PART ONE

THE POLITICS OF POWER: WHO WATCHES THE WATCHMEN?

THE SUPERMAN EXISTS, AND HE'S AMERICAN: MORALITY IN THE FACE OF ABSOLUTE POWER

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The Son of a Watchmaker

We've all heard the Spider-Man saying "With great power comes great responsibility." But what kind of responsibility comes with *absolute* power? In the world of *Watchmen*, a freak accident turns physicist Jonathan Osterman into Dr. Manhattan, a kind of "superman" who is able to perceive events atemporally, live indefinitely, manipulate matter at its most basic level, and travel unaided to distant worlds. In short, there's very little Dr. Manhattan wants to do that he can't do. And this puts him in a rather unique position. Dr. Manhattan doesn't just have great power, he has a whole different magnitude of power, a kind of hyper-power that makes him, in the estimation of the esteemed Professor Milton Glass, more or less a god on Earth.[1] God's American, too—and that's not a

trivial fact. Dr. Manhattan's status as a U.S. "asset" gives the America of *Watchmen* an even greater technological and military advantage than it has in actuality.

But the existence of such a superpowerful and superintelligent being who lives among mere mortals—at least for a time—invites us to consider several questions that fall within the purview of moral philosophy. Is Dr. Manhattan any longer capable of reasoning about right and wrong in the way that he did as Jonathan Osterman? What force does morality really have over someone as powerful as him? And how ought the United States itself behave, given the supreme international dominance it has in virtue of Dr. Manhattan's existence?

Rubble and the Human Race

Let's begin by looking more closely at Dr. Manhattan's thoughts and actions. A little way into *Watchmen*, he leaves Earth to reside on Mars. His departure is spurred by public accusations that his presence causes those close to him to develop cancer. (This turns out to be false; the rumor was spread by Ozymandias as part of his plan to eliminate, one way or the other, the heroes who would stand in the way of his grand scheme.) But Dr. Manhattan had withdrawn emotionally from the world long before his physical departure, as his partner Laurie Juspeczyk, the second Silk Spectre, would readily acknowledge. As a result, Dr. Manhattan no longer finds much value in the human race; in particular, he finds it difficult to care about the pressing problem immediately confronting it, that of possibly having to endure a nuclear war, the threat of which is, in part, due to his decision to take up residency on Mars.

What exactly is going on with Dr. Manhattan? We've just made three important claims. The first is that he's having difficulty finding human beings morally valuable. The second is that he's somehow emotionally absent. And the third is that this absence is the cause of his, let us say, moral ambivalence. Can we defend these assertions?

The first is the least controversial; in fact, it's supported outright when Laurie presses her case for Dr. Manhattan to return to Earth: "I mean, ordinary people . . . All the things that happen to them . . . Doesn't that move you more than a bunch of rubble?" Dr. Manhattan replies, "No. I read atoms, Laurie. I see the ancient spectacle that birthed the rubble. Beside this, human life is brief and mundane."[2] This makes it pretty clear that Dr. Manhattan doesn't see human beings as possessing the kind of moral value we think they do. But why doesn't he?

My suggestion is that Dr. Manhattan's attitude toward humans is best explained by his lack of some kind of crucial emotional capacity. This idea can be resisted, however. For one thing, we might think that his moral attitude toward humans is simply the result of his supreme intelligence and power, without having anything specific to do with his emotions. That doesn't seem plausible, though. Concerning his intelligence, it's true that Dr. Manhattan is able to experience the natural world in a fundamentally different way from how human beings do—he can "read atoms," after all—but the world he's in contact with is not a mysterious one that ordinary physicists aren't aware of. Stephen Hawking is well versed in the scope of the cosmos and our tiny place in it, yet he doesn't consider humans to be morally on a par with rubble. And concerning Dr. Manhattan's power, we humans have power over young children comparable to what he has over us. And yet we don't think this makes children morally insignificant. So the explanation of Dr. Manhattan's moral ambivalence can't rest solely on the nature of his intelligence or abilities.

A different way to resist our explanatory claim is to point out, rightly, that Dr. Manhattan does experience some emotions; he gets angry during the television interview when he's falsely accused of being carcinogenic, and he also seems to feel jealousy over Laurie's budding relationship with Dan Dreiberg, the second Nite Owl. But using the work of philosopher Jesse Prinz, especially as presented in his book *The*

Emotional Construction of Morals, we can distinguish moral from nonmoral emotions.[3] According to Prinz, moral emotions, like indignation, are "built up" out of nonmoral ones, like anger. It's important to note, however, that moral emotions aren't identical to nonmoral ones—they're unique.

So we can revise our original idea by claiming that while Dr. Manhattan might possess nonmoral emotions, he lacks moral ones. And this absence isn't merely a kind of withdrawal. It's not that Dr. Manhattan is simply depressed. Rather, it seems plausible that the atomic accident that led to his disintegration and subsequent reintegration, while granting him powers almost beyond our imagination, nevertheless robbed him of the capacity to experience moral emotions.

Emotions: They're Not Just for Breakfast Anymore

But so what? Even if we grant that Dr. Manhattan lacks the capacity to experience these kinds of emotions, how does that explain his inability to value persons properly? In other words, what role do such emotions play in moral reasoning? The answer, according to many philosophers, starting with David Hume (1711–1776), is: quite a lot![4] Unfortunately, agreement ends there. *Emotivists*, who see themselves as following in the tradition of Hume, think that moral reasoning (if it even is reasoning) simply amounts to the possession and expression of emotions. So when we say, "What Ozymandias does at the end of *Watchmen* is wrong," all we're doing is expressing a negative moral emotion—such as indignation—toward his action.

Others think, more plausibly, that moral reasoning has more substance than that; in particular, they think that when we say, "What Ozymandias does at the end of *Watchmen* is wrong," we're expressing the *thought* that what he does is wrong, which isn't just the expression of an emotion. But emotions play an important role in forming such thoughts. Again

turning to an idea motivated by Prinz, we can say that we need moral emotions to possess the *concepts* of moral rightness, wrongness, goodness, and badness.[5] So if Dr. Manhattan lacks moral emotions, he no longer possesses the things needed to properly form beliefs about what's morally right and wrong. And this explains his inability to judge humans as having the value we all believe them as having.

It's worth asking, though, why we should accept the idea that emotions play this central role in moral thinking. Consider Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who claimed that the morally right actions are those that conform to the categorical imperative—they're the actions that treat people as ends in themselves and not merely as means.[6] Although it would take some work, we can determine whether, say, Rorschach's act of dispensing with Big Figure conforms to the categorical imperative (want to take a guess whether it does?). We can also thereby judge his action as being morally right or wrong without reference to any moral emotions whatsoever. So while we may not *in fact* lack the relevant emotions needed, because of the way we're hard-wired, it's nevertheless *possible* for us to lack these emotions and yet make moral judgments.

We can challenge this possibility, however. To borrow a gruesome but effective example from Gilbert Harman, imagine that we stumbled upon some people pouring gasoline over a cat, preparing to set it on fire.[7] No doubt, we would judge this action to be wrong. But suppose also that one of us, call her Alice, simply doesn't *feel* anything at all upon witnessing the event. No moral outrage, no moral disgust, nothing. Let's assume she still says the same thing we do: "That's wrong!" Even so, it seems reasonable to conclude that Alice is merely parroting our words. She hasn't *really* formed and expressed the thought that burning the cat alive is wrong—how could she have, if she feels *nothing*.

Similarly, if Alice appears to judge that the right thing to do is to try to stop these villains but feels absolutely no compulsion

to do so, that, too, would suggest that she really doesn't believe that it's the right thing to do. And this is because there's good reason to suppose that moral beliefs are intrinsically motivating; when we form a belief that something is right or wrong, doing so *by itself* motivates us to action. If emotions are part of that process, then the motivational aspect of forming moral beliefs is easy to appreciate, since emotions often do motivate us to action.

Admittedly, these thoughts do not amount to a knock-down argument against the possibility that persons without emotions can nevertheless hold robust thoughts about what is morally right and wrong and good and bad. But it should make us suspicious that this *apparent* possibility is in fact a genuine one. We'll continue, then, with the analysis we've been suggesting about what's wrong with Dr. Manhattan. He lacks the emotions necessary to form appropriate moral judgments, and this explains his ambivalence toward the value of persons. Sadly, this is not a very uplifting prognosis of his condition, for it suggests that even though Dr. Manhattan has superhuman power and intelligence, he can't do something important that Joe and Jane Ordinary can: he can't reason properly about what's right and wrong. This is a particularly troubling fact, given just how much power Dr. Manhattan has at his disposal; indeed, given his ambitions at the end of *Watchmen* to create human life somewhere in the universe, it's a downright frightening fact. The idea of a morally ambivalent god is not comforting.

Sure, It's the Right Thing to Do—Now Tell Me Why I Should Do It

Whether Dr. Manhattan is himself capable of adequately thinking about right and wrong, it's nevertheless reasonable to think that he's subject to the very same moral mandates, permissions, and restrictions that the rest of us are subject to. Put succinctly, Dr. Manhattan has an obligation to do the right

thing and to avoid doing the wrong thing. So if, returning to Kant for a moment, it's true that we have an obligation to act in ways that treat people as ends and not merely as means, then Dr. Manhattan has that obligation, too. And if we therefore wouldn't have been permitted to kill Rorschach at the end of *Watchmen* just because we disagreed with his decision to expose Ozymandias, then Dr. Manhattan wasn't permitted to do so, either. His supreme intelligence and power—his god-like standing—do not exempt him from being held to the same moral standards that the rest of us are held to, whatever those might end up being.

This is a compelling line of thought, summed up nicely by the slogan that no one is above the moral law. But it invites a further question. Why, exactly, is no one above it? Even by philosophical standards, this is a deep question. It is asking, in essence, what the *grounds* of morality are—what gives moral principles their force over us? And it's particularly important to consider this question as it concerns Dr. Manhattan, since we ourselves have no way of enforcing moral obligations on him should he choose not to follow them. How does one punish or reward someone who is able to create worlds and simply think people into nonexistence?

We can therefore imagine Dr. Manhattan asking, "Given my intelligence and power, why should I do what morality demands?" One answer that some might find appealing is to say that morality gets its force from God. This *divine command theory* of ethics, as it is often called, claims both that God "bestows" actions with moral properties such as rightness and wrongness and that what compels us to act morally—what gives us an obligation to do the right thing and to avoid doing the wrong thing—is the fact that God wills it.

This response grounds the demands of morality on the existence of God, but even for believers, it isn't a very good way to go. Dr. Manhattan seems pretty skeptical about the existence of God, saying that "existence is random, has no pattern"

and referring to the universe as "a clock without a craftsman." So the divine command theorist would have to convince Dr. Manhattan that God exists before providing him with a reason to take the moral law seriously. And given the notorious difficulties with "proving" the existence of God, this approach isn't strategically smart. Moreover, it's unclear exactly why God's willing that certain actions are right or wrong should hold any sway over what Dr. Manhattan does. He might rightfully ask what it is about God that gives God's will this importance in his life. Perhaps it's the threat of God's wrath. But that threat loses much of its force when it's directed against a being as powerful as Dr. Manhattan is. Maybe instead it's the *nature* of God that gives God's will its binding force. But the all-knowing, all-powerful nature of God is something Dr. Manhattan more or less shares, so he might understandably wonder why his own will isn't as effective as God's in this matter.

Kant offers a different approach. For him, all rational creatures are subject to acting in accordance with the categorical imperative, and that's because the demand of morality is a rational one; it is, according to Kant, *irrational* not to act morally. The irrationality doesn't so much have to do with acting against one's self-interest, but in willing or affirming contradictions. What does that mean? The details are unfortunately quite thorny. Happily, we needn't concern ourselves with them, but unhappily, that's because it doesn't seem likely that Kant's approach will work in the case of Dr. Manhattan. And that's because, however the specific story goes about why acting morally amounts to acting rationally, it assumes that morality only binds *rational* agents. And it's not clear that Dr. Manhattan is rational!

Here's why. No one's questioning the intellect of Dr. Manhattan. But for him to count as fully rational in the sense that will give morality rational sway over him, he needs to possess the conceptual apparatus necessary for forming moral thoughts. This is why, in Kant's view, nonhuman animals

aren't subject to the moral law; while they can certainly reason about certain things, they aren't fully rational, because they lack certain conceptual capabilities. Now Kant thinks that one doesn't need moral emotions to be able to form moral thoughts, but we disagree and have previously provided reasons supporting our position. If that's right, however, then Dr. Manhattan shares the same lot that nonhuman animals do when it comes to the moral law. He isn't subject to it, because he isn't fully rational.

So maybe Dr. Manhattan is above (or below?) the moral law. But that would seem to be due to a technicality. It's one thing to think that bears aren't subject to moral evaluation when they attack people who unwittingly trespass on their turf; it's quite another to think that someone as intelligent and as sophisticated as Dr. Manhattan is likewise unbound by moral demands. Perhaps, then, the best answer to his question as to why he ought to do what the moral law requires is a resounding "Because!" Obviously, that sounds rather unsatisfying (just ask a child). But everyone agrees that analysis stops somewhere. Maybe it's just a brute fact, admitting of no further explanation, that beings like Dr. Manhattan ought to do the right thing and avoid doing the wrong thing, period. This means that we were on the wrong track in assuming that there needed to be a substantive answer to Dr. Manhattan's question. Even philosophers should sometimes let certain questions lie.

From the Personal to the Political

Let's proceed, then, by assuming that Dr. Manhattan has the same moral responsibilities that the rest of us do. Our last question is what responsibilities the United States has in light of the fact that Dr. Manhattan has signed on as an official military asset. This is a question of political morality, and it concerns the moral mandates, permissions, and restrictions that states have toward one another. Specifically, we want to

know whether the United States, given the huge strategic advantage it has with Dr. Manhattan in its employ, is morally permitted to adopt a "double-standard" when it comes to its international behavior, insisting that other nations behave in ways that it doesn't.

It might seem that we've already answered this question. If Dr. Manhattan himself isn't above the moral law in virtue of his power and intellect, it seems only reasonable to conclude that the United States isn't above the moral law in virtue of the power it inherits from his service. That certainly should be our default position, but it's important to point out that political morality is different from personal morality. Nations aren't persons, and so it's not necessarily inconsistent to claim that while Dr. Manhattan has to play by the same moral rules that every other person has to play by, the United States as a country does not have to play by the same moral rules that other countries have to. Just because we've taken a stand on a question involving personal morality doesn't mean we are thereby committed to taking the same stand on a question involving political morality.

It's also important to keep in mind that we're not primarily concerned with what it's permissible for Dr. Manhattan himself to do, acting alone, when it comes to international affairs. Since he's employed by the U.S. government, he has subjected his will to its will when acting in a military capacity. So our question, again, is what it's permissible for the United States to do, given the hyper-power it's become due to Dr. Manhattan's service. We are not concerned with whether Dr. Manhattan ought to involve himself personally in international affairs, beyond the legitimate mandate he receives by acting as an agent of the United States.

Having said that, why in the world should we think that the United States is morally permitted to do things others nations aren't, like, say, engaging in preventive wars and advancing protectionist economic policies? David Luban, although an

opponent of the double-standard view of American policy, has examined some of the arguments that have been mustered in its defense.[8] He first points out that if the idea is going to be plausible at all, it best not be justified along the lines of, "The United States is permitted to do it because it can get away with it." If that's the whole story, that's no story at all. But there are more compelling reasons to think that a hyper-power is permitted to act on the international stage in ways other countries aren't.

One line of reasoning Luban looks at claims that the best way of promoting the emergence of more democracies, of advancing more economic stability, and of securing more meaningful freedoms—all very good things, no doubt—is for the United States to act in its own self-interest, involving itself in the affairs of other nations in a way that is impermissible for other nations to do. Another line of reasoning explored by Luban claims that the United States is granted permissions other nations don't have because it endures costs that other nations don't. By acting as the "sheriff," it makes itself more of a target and puts U.S. soldiers and resources on the line. The idea is that the more it is willing to risk losing, the more costs it is willing to take on, the more permissions it gains.

Neither of these arguments are very compelling, though. Luban rightly points out that the first one rests heavily on a dubious assumption, namely, that every time the United States acts in a self-beneficial way on the world stage, it also somehow promotes good things beyond its borders. Sometimes this is undoubtedly true, but surely not always. And even if it were always true, the reasoning involved faces a more fundamental flaw when the role of Dr. Manhattan's service to his country is taken into account. Given his more or less absolute power, and given that it would be in America's best interest to deal with a world where all countries are peaceful, freedom-loving democracies, it seems permissible according to this view for the United States to launch a world war to attain

this goal. With Dr. Manhattan's powers, there's little doubt that the United States would win, probably at very little cost to itself. And it would be acting both in its interests and in the interests of the other nations and people of the world; when the dust settled, many persons would be living under better conditions than they now live under. Still, it is deeply counter-intuitive to think that these facts morally warrant the United States in waging such a war, with Dr. Manhattan leading the charge. That's because we think that nations have a certain right to sovereignty—a right to self-determination—that they don't forfeit unless they start committing heinous acts within themselves or start waging war with other nations.

The second line of reasoning is equally problematic in light of Dr. Manhattan's service to his country. Given his powers, the United States really doesn't take on any additional risks by acting as the world's sheriff. There's little that can be thrown at the United States that Dr. Manhattan can't stop or undo. So if the risks need to be genuine to warrant lopsided permissions, the United States doesn't satisfy this condition. In the absence of further arguments in favor of U.S. "exceptionalism," then, it seems that even though Dr. Manhattan makes it a hyper-power with absolutely no serious rivals on the international stage, the United States must nevertheless behave as all other nations do.

The Endless Ethical Enigmas of Dr. Manhattan (There Oughta Be a Book . . .)

We've looked at a variety of moral issues surrounding the existence of Dr. Manhattan, a unique and powerful entity in the *Watchmen* universe. And there are plenty more questions to consider. Is it morally appropriate for him to leave Earth after the devastating attack by Ozymandias? Can any plausible defense be given of his choice to kill Rorschach? Would it

be permissible for him to create human life elsewhere in the cosmos? These are all worthwhile things to ponder, but it is perhaps worth noting that Dr. Manhattan already knows how we'll answer them, when we'll do so, where we'll be, and what he thinks about them. And that is either a very comforting or a very terrifying thought.

NOTES

1. *Watchmen*, chap. IV, supplemental material, excerpt from *Dr. Manhattan: Super-Powers and the Superpowers*, by Professor Milton Glass, p. ii.

2. Ibid., chap. IX, pp. 16–17.

3. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007.

4. See Hume's *A Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. David and Mary Norton (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000).

5. Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 1.

6. See Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

7. See Harman's *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), chap. 1.

8. "Preventive War," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (July 2004): 207–248.