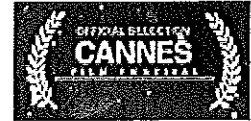The New York Times

Batman should kill the Joker.

How many of us would agree with that? Quite a few, we'd wager. Even Heath Ledger's Joker in "The Dark Knight" marvels at Batman's refusal to kill him. After all, the Joker is a murderous psychopath, and Batman could save countless innocent lives by ending his miserable existence once and for all.

Of course, there are plenty of masked loonies ready to take the Joker's place, but none of them has ever shown the same twisted devotion to chaos and tragedy as the Clown Prince of Crime.

But if we say that Batman should kill the Joker, doesn't that imply that we should torture terrorism suspects if there's a chance of getting information that could save innocent lives? Of course, terrorism is all too present in the real world, and Batman only exists in the comics and movies. So maybe we're just too detached from the Dark Knight and the problems of Gotham City, so we can say "go ahead, kill him." But, if anything, that detachment implies that there's more at stake in the real world - so why aren't we tougher on actual terrorists than we are on the make-believe Joker?

Pop culture, such as the Batman comics and movies, provides an opportunity to think philosophically about issues and topics that parallel the real world. For instance, thinking about why Batman has never killed the Joker may help us reflect on our issues with terrorism and torture, specifically their ethics.

Three major schools of ethics provide some perspective on Batman's quandary.

Utilitarianism, based on the work of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, would probably endorse killing the Joker, based on comparing the many lives saved against the one life lost.

Deontology, stemming largely from the writings of Immanuel Kant, would focus on the act of murder itself, rather than the consequences. Kant's position would be more ambiguous than the utilitarian's: While it may be preferable for the Joker to be dead, it may not be morally right for any person (such as Batman) to kill him. If the Joker is to be punished, it should be through official procedures, not vigilante justice. More generally, while the Joker is evil, he is still a human being, and is thus deserving of at least a minimal level of respect and humanity.

Finally, virtue ethics, dating back to the ancient Greeks (such as Aristotle), would highlight the character of the person who kills the Joker. Does Batman want to be the kind of person that takes his enemies' lives? If he killed the Joker, would he be able to stop there, or would every two-bit thug get the same treatment?

Taking these three ethical perspectives together, we see that while there are good reasons to kill the Joker, in terms of innocent lives saved, there are also good reasons not to kill him, based on what killing him would mean about Batman and his motives, mission and character.

The same arguments apply to the debate over torture: While there are good reasons to do it, based on the positive consequences that may come from it, there are also good reasons not to, especially those based on America's national character. Many Americans who oppose torture explain their position by saying, "It's not who we are," or "We don't want to turn into them." Batman often says the same thing when asked why he hasn't killed the Joker: "I don't want to become that which I hate."

Applying philosophy to Batman, South Park, or other pop culture phenomena may seem silly or frivolous, but philosophers have used fanciful examples and thought experiments for centuries. The point is making philosophy accessible, and helping us think through difficult topics by casting them in a different light.

Regardless of your position, torture is an uncomfortable and emotional topic. If translating the core issue to another venue, such as Batman and the Joker, helps us focus on the key aspects of the problem, that can only help refine our thinking. And Batman would definitely approve of that.

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