythology of Superman. Though it's not my day job (not exactly), that's my field of focused expertise. I freely admit that it's—to put it charitably—rather "specialized," but for all my other wide and varied interests, nothing in this world has ever held quite the same fascination for me as has the Man of Steel.

At a time in my emotionally tumultuous teenage years when I most needed guidance and inspiration, I found a father figure in Superman. Fictional or not, the power of his spirit quite literally saved my life, and ever since, I have done what I can to return the favor by investing in his legend. In the process, and without design, I became one of the world's leading authorities on the Last Son of Krypton. Over the years, I've retained the dubious distinction of being the only man alive to have read every Superman story, watched every cartoon, and TV show, and movie, listened to every radio drama, and unearthed every unpublished manuscript about him. I've so thoroughly immersed myself in every aspect of the Superman lore—and, along the way, absorbed such minutiae as Clark Kent's Social Security number and his boyhood sweetheart's mother's maiden name—that I regularly field queries from sources as varied as *Time* magazine, *The History Channel*, and the *Smallville* television producers. Long before now, I thought I knew Superman inside and out. But I was wrong.

The One Question I Could Not Answer

Up until the spring of 2002, it had been a good, long while since anyone had stumped me with a Superman question. That changed the day I had to face one that, oddly, it had never even occurred to me to ask:

"Why does he do what he does?"

The man who confronted me with those words and got to savor watching a lifetime of smugness evaporate from my face as I flailed for an answer was Dan Didio, Executive Editor of DC Comics, the publishers of Superman's exploits. Again, being a Superman expert is not my day job, though it's certainly a pertinent sideline. For most of my adult life, I've enjoyed a career as a reasonably successful comic book writer, and my boss had just approached me about creating a new Superman series called *Superman: Birthright* that would, as he put it, "re-imagine Superman for the twenty-first century." Understandably, he wanted to get my take on Superman's basic motivation. Why does Superman do what he does? What are his reasons? What moves him to take on the role of everyone's protector and defender? Why does he invariably seek to do the right thing?

"Why? Because," I responded with a telling stammer,

"because doing the right thing is . . . is . . . is the right thing to do . . ."

"I'm hiring you to re-imagine harder than *that*," my boss insisted, and he had a point. Because I grew up with Superman, because I took his fictional presence for granted, I was falling back on an easy, childlike—and knee-jerk—answer. The truth of the matter was, I hadn't any real clue, and if I was going to do my part to revitalize the character's impact on a post-9/11 world . . . well, Superman deserved more than that from me.

Comic book superheroes were created as, and always have been at root, an adolescent power fantasy. As literary constructs go, they don't need to be terribly complex; in their primary-colored costumes, fighting gaudy villains and hyper-dramatic menaces that aren't terribly subtle, they're intended to excite the imaginations of children with the same fire and energy as the myths and fairy tales of years past. But, to kids today, as the stars and profiles of Batman, Spider-Man, and Wolverine have risen, Superman has become increasingly irrelevant. As a pop-culture force, he enjoyed his greatest impact nearly a half-century ago, and today there are entire generations to whom Superman is about as meaningful and significant as Woody Woodpecker or Amos 'n' Andy. And, speaking as a man in his early forties, it's tempting to simply assume that "kids today don't know what's good." But that ignores the undeniable fact that the Gen-X and Gen-Next audience I cater to as a comics writer perceive the world around them as far more dangerous, far more unfair, and far more screwed up than my generation ever did. To them, and probably more accurately so than the child in me would like to believe, their world is one where unrestrained capitalism always wins, where politicians always lie, where sports idols take drugs and beat their wives, and where white picket fences are suspect because they hide dark things.

And Superman, the ultraconservative Big, Blue Boy Scout, actively *protects* that status quo. No wonder he's lost his sheen.

How relevant is a man who flies and wears a red cape to kids who have to pass through metal detectors at school? How inspirational is an invulnerable alien to young people who are taught that the moral visionaries and inspirational figures of history—from Bobby Kennedy to Martin Luther King to Mohandas Gandhi—got the same reward for their efforts: a bullet and a

burial?[1] Modern times have created a new distance between Superman and his intended audience, because now they can't help but ask "why?" If this "Man of Tomorrow"—a.k.a. Kal-El, the Last Son of the planet Krypton—grew up in today's world, with anything even remotely resembling a contemporary point of view on heroism, why on Earth would he even consider embracing a path of selflessness? What possible reward could public service hold for a Superman who could, if he so desired, remain out of the public eye and media scrutiny? What would a full-time career of doing good for others offer a man who could, comfortably and safely cloaked in a T-shirt and jeans, make a very good living by wringing a diamond out of the occasional lump of coal? Or, to put it another way, this is a unique individual who could have anything he wanted for himself, so why does he spend nearly all his time taking care of others?

Yes. I know. It's a little weird to be asking such intense questions about someone who's, oh, *not real*. But that's the job of a comics writer—to give life to these heroes in ways that make them believable and keep them relevant. I was convinced that good answers could be mined from the character—provided I was willing to first forget everything I'd spent a lifetime knowing about him. The great philosopher Socrates (469–399 B.C.) believed that any genuine search for wisdom begins when we first admit that we do not really know. Only then can we truly learn. Socrates should have written comics.

A big part of retelling the Superman myth for a modern audience came in finding some distance, in allowing myself the perspective necessary to separate its timeless elements from the details that could be updated. There was no reason, for instance, that the *Daily Planet*—reporter Clark Kent's traditional employer of choice—couldn't be a World Wide Web news service instead of a print broadsheet. Or, for example, in our privacy-conscious day and age, in this retelling, a man with x-ray vision and superhearing would have to earn the trust of the citizens of Metropolis rather than just assume it was his for the asking. Still, most of the Superman lore that I took for granted continued to hold up under scrutiny. Rocketed as an infant from a doomed

---

[1] Gandhi was cremated and his ashes, mixed with milk, were scattered in the Ganges River—a form of burial akin to burial at sea but especially holy for Hindus.

planet orbiting a dying, red star? Check—although his rocket ship would now have to be equipped with all manner of detection-cloaking devices to keep it hidden from NORAD. Adopted by a kindly Midwestern farming couple and named Clark Kent? Certainly—but I wanted to position the Kent family as a little younger, and therefore a little more energetically invested in Clark's upbringing. Disguised as a mild-mannered citizen? Absolutely. In fact, this aspect of his character, upon renewed scrutiny, made more sense to me than ever. Of course, Kal-El is going to want to sport a low profile. How would you react if someone you thought you knew suddenly revealed that he was freakishly strong or could melt your car with an angry glance? People get seriously weirded-out when they see this man use his powers openly. It makes them retroactively paranoid. He has superhuman powers *and* he's been keeping them a secret? That's a *big* secret. What else has he been keeping from them, they'd wonder. The possibilities would be endless, and some of them sinister.

Who is he, *really*?

We know the answer to that one, as does Kal-El. He has vague, dreamlike memories of his lost home world, particularly every evening at dusk, when he feels an inexplicable sadness and longing in watching the setting sun turn red on the horizon. And every time, in his Clark identity, that he has to politely forego a pickup touch-football game for fear of crippling the opposing line, every time he hears the splash of an Antarctic penguin while trying to relax on a Hawaiian beach, every time he surrenders himself to a moment of unbridled joy and looks down to see that he's quite literally walking on air, he gets the message loud and clear: He's not from around here. He doesn't belong here. He was raised as one of us, but he's really not one of us. Superman is the sole survivor of his race. He is an alien being, and he is probably more alone in this world than anyone else ever has been.

And that's the key.

The Need to Belong

The basic desire to belong is a fundamental aspect of human nature. As defined by psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908–1970), our need to connect to others is paramount to our

well-being, prioritized just below our physiological needs (which have virtually no significance to Kal-El, whose cellular structure derives its nourishment not from food but from solar energy) and our need for safety (an instinct that is also likely to be slightly foreign to a man who can survive a direct nuclear blast). It's fair to presume that, despite his extraterrestrial origins, Kal-El feels the same basic need for community that is shared by all the human beings around him; if not, he most likely wouldn't bother being Clark Kent at all and would just as soon soar off to explore the greater solar system and galaxies beyond than work a nine-to-five in Metropolis.

Building from this assumption, I began to examine some theories as to how Kal-El might meet this need for community, but it wasn't until I came across a specific passage on the Internet by an author named Marianne Williamson that everything crystallized for me:

> Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.[2]

How does Kal-El connect with the world around him? Not by turning his back on his alien heritage, though that was certainly his instinct while he was growing up in a small town. No, he ultimately connects by *embracing* that heritage—by creating as an adult a new identity for himself that is as Kryptonian as Clark Kent is human. Kal-El knows instinctively that it is only when he puts his gifts to use that he truly feels alive and engaged. Only by acting to his fullest potential, rather than hiding on the sidelines behind a pair of fake eyeglasses, can he genuinely partic-

---

[2] Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of* A Course in Miracles (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

ipate in the world around him. Only by being openly Kryptonian can he also be an Earthman with exuberance and excellence. When he lives as who he really is, in full authenticity to his nature and gifts, and then brings his distinctive strengths into the service of others, he takes his rightful place in the larger community, in which he now genuinely belongs and can feel fulfilled. It is no coincidence that, when the philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) wanted to understand the roots of happiness, he began to explore what it takes to live with excellence. Superman, in his own way, discovered the same connection.

Kal-El, it occurred to me as I began to formulate *Superman: Birthright*, would have only some passing familiarity with his origins, but that would be enough. There were two artifacts left to him by his birth parents, both of which accompanied him on his journey. The first was a Kryptonian "e-book" of sorts—an electronic tablet chronicling in comic-book-style illustrations a history of Krypton, and while the accompanying language in it was foreign to him, Kal-El still gleaned from its pictures that his was a race of adventurers and explorers eager to plant their banner to mark the victory of their survival. His birth race were people of accomplishment and great deeds. The second artifact he had was the banner itself: a red-and-blue flag centered around an alien glyph that, had the Kryptonians spoken an Earth language, might have borne a more-than-coincidental similarity to our letter "S." A flag always signals a sense of distinctiveness, achievement, and pride. It roots any individual who embraces it in a past, and in a people, while at the same time preparing him to live in the present and launch out into the prospect of a meaningful future with a sense of tradition, direction, and value.

Basing his own design on what he knew about the historical fashions of his Kryptonian "tribe," Kal-El used that flag and created a colorful garment that would resonate with their image, and yet still be unique to himself, a caped uniform that proudly celebrated and honored his race. Then, wearing it, he took to the skies boldly and unashamedly, using his superpowers to save lives and maintain the peace. It was during his very first public appearance that a fellow reporter named Lois Lane decided that the symbol emblazoned on this hero's chest stood for "Superman," and so the name stuck, as did the mission.

The Great Paradox

The resultant paradox brought me up short. Superman has, since his creation, been a shining example to readers everywhere of the virtue of selfless heroism—but he has accomplished this *by acting in his own self-interest.* Yes, Superman aids those in peril because he senses a higher moral obligation, and yes, he does it because his natural instincts and his Midwestern upbringing drive him towards acts of morality—but along with that genuine altruism is a healthy amount of self-awareness and a surprisingly enviable ability on his part to balance his own internal needs with the needs of others in a way that most benefits everyone. In helping others, Superman helps himself. In helping himself, he helps others. When he comes to the aid of other people, he is exercising his distinctive powers and fulfilling his authentic destiny. That, of course, benefits him. When he embraces his history and nature and launches out in the one set of activities that will most fulfill and satisfy him, he is helping others. There is no exclusive, blanket choice to be made between the needs of the individual and the needs of the larger community. There is no contradiction here between self and society. But it's a bit paradoxical in a very inspirational way. Superman properly fulfills his own nature, and his destiny, and the result is that many others are better off as well.

The man really does have a secret identity, and it's one that's been clever enough to fool me since I was a child. I don't think he'd discourage me from exposing this one, however. Superman is really the authentic individual accepting who he most deeply is, celebrating that true self, and then using all his powers for the good of others as well as himself.

Long past the point where I believed I had anything left to learn from a simple hero of my childhood, Superman stands revealed to me as a tool through which I can examine the balance of selflessness and self-interest in my own life, which is every bit as valuable a lesson as the ones he taught me years ago. He really does fight a never-ending battle.