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## The Morality of Superheroes: Gods No More

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# **The Morality of Superheroes:**

## **Gods No More**

By Jessica Testerman

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Do you think a superhero is a god or a mortal?

Modern pop culture is saturated with superheroes; in fact, it feels like there is a new superhero movie every three months or so. Thus, it is no wonder that after being soaked in this culture of superheroes that act with impunity in worlds of their author's creation that a someone should wonder at the morality of superheroes. In my work, I argue against the popular belief that anyone who acts "good" and has a superpower is a superhero.

I propose a new way of defining the superhero that removes the superhero from the pedestal of demi-god/god that they are placed on by society and returns the superhero to the realm of the human without nerfing their abilities. This essay is broken up into four sections; starting with my definition, moving into the philosophy backing me up, progressing with a practical section of the application, and ending in a conclusion. Each section will examine things very relevant to demonstrating why my definition of the superhero is important to returning the superhero to the people.

The third section of this paper, which focuses on philosophy which bolsters my argument, features a lesser known work of Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. This work will be used to show how my definition is not only informed by philosophy, but help return the superhero to the mortal realm.

## II. THE WORLD AND SUPER HEROES

As has been well established by now my purpose in writing this essay is to remove the superhero from their place as god like figures, but to do this first we must establish what a god is. A god is supernatural because it is not governed by the laws of this universe but is outside this

universe. Think, for a moment, about magic. Magic does not exist in the real world because it operates outside the laws of the universe; for example, the spell “wingardium leviosa,” from the *Harry Potter* series, famous for being able to make objects float, regardless of their weight (Columbus).

This spell could never work on Earth because it defies numerous natural laws, like gravity. Imagine you are trying to lift a tree that is twice your size and thrice as heavy as you are, it would take a lot of effort, and another person; however, with the wingardium leviosa spell this tree could be easily lifted and manipulated to do whatever the caster desires defining gravity and physics. This is outside the realm of the natural, thus it is supernatural.

God works in much the same way; for example, Noah’s ark was telepathically commissioned by God because it wanted to flood the Earth and reset its creation. Once the ark was too God’s specifications it sent two of *every animal on the planet* to fit in this vessel. Now scientifically there are some issues with this story, but we will focus on the fact that two of a species is not enough to restart a population. More than two creatures are needed for genetic diversity, which is important if you want a species that is not significantly inbred and chronically ill because of this.

So, if the story is to be believed, the god must have interfered later to allow for the animals to thrive; in addition, it must have done something to keep the animals from eating their caretakers and fellow passengers. A predator is still a predator on a boat. This story is steeped in supernatural occurrences, like telepathy, weather control, animal mind control, and some kind of gene manipulation that is never really cleared up in the story; in fact, how any of the story happened is to be taken on faith and belief in a power outside this universe a supernatural entity.

The public conception of superheroes moves them into the realm of the supernatural as well, but this is a mistake because that is not the intent of superheroes. These people are supposed to be, essentially, humans who had some kind of “accident” that gave them more power than a normal human<sup>1</sup>; however, all of the powers they are granted are somehow within the natural laws of their universe, and their powers are limited. Spiderman, for example, cannot hear a woman screaming on the other side of the state and get to her in moments because in his universe that action is not possible. His genes, however, can be genetically mutated with spider DNA because that is a technology invented and allowed in his universe.

All that superheroes do is scientifically explainable within their universe to the extent that some of these people even come from science accidents. Nothing about them is asked to be taken on faith, or is unexplainable within the universe. These characters are not supernatural, rather they are natural; however, the public does not seem to take this into consideration. They consider superheroes to be supernatural beings that have a morality outside the understanding of mere mortals, but this is a gross misunderstanding of these beings.

The authors of these characters go to great lengths to show that nothing about them is unexplained in their universe; for example, Superman’s powers are all derived from the fact that he is an alien and his physiology is effected by the different gravity and sun rays. If the creator of Superman wanted him to be a supernatural being the character’s origins would be much more mysterious, and where his powers originate from would be unclear. Compare Superman’s lineage and power to that of Harry Potter’s.

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<sup>1</sup> There are, of course exceptions to this rule Superman, Rocket the Raccoon, and other nonhuman superheroes. These exceptions are still gifted abilities beyond the norm in some way, but they still work within the framework outlined here.

It has been established already that Superman is an alien and because his physiology is different from that of a human he gets many of his abilities; in addition, the type of sunlight he is exposed to changes his people's abilities. But where does Harry Potter's magic come from? Well the simple answer is his parents, but his mother, Lily Potter, was muggle born, meaning that her parents were both non-wizards. This is the most explanation given as to how Lily got her powers, there was no radioactive spider or alien physiology to explain where magic comes from, in Rowling's universe magic simply exists as an unexplainable other thing.

This is where the difference between the supernatural and the natural become glaringly clear because much like the magic of the *Harry Potter* universe, the origins and nature of God exist outside the explainable, and in many cases, defy explanation. With superheroes, however, there is an explanation, and nothing about what they do is outside the bounds of their universe. If something does happen that is unexplainable, it is generally revealed, in due time, that it does make sense and is natural.

The public does not conceive of superheroes the way I have explained here, however. They equate superheroes with the supernatural, and while I could theorize on why this is, I will not. It is more important to understand implications that arise from this move that are not necessary. Superheroes, in the public's eye, are almost all-powerful, good, and nearly infallible, and for some reason godlike, but superheroes have origin stories, understandable origins, and come from imperfect beings.

One cannot take a thing firmly rooted in the natural and because it has more power than normal move it into the supernatural. That is like saying that because a lion is stronger than a human a lion is a supernatural being; even though, you have all the facts in front of you that explain succinctly why that is not the case.

### **a. Defining the Superhero**

I argue that a true superhero, the ones the public is truly interested in, is not a demigod but rather very human. I want to reject this public view of superheroes and replace it with a better way of conceiving of superheroes. My definition of a superhero is threefold; the superpower, the greater good, and reluctance.

#### **i. superpowers**

*“Big man in a suit of armor... Take that away and what does that make you?”* –The Avengers (Whedon)

A superpower must be something beyond the realm of normal human capacities, and it must be used to qualify. Meaning that prior to a super-person gaining their power they were not a superhero, and if they were born with it but never used it this also disqualifies them from being a superhero. The person who gains the power after being born is not a superhero prior to gaining their powers because at that time they could do nothing outside the limits of human experience they were simply regular beings.

A superpower must be used to qualify because of a similar line of reasoning. If a person with a superpower is not utilizing their ability, for any purpose, then they are remaining within the limits of human experience and cannot be considered for superhero status. This may seem strange but think of it like this if a person can catch two balls thrown at them at the same time, but never does how can they be commended for an ability that no one knows they have? A counter argument to this would be that the reader or viewer knows that the person has a superpower, so it should count.

This is not, however, a valid argument because if the person with the power has not done anything using the power in the context that they are in then how can they be a superhero? They



cannot because they haven't done anything super. I think this would be best demonstrated by an example; so, look at Clark Kent.

Clark Kent is a regular person, he is not human, but he tries very hard to be. So, hard that he blends right into the background of the overflowing crowds of humanity. Now this is what Clark Kent longs to do because he has been raised to believe that to not be studied and persecuted he must blend in as a human. Is Clark Kent a super hero? Does Clark Kent ever want to be a superhero? No Clark Kent wants to be human, and so he never uses any of his genetic differences. He has them, but no one in the world would know this unless Clark Kent decided to let himself be Superman.

This is why use is important to a superpower. Clark Kent has insane amounts of power but he does not use it. It is not until he develops, or allows for, Superman that Clark Kent becomes a superhero. But Clark Kent could have gone his whole life without using his powers, but he would never have been Superman. Clark Kent has all this power inside him but it is not until he uses it that he becomes eligible to be a superhero. If the power was never unleashed, although he has it, Clark Kent could never be eligible to be a superhero because a superpower must be used.

Now I want to be very clear here to avoid any confusion, this means using the super ability to fight for what the person believes is right. Now the reason I want clarity here is because I am not saying that only a superhero can have a superpower. Supervillains can possess a super power too, and simply having a superpower does not make a person a superhero. A person must use the power for a cause they think is right, but this aspect of the definition does not consider right and wrong, or good and evil. This part simply details that a person must have and use a superpower to be considered a superhero.

## ii. the greater good

*“It’s for the GREATER GOOD!” –Frozone Incredibles*

In both philosophy and in comic language one often hears the term "the greater good" bandied about. So much so I think this is an important part of the superhero genre and the superhero in general, but philosophy and comic greater good can be very different. These differences can be confusing unless they are made clear, after which I will relay what my definition conceives as the greater good.

To begin with, in philosophy, the greater or greatest good is most often used within the utilitarian, or consequentialist framework. Mill defines the goal of utilitarianism as, "...pleasure itself, together with exemption from pain..." (Mill 5). What this means is simple a utilitarian tries to get the most pleasure with the least amount of pain out of any action. This can be pleasure at completing a job well, or even doing good in the world. This is similar but not quite what the superhero genre thinks of, however. In the superhero genre, the concept of the greater good usually means to save the most people, preserve the current world order, and other things in this vein of thinking. This is not usually associated with pleasure.

But these are different from what I want to propose as the greater good. I propose that the greater good is what the person individually perceives it to be, and is willing to risk their life for. The first part of this definition can be challenging to work through because it sounds exactly like the ideas that I claimed earlier it was different from. However, where it differs is in that the greater good that the superhero is fighting for is not socially, but rather personally defined. There is not necessarily a moral choice in what the hero does or does not define as good.

This is not the only part of the greater good though, there is also the willingness to endanger oneself for the cause. For a person to be a hero and act for the greater good they must

realize that not every action is going to be simple, and a truly heroic act requires possible self-harm. I define self-endangerment as the willingness to be injured or die for the superheroes definition of the greater good. I have included this in the definition of a superhero, especially the greater good, because superheroes are never doing the less dangerous parts of rescuing people, like building homes or running soup kitchens.

Superheroes are out fighting villains, supervillains, and aliens from hurting that which they have chosen to protect. Rarely is this a simple verbal battle of ideals or words. Often to always is this a battle of physical strength and will power, and always someone ends up getting badly wounded, usually the pro/antagonist of the tale. When defining a superhero one needs to keep in mind this very important aspect of the superhero culture, which is how they protect and defend the greater good by risking their lives.

### **iii. reluctance**

*“Be a hero. Everyone thinks it's a full-time job. Wake up a hero, brush your teeth a hero, go to work a hero. Not true. Over a lifetime, there are only four or five moments that really matter. Moments when you're offered a choice.” –Deadpool (Miller)*

I have chosen to save reluctance for last because it is the most complicated and controversial part of my definition; in addition, it is the part of my definition that separates it from the rest of the usual definition of superheroes. Reluctance is very important to separate superheroes from the gods and demigod's society has become accustomed to. This part of the definition is what gives the superhero back their humanity and makes them relatable as characters. I define reluctance as the superhero's lack of willingness to use their superpower until an inciting incident.

Reluctance is the key of the superhero definition because when a superhero has no reluctance they are not making their own choices. They are not evaluating what they are doing, why they are doing it, or even who they are doing it for. When a person, regardless of whether they are a superhero, has reluctance they stop and consider whether an action is truly what they want and what they believe is right. But when that reluctance is taken away, when a person acts on a decision from a week, a month, a year or more ago that person is not rational, and they are not someone anyone admires. For example, let us look at a regular person, Joe.

Joe decided when he was five that anything yellow was nasty and bad. Joe is now 35 and he never reevaluated that decision or changed it. Joe now actively avoids yellow, and is extremely uncomfortable around blonde people. He once punched a person, who was wearing too much yellow, in a bar. He has turned down job opportunities, college offers and scholarships, all because he doesn't like yellow.

Joe has not reevaluated his dislike of a color in twenty years, and Joe has based many life impacting actions around this disdain. He has even been violent because of this. This is clearly irrational because a color, with no outside actors, cannot hurt a person. The concept of the color yellow cannot physically injure or harm a person in anyway, and it would be laughable for a person to think that it possibly could negatively affect their life, outside of the power they give it. Joe is just a regular person, however, think if Joe was more than that.

For this rather than a fake person, examine instead Captain America, and his motives for acting. For example, Captain America signed up for the army because he has a view of the world which he believes is right. He believes the world should work a certain way and regardless of how it actually works he tries to make the world work how he perceives it does. Captain America decided at his conception as a superhero that he would help the world become as he thinks it

should be and he never changed his opinion. He never questioned his ideas or wondered if they may be misguided he simply followed his convictions.

An astute reader will notice that I have never mentioned what those convictions are, or what Captain America fights for. I have intentionally avoided this because to see what is missing with Captain America one cannot focus on the fact that he is fighting for what is commonly considered to be good. However, regardless that he may be fighting for what society considers good, there is still a problem with why he is doing it. He is still fighting his fight without thinking about it, and without worrying about whether it is truly good or bad. He is like Joe in this.

Joe and the Captain made a decision about their lives early on, and have stuck to that decision through whatever challenges or rewards they faced. They have fought for their decision, they have lived their choice daily, and nothing they have encountered changed the decision. But Joe and Captain America behaving without reluctance means virtually nothing because Joe's actions affect relatively few and Captain America's actions are for the socially approved good. So why does the lack of reluctance matter?

Let's look at Dr. Doom from *Fantastic Four*, this is a character that has not reluctance at all and no desire to change. He is given visions of the future where humanity does not survive unless he is the supreme ruler. He decides that he will become the supreme ruler so that humanity can survive. He undertakes this role without ever considering that there are other options for the future, or worrying about whether his actions are right. He acts simply to make what he believes to be the best version of reality happen. To be clear this means that he does not care who or how many he hurts provided it accomplishes his goal.

Now why are Dr. Doom, Captain America, and Joe all similar? Because each of them operates in an unchallenged world view that they will not correct regardless of how outdated, or ridiculous it may be. This way of achieving your goals is not only unsafe, but it can lead to so very dangerous consequences because they are in no way worried about their choices. Nor are they ever reluctant to take an action which will lead to the realization of these goals. These are the dangerous and easily manipulated characters because all they need is to be told that an action will accomplish a goal and they will do it.

A superhero needs reluctance because it allows them humanity, indecision, and choice. Without reluctance, a superhero is locked into the same actions repeatedly, because there is nothing causing them to think about what they are doing. A superhero is constantly put in a state of danger, but not thinking of that, not considering how that will affect anyone in their lives is dangerous for a superhero. That is why they need reluctance. There is something else that reluctance needs to address, and that is the fact the it is not a single event.

A superhero cannot have one single moment of reluctance and be deemed a superhero forever. Consider this does a human being question only one decision in their life, or do they hesitate before making many choices? Reluctance cannot be encompassed by a single moment because this creates inauthentic characters. Even if there was a superhero that knew all the consequences of his actions from now to infinity he would still have reluctance because of the heavy burden being the person that causes all those things to happen and lives to be lost would be.

## **b. The Definition**

A few quick notes now that each of the parts of the definition have been revealed. The first is that reluctance and the greater good are neither static or independent. They are dependent

on each other, and constantly changing. This is because the reluctance, a mentioned cannot be static as that would lead to the hero becoming fixed in a certain way of being. The greater good also cannot be static because if it were then superheroes would never be able to help anyone outside their originally set boundaries Superman could never save the world because he started in New York. Therefore, keeping the greater good static does not make sense.

The two also cannot be independent because a superhero has nothing to fight for if there is no greater good for them that needs defending, and if there is nothing them to fight for then they have no need for reluctance. While reluctance can be used by most regular humans, it is not quite the same as a superhero's reluctance. This is partly because most humans do not have the same concerns that superheroes have.

Now to wrap up this section the definition of the superhero shall be revealed in full. A superhero is a person, regardless of origin, who in some way gains a superpower, and then, overcomes their reluctance to work for the greater good. Above each part of this definition was outlined and discussed in full, but the work for this is not over yet. In the next part of this discussion there will be an exploration of how Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* can be used in conjunction with, and relates to the work on superheroes done here.

### **III. SIMONE DE BEAUVIOR AND SUPERHEROES**

Now that we have seen how a superhero is defined it is time to discuss how that definition relates to philosophy because, while this specific topic was not what she had in mind, Simone de Beauvoir has said some rather pertinent things about ethics and how humans work. This is relevant because as we saw in the last section we are trying to bring superheroes out of the realm of demi-gods to the more relatable world of humans. Beauvoir's *The Ethics of*

*Ambiguity* is especially good for that because it explicitly deals with human morality, how it is formed, and how it applies to those with different backgrounds.

In this section of the essay we will look at how Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* relates to superheroes. First, an explanation of what *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is trying to communicate about ethics, people and morality. Then we will move into how de Beauvoir's ideas about ethics works with the definition of superhero that has already been explained. Finally, this section will explain Beauvoir's ideas and the superhero definition in relation to some examples of real superheroes.

**a. An Explanation of *The Ethics of Ambiguity***

In the following pages, I could relay to you, the reader, Beauvoir's work in her terms and rather dense language, and if I did that it would be simple possibly quick, and, unfortunately, dense and confusing. Thus, I do not plan to do that because when reading any philosophy, I always find it simpler to in effect "translate" it to something I can understand; so, to keep things simple I plan to offer up my translation of Beauvoir's words. The following will be in my own words, and if I need to use any of Beauvoir's, I will stop and explain what I understand them to mean, and if there is any shift in that meaning I will relay that as well. Now after this brief explanation of the task I propose to undertake, let us begin.

**i. "ambiguity and freedom"**

*The Ethics of Ambiguity* is broken up into three parts in the first section, titled "Ambiguity and Freedom," Beauvoir relays the reasons for her work, and what the current existentialist framework is lacking. "Ambiguity and Freedom" begins with the argument that existentialism allows for an ethics, though critics say it does not. Then moves to how



existentialism allows for evil; and ends with how her framework for an ambiguous ethics will not only work coherently but also is necessary for existentialism.

In this first section the bulk of what Beauvoir does is point out where other existentialist philosophies fail, or do not go far enough, and then explains briefly her project. The main points that Beauvoir makes here are that there can be no absolutes in existentialism because that is self-defeating to the philosophy; she introduces her concept of freedom<sup>2</sup> and how it depends on others (more on this later). The last point she makes is somewhat complicated because she almost combines two different points, so to explain I will break them down.

The first half of this point that Beauvoir is trying to get across is that man is free because he can make choices, which is why ethics exist. Specifically, she says, “Therefore, not only do we assert that the existentialist doctrine permits the elaboration of an ethics, but it even appears to us as the only philosophy in which an ethics has its place.” This is a huge claim that Beauvoir is making! She is saying that existentialism is the only philosophy that can have an ethics because it allows for elaboration.

So first, Beauvoir claims that no other philosophy allows for an ethics because all other philosophies are very rigid, whereas existentialism is very ambiguous. This means that where other philosophies set out strict rules for what happens when X occurs, meaning if X happens always Y; existentialism instead says, when X occurs maybe Y or maybe Z or H or etc. Her reason for this is ambiguity, which is central to her ethics. For Beauvoir, ambiguity means that nothing is set in stone and what may seem obvious is not always so; for example, most philosophies say killing a person is wrong, but Beauvoir’s philosophy looks at not only the act but why it was performed.

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<sup>2</sup> As a quick note freedom is taught, so one person’s understanding of freedom depends on what another person taught them; additionally, a person can only have so much freedom in relation to others; i.e. respect others.

So, examine again the situation presented above, killing a person, but now let us add some details. The scene is a doctor and a terminally ill patient, who has been fighting their disease for years they are exhausted, mentally and physically, any technology or treatment to help this person is a distant hope. The patient has begged the doctor to end their life, and the doctor has the means to humanely end this patient, who has been living in agony for years, life.

Beauvoir's ethics considers the reasons behind the killing, examining the reason the doctor decides to take this life, the possible benefit this action has for the patient, and after all that still does not determine if the action is good or bad, right or wrong. This is the final point that Beauvoir is trying to make in her first section, the room for elaboration.

Beauvoir claims that what sets her ethics apart from others, and what disqualifies other ethics, is the room for elaboration. As explained above Beauvoir feels that elaboration is like ambiguity, but it differs in that it means specifically allowing for more explanation of certain circumstances around an action, is necessary to determine the value of an action because while killing a person can be wrong, it can also be a humane kindness, or ridding the world of a serial murderer.

What she is claiming here is an early version of particularism, which is an anti-theory in ethics. Particularism is a theory of ethics that argues that there are no moral principles, there are only moral judgements, which are on a case by case basis. This differs from other theories of ethics because other ethics argue that there are moral principles that can be made and applied to every case. The idea behind particularism is that many moral principles are too general to be used in every case, but if you get too specific then they are not useful at all. Thus, what Beauvoir and particularism are arguing for is an ethics that has no moral principles, only moral judgments that are made on a case by case basis.

*ii. Personal Freedom and Others*

In the second section of her work Beauvoir gives a description of how her system of ethics operates in the world. Her first assertion is that a child starts out in an objective world. Let's pause for a moment and explore this term, objective. This term is often used in Beauvoir, and if she changes how she uses it I'll let you know. She uses objective to mean concrete, factual; allow me to explain using her idea of the child in an objective world, and then extrapolate a better definition from there.

She believes when a child is born they initially grow up thinking that their parents and all adults know everything, that these people even dictate how the world works. Beauvoir claims that children see their parents as infallible beings that cannot be challenged; that adults are objective. Having seen how Beauvoir is using the term we can see that she is using a rather traditional definition of the term objective, she means fact, and hard reason. However, this is how she thinks children view the world, and childhood does not last forever; let us move on to the adolescent.

The adolescent is different from the child because they begin to realize the adults' subjectivity. Now here is another term that needs explained, subjectivity. Beauvoir uses subjectivity to mean influenced by emotion, and human; i.e. prone to mistakes, influenced by others, not perfect. In the world of the child Beauvoir believes that they view the adults as almost god-like. Think like a little kid for a moment, your parent makes food appear, they know how to drive, adults know when you are acting badly, and they can punish you for it. Imagine being a child again and think of all the things your parents did that you maybe did not understand or thought your parents were better at than they were.

Beauvoir claims that to be an adolescent is to realize the faults, or subjectivity of the world and having to make decisions for alone. What this means is that at some point a child begins to realize that the world has more to it than they thought, and they encounter a situation where they need to make a moral decision. For example, a child on the verge of adolescence was told that fighting is wrong, but they come upon a younger child being bullied a little by a bigger kid. They have a choice, to walk away, watch, or do something about the scene in front of them. This moment of choice where the child must decide something for themselves that is not an easy set in stone answer is when Beauvoir thinks that a child becomes an adolescent.

The adolescent realizes to some extent that the world has no set authority who knows the answer to everything, and because of this they must make their own moral decisions. Beauvoir says that in this moment, whatever choice is made becomes the moral character of the adolescent. Our child has moved into the world of subjectivity and is now completely an adolescent, but this teen is still finding their footing in the moral world; however, every choice they make creates the moral adult they are going to be. There is, however, a catch.

Though the adolescent is forming the adult nothing is set in stone, Beauvoir says, “Moral choice is free, and therefore unforeseeable. The child does not contain the man he will become. Yet, it is always on the basis of what he has been that a man decides what he wants to be” (Beauvoir 43). Now this quote can be a little confusing, but all it really means is that because there is free choice a person can change their moral being whenever; essentially, you can’t kill Hitler as a baby because the baby is not the Hitler who commits genocide. Beauvoir believes that a person who is set in their moral ways can change, but it is very difficult because they have created an environment and a circle of people that know their behavior and will try to influence it to stay that way.

All that is dependent on Beauvoir's theory of freedom, however, which is not what needs to be discussed next because Beauvoir also has seven various moral agents who have varying degrees of freedom. This needs to be addressed first because examining how free a person is helps one to understand what freedom means for Beauvoir.

For our discussion of these various moral agents I will explain the type of agent, and then, using pop culture references, explain how they work. The first type of moral agent that Beauvoir represents are slaves and women of centuries past, but she uses them to show what having no freedom looks like. The next type of moral agent only has slightly more freedom than this one, but we will get to that.

### *Henchmen*

Beauvoir categorizes this type as Sub-Man, but I think they would be best described as henchmen because this type of moral agent does not think on their own, or make any decisions for themselves. This means that they completely rely on someone else to direct their moves and make their choices. This type of people always make me think of Stormtrooper because they only do what they are told they don't ask questions and their purpose is to be the foot soldiers. Similarly, Beauvoir describes these people as those that do the dirty work, she also says that they have very little freedom because they deny the kind of world they live in.

Essentially, when they were presented with the moral choice of the adolescent instead of trying to create their own solution, they retreated from the subjectivity of the world and choose to try and live in an objective world that rejected the subjective entirely. Think of it like this rather than facing the reality of the world they choose to impose a fantasy on the world and live in it instead. This type of moral agent cannot make moral decisions for themselves, but rely on another "authority" to tell them what is right.

*Fanatics*

This next agent can oversee the sub-men, but they often have very little freedom as well, Beauvoir calls them “the Serious man.” These people are not inherently bad, as we will see much later, but they tend towards fanaticism. The serious man takes the world too seriously, and because of this tends to get a skewed view of how it works. Often, they try to impose this view on the world regardless of opposition; in addition, their actions are often in service of a greater authority whom, they believe, understands the way the world is, or should be.

I imagine the perfect example of this to be Dolores Umbridge from the *Harry Potter* series because Umbridge is a fanatic for the Ministry and it’s rules she wants to help everyone embrace the truth of the ministry even if people get hurt along the way. For example, one of the many things she is known for is making Harry write the line, “I must not tell lies,” over and over with a special pen that etches the words as a scar into his hand.

Now the reason for this is that Harry saw Voldemort return, which Ministry of Magic has denied having happened. Dolores, a true follower, or believer, of the word of the Ministry, and having been appointed the new Dark Arts professor, decides, when Harry tries to assert that Voldemort is back in her class, that he must learn not to tell lies, or in this case non-Ministry approved stories. You may be thinking, “We all know why Umbridge did what she did, and is the way she is; she’s just evil,” but I do have a reason for explaining the situation.

By looking at Umbridge’s motives in this situation, reinforcement of Ministry truths, one can see that regardless of her being evil, or not, she is a fanatic and she takes her job very seriously. Through looking at why Umbridge does what she does we can see the application of Beauvoir’s idea of “the serious man”. However, I want to make something especially clear here, and I think that Beauvoir says it best, “The serious is not defined by the ends it pursued. The

frivolous lady of fashion can have this mentality of the serious as well as an engineer” (Beauvoir 50). This means that anyone can be a “serious man” what is important for joining this category is that when faced with the subjectivity of the world the person either returned to the ideals of their parents, or sought out a new objective truth. The serious man also does not question things, but where the sub-man could not consider questioning the world because that would break the illusion, the serious man simply does not.

### *The Demonical Man*

The next type of person is kind of weird, in that while other's get pages devoted to them, he only gets a short paragraph. Beauvoir calls this type “the demonical man” essentially this type of person is much like the serious man. This person instead of picking a new ideology to follow returns to that of his parents, but only to be perpetually dissatisfied with that state of being. He follows the ideals of his childhood so he can rage against them.

He is not angst filled teen, though this is the first comparison that comes to mind, because he knows what his world is filled with and is comfortable with how he sees it. This man just does not like the world the way he sees it but he will not do anything to change it. He is trapped in a cage of his own making that he keeps beating at instead of unlocking.

### *The Tyrant*

The nihilist, the next type, as Beauvoir see them and yes this is slightly different than normally thought of, is a person who, when confronted with the world's subjectivity, rejected their existence. This person is like the demonical man in that they rebel against the way the world work but they do so in a way that can result in either regular person or a tyrant. The regular person after becoming a nihilist retreats to the serious and stays there for the rest of their life, but the tyrant decides to impose upon the world.

The nihilist is a person rejects their own existence and that of others, essentially they “othered” themselves and the rest of the world. The term I am using “othered,” means creating a category of difference that is not there; for example, racism results from othering people. When a person looks at another human of a different skin color and decides that they are completely different this is othering, and the colored person has been othered.

The nihilist and the serious man are very similar, they do, however, have some key differences. The main difference is that the nihilist rejects all existence even his own, which results in him being trapped in his own self-perpetuating sphere of contradiction. Beauvoir says, “But this will to negation is forever belying itself, for it manifests itself as a presence as the very moment it displays itself. It, therefore, implies a constant tension, inversely symmetrical to the existential and more painful tension, for if it is true that man is not, it is also true that he exists...” (Beauvoir 58). This means that the problem of the nihilist is that in denying their existence, they also confirm it.

Beauvoir offers three ways to resolve this either suicide, a retreat to the serious, or tyranny. Suicide is an obvious solution to this issue because if you do not exist then you can’t die. The retreat to the serious happens because the two are very similar, and I think that this retreat would be to the demonical man specifically because the demonical is a sub-category of the serious. Tyranny may not make sense though, so think of it like this. If you do not exist, then neither does anyone else, so you are not killing anyone, but rather eliminating inconsistencies.

Living as a nihilist is intensely painful and uncomfortable because one can never rest easily, the existence of others always confirms their own, and yet they deny that existence too; in order, to make the world more livable then the nihilist must eliminate other people that make the nihilist question their existence, this will eventually include themselves. Thus, to accomplish



their goals of annihilation, the nihilist must obtain power, and to do this becoming a tyrant is the most effective way to quickly get one's agenda across.

Think of Lord Voldemort, he believed that only pure blooded wizards should populate the world, and that he needed to be more powerful; in order, to achieve this he killed any resisters, and some followers, he also murdered muggles, any wizard without a completely pure blood line. But this course of action was self-defeating because Voldemort himself is not a pure blood, but rather was the result of a muggle and a pure blood having a baby. So by trying to kill others who were not pure blood Voldemort was trying to kill himself and eliminate the contradiction he felt within him. Voldemort became a tyrant for the power to eliminate the contradiction that he felt constantly churning within.

### *The Hedonist*

The next type is the Adventurer, basically a hedonist. Beauvoir thinks that this person, accepted the subjectivity of the world, but wants to return to the sublime joy they felt as a child. The adventure is only interested in the material benefit he can get, and only does things to make himself feel better, closer to the way he felt as a child. This person does not care about anyone else and will do whatever they need to in order to achieve their goals. This person is extremely free but they are bound by their need to return to a state that can never be returned to.

For this person, I imagine the character Jayne, from *Firefly*. Jayne is a very simple man he likes women, money and killing, he does not have many interests outside of those; additionally, he will do anything for money, generally. The only thing he has not done for money is betray his captain, but this does not exclude him from this category because the adventurer does not have to step on others to get what they want, and they can achieve their desires however they choose.

### *The Good One?*

The last type of person that Beauvoir outlines is the passionate man. This type of man encompasses the very best kind of person one can be, but this does not prevent a person from going too far and changing into a tyrant. Essentially the best type of person, of Beauvoir, is one that is constantly unsettled with life, and worried about the consequences of their actions. But she recognizes that most people cannot live like this and concedes that “the good one” usually ends up as a serious man or a tyrant. Unfortunately, this is really all the information she gives on this.

### *iii. The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity*

This last section while very interesting, does not apply to the focus of this paper, and thus I have decided to leave it out. Essentially, it demonstrates the way that Beauvoir’s theories apply in the real world, and while this is fascinating and possibly interesting for the way superheroes work. I think since this paper focuses on the theoretical and that superheroes do not operate in the real world it would be best to leave this section out.

### *iv. Freedom*

Beauvoir has a weird and complicated idea of freedom, but I will try to make her as clear as possible. There are two types of freedom in the philosophical world, one is a metaphysical kind of freedom that mainly relates to the soul and the consciousness, this is not Beauvoir’s freedom. Her freedom is more bodily and related to the mind, almost political; for example, she uses the end of slavery in America. She talks about how the slaves, once free, did not want their freedom; from which she claims that, freedom is not something everyone inherently knows, rather it is something that a person must be taught.

Think of it like this, if you have never used something, like the T.V. or the internet, how do you know that you want it? You would not, until you are taught what they are and how to use them. Essentially what Beauvoir claims is that freedom is not inherent it is taught. She later goes on to talk about political freedom, but as that is not hugely relevant here, it shall be left out.

One other thing about Beauvoir's freedom should be mentioned briefly before we move on, and that is your freedom is dependent upon others. This means two things, the freedom you were taught, and the freedom you are given. The freedom you were taught is simple to explain as it is simply what you were taught that freedom was as you were growing up, this shapes your conception of freedom as an adult; for example, you would not know you are free if there was no one present to ever give you the idea or concept of freedom.

The second part is about your freedom in relation to others, this means what freedoms your society gives you; think of a dictatorship, in that setting the freest person is the dictator because he limits the freedoms that the others around him have. Or consider a law against murder, that law restricts your freedom to simply kill whomever you want. You could not have freedom independent of others, and your freedom is dependent on others.

#### **IV. ARE THEY A SUPERHERO?**

In this section, we shall examine three super-people, Captain America, the Hulk, and Deadpool to see the practical applications of the definition intermingled with the philosophy of Beauvoir.

##### ***i. Captain America***

*"I just don't like bullies."* –*Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston)

Captain America is the ideal superhero, right? I mean the guy fought, and killed Nazis in the name of freedom and democracy. Ever since then his character has evolved and done even

more awesome stuff that resulted in even more amazing victories in the name of democracy and freedom. Regardless of all that he has done and all the good he has fought for; the Captain is not a superhero. Now this may be shocking to some readers, and some may even be offended, but according to my definition of the superhero Captain America is missing a key part of what it means to be a superhero.

The Captain clearly has superpowers, no one can deny that. I mean he is a genetically mutated superhuman, the only of his kind, who can literally run down a car moving at top speeds (Johnston). In addition, he does use his superpowers so he's complying with the first part of the definition. As for the greater good, Captain America does have an idea of the greater good and he does strive to protect it regardless of the harm it could do to himself, but when it comes to reluctance, the Captain fails.

Reluctance causes Captain America to fail the test because he never falters in his actions or ideals. He has a set way that the world should work and he tries to force the world to act that way regardless of what he must do. Now this should sound familiar because we have seen this type of person before with Beauvoir. Recall the fanatic and the tyrant from the previous section. The Captain needs reluctance because it causes people to stop and think before they act and it allows people to consider the possibility that they might be wrong; however, part of the Captain's modus operandi is that he is never wrong.

Recall Umbridge from the fanatic section, we can draw some disturbing parallels between the way the Captain and Umbridge act; for example, recall that Umbridge felt that any action she took was justified as long as it was in the name of the Ministry. Well the Captain feels the same way about freedom and democracy; for example, in *The Avengers* movie the Captain

wants to rid the city/world of aliens, so he leads the Avengers in a charge against these creatures, and in the process, destroys most of New York, which was in no way evacuated (Whedon).

This was something he had been prepared to do since the beginning of the film; in fact, unless there are civilians visibly present, the Captain does not seem to care about the carnage he causes provided the job gets done. Furthermore, in the beginning of *Civil War* the Captain leads his team in blowing up an office building, in the middle of a crowded city, just to kill a single terrorist. This action is something he never regrets during the movie (Russo and Russo).

This is much like how Umbridge decided, when she became headmaster of Hogwarts, that she must make the place entirely ministry approved and force her will upon the school. She did everything in her power to force people to do what she wanted when she wanted, and she did not care about the hurt she caused. You may be thinking that these two characters are in no way similar because the Captain fights for good and Umbridge is evil, but that is not the point I am making. While the two have very different agendas behind their actions how and why they perform them is, sadly, the same.

Both are fanatics under Beauvoir's philosophy meaning they do not question, and they retreated into an objective truth when faced with the world's subjectivity. We have already looked at Umbridge in this matter, so examine the Captain. His truth of the world is that it should be a place where everyone is free and able to act on their own and he will subjugate anyone who does not feel the same way in the name of his cause. Now while he may have a good cause this is simply coincidence, or luck that he feels this way he could easily have been like Umbridge because he does not question his actions. The Captain is a fanatic to the ideals of democracy

Now we must consider that he has superpowers as well, so the Captain could easily slide into tyranny, becoming the tyrant, or nihilist. He could do this easily because he is a superhero

which means he has the power to go out and rid the world of the “bad” guys, which is what he is doing at the beginning of *Civil War*, and if his idea of the bad guys gets thrown off course in any way. Well that would be a dark day in the superhero world.

My point here is that we cannot consider Captain America a superhero because he has no reluctance in his actions, and due to this lack, he is easily prone to doing “good” on accident. A superhero should not be accidentally doing the right thing, that is like praising Voldemort for accidentally not killing Harry Potter. Until Captain America can recognize that his actions may be flawed, and that his way of seeing the world is not perfect he cannot be a superhero, only a super-person.

**ii.      *The Hulk***

*“I’m always angry!” –The Avengers (Russo)*

The Hulk is a superhero because he is reluctant, fights for his greater good, and has a superpower. The Hulk, a.k.a. Bruce Banner, is filled with reluctance and worries about the consequences of using his power to such an extent that he almost never acts; however, when he chooses to act it is generally for a cause he believes in. This worry about acting and almost inhibits Bruce Banner from acting. While he is not the perfect superhero, he is more a superhero than Captain America could ever hope to be at present because Bruce Banner recognizes the subjectivity of the world and is painfully aware of others subjectivity within the world.

All that really means is that Bruce Banner is aware that other people are people and he is not quick to extinguish their lives; whereas, the Captain tries to accomplish the goal no matter what, Dr. Banner tries to decide if the cost of what he is going to do is worth what will be sacrificed. Dr. Banner would most likely fall into that last category defined by Beauvoir because

he follows all the requirements that Beauvoir outlines without, as of yet, falling to the difficulties of the type.

*iii. Deadpool*

*“You look like an avocado had sex with an older, more disgusting avocado. ... Not gently. Like it was hate-fucking. There was something wrong with the relationship... and that was the only catharsis that they could find without violence.” –Deadpool (Miller)*

While that may be what Deadpool's face looks like in his actions, he never shies away from violence, which is part of what makes him an issue. Deadpool is a problem because while he operates in the same universe as the superheroes we are discussing and he has a “superhero” movie, he adamantly claims that he is not a superhero; however, we can see that he occasionally does superhero type things. For example, while it is true that Deadpool went on a rampage to find Francis to fix Deadpool's deformities caused by the gaining of his powers, but in doing this Deadpool also eliminated a group of people that were kidnapping, torturing, and enslaving people. So, we must ask ourselves, does this make him a superhero?

I argue that he is not a superhero but he highlights some issues with the definition and some key points of the definition that are very important. Deadpool is not a superhero because he has no reluctance, and no greater good. When he fights, Deadpool is fighting for himself and his wants or needs. Recall our example from above, yes Deadpool does eliminate a group of slavers on his quest for Francis, but this was not his main goal; in fact, he probably rarely thought of it. In following his quest Deadpool was simply following his desires for material differences, much like Beauvoir's adventurer<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> For our purposes reference the Hedonist.

The adventurer goes around trying to return to a state of happiness and childhood even though they cannot. So, the adventurer realizes the subjectivity of the world/people and just does not care, which is exactly how Deadpool behaves. He acknowledges that other people are thinking and feeling human beings, as seen with his interactions with Dopender his cab driver, but when they get in the way of what he wants he is unafraid to move them aside, often violently.

Where he can raise problems with my definition is that he does sometimes act as a superhero would even exhibiting some reluctance, as when he tries to rescue and keep safe Vanessa; however, being a superhero is not something one constantly is. One does not have to be a superhero all the time, only when they act in that role do they need to qualify as a superhero; in addition, even though Deadpool does occasionally act for the greater good he is never doing that action for any greater good than himself.

When Deadpool is rescuing Vanessa, he is not doing so because of Vanessa or the villains that kidnapped her, but because he wants to, and because it makes him happy to have her in his life. Ultimately, there is no greater plan or goal for Deadpool than his own happiness, and because he cannot look beyond himself he is not a superhero.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, we have seen how my definition of superheroes works together with philosophy to create a new definition of superhero that removes them from the realm of gods returning these people as mortals. By using my definition of superhero one can see the superhero as a truly relatable character that can make mistakes, have faults, and doubt, which only a supernatural being could live without.

By looking, mainly, at the different types of people that Beauvoir presents one can see how they relate to different types of characters in the superhero world; and thus, see how her



work bolsters my argument. With a demonstration of how this definition applies to some of the more common and popular superheroes of the day, we can see that with this definition there will be upsets in the traditional superhero world and possibly some changes as well.

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