

**PART ONE**

**WILL AND EMOTION: THE  
PHILOSOPHICAL SPECTRUM**

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# **THE BLACKEST NIGHT FOR ARISTOTLE'S ACCOUNT OF EMOTIONS**

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Since 2005's *Green Lantern: Rebirth*, writer Geoff Johns has told a series of stories leading up to *Blackest Night*, introducing to the DC Universe a series of six previously unknown color corps in addition to the classic green: red (rage), orange (avarice), yellow (fear), blue (hope), indigo (compassion), and violet (love).<sup>1</sup> The members of each corps see the emotion they represent as the most important one and believe that acting out of that emotion is the only appropriate way to behave. The Green Lanterns, on the other hand, represent the triumph of willpower or reason over emotion and seek to overcome and stifle these emotional states.<sup>2</sup>

The conflict between the various lantern corps, while providing an interesting series of stories, also sets the stage for thinking about one of the most long-standing questions in ethics: What role should emotion play in moral reasoning?

## Color-Coded Morality

With the exception of the Indigo Lanterns (who don't speak a language that can be translated by a Green Lantern power ring, much less your average comics reader), the representatives of the new color corps all make the case that acting out their sections of the emotional spectrum is the only way to achieve justice. Let's consider the ways these Lanterns make their cases for a morality driven by a single emotion.

The first of the new color corps to make itself known to the DC Universe was the Sinestro Corps. Led by the renegade Green Lantern after whom it takes its name, this corps embodies the yellow light of fear. Since the days when he was a Green Lantern, Sinestro has argued that people do the right thing only when they fear the consequences if they don't. It was this principle that led Sinestro to force the residents of his home world, Korugar, to live in fear of his wrath.<sup>3</sup> While this might seem extreme, Sinestro has shown us time and time again that fear is a strong motivator. For instance, when he decided that the Green Lanterns needed to change the Laws of Oa to allow Lanterns to kill, he was able to make the Guardians so afraid that they did as he wished.<sup>4</sup> When discussing Sinestro's motivations, some may say that while he wants others to act out of fear, he holds himself exempt from this standard. But a closer look shows that Sinestro's turn to fear came from his own fears of a prophecy relayed to him by Atrocitus, which said that Korugar would fall into a state of chaos from riots and a violent coup if nothing was done to prevent it.<sup>5</sup>

Like the Sinestro Corps, the Violet Lantern Corps was started by a long-time Green Lantern villain, Star Sapphire. Actually, Star Sapphire is not a person, but an alien gem that possesses the person desired most by Hal Jordan; more often than not, that person is Carol Ferris (his sometimes employer and love interest).<sup>6</sup> Let's set aside the fact that violet light is powering a person whose name refers to a blue gem—and

whose costume is pink—and move on to a discussion of the Violet Lanterns’ emotional focus. Violet Lanterns, just like John Lennon, will tell you that love is all you need. The leaders of this corps, the Zamarons (a group of female former Guardians), appear to believe that the only appropriate way to reason is to act on one’s feelings of love. For instance, the Guardian Scar says that “to believe that love will save the universe is naïve and irresponsible,” to which Queen Aga’po of the Zamarons responds, “That is your misguided, and dare I say it, irrational opinion.”<sup>7</sup> Scar’s claim is deemed irrational because she used something other than love to arrive at it. The goal of the corps is clear: to “wield the violet light energy of love” and “convert all to their way of light.”<sup>8</sup> They are so committed to this conversion that they go as far as to kidnap members of the Sinestro Corps and imprison them until they come to see (or are brainwashed to see, according to Green Lantern Arisia) the way of the Star Sapphire Corps.<sup>9</sup> When reasoning means acting out of love, rather than intellect or some other emotion, there doesn’t seem to be much room for compromise.

The rage of the Red Lanterns is grounded in a belief that great injustices often go unpunished. The founder of the Red Lantern Corps, Atrocitus, experienced a life filled with such injustices. The Manhunters, the Guardians’ initial attempt at an intergalactic police force, concluded that the only way to prevent chaos from consuming the universe was to destroy all life—this led to the murder of all but a handful of people in Atrocitus’s space sector.<sup>10</sup> Atrocitus and the other survivors of the massacre attempted to enact justice (or vengeance) on the Guardians for what they had done, and the Guardians responded by imprisoning them. From these experiences, Atrocitus now sees emotionless reasoning—the decision process of the Guardians—as responsible for the destruction of his home world.

Rage is all that Atrocitus feels after centuries of imprisonment, and it alone compels him to act. By his reasoning, emotions

other than rage are bad, as they are likely to lead to passivity in the face of injustice by causing us to be concerned with the consequences of our actions. When Atrocitus is reborn as a Red Lantern on Ysmault he blames the Guardians for their sins, which “stretch back eons.”<sup>11</sup> All he has left is rage, “the red light [which] is violent action with no consideration for consequence. It is uncontrollable.”<sup>12</sup> Atrocitus’s rejection of other emotions can be seen in his interactions with members of the other corps; for instance, he rejects the power of hope, saying to Blue Lantern Saint Walker, “You wield coalesced hope. Empty prayers. Disembodied faith.”<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the most surprising emotion that one might advocate as the proper impetus for action is avarice. Larfleeze, the only Orange Lantern (except for Lex Luthor’s brief stint in *Blackest Night* #6–8, 2010), explains his commitment to greed, talking to himself in *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #39 (March 2009). Speaking about the Controllers, the creators of the Darkstars (an earlier alternative to the Green Lantern Corps), he says, “They want to protect the universe their own way. You can’t protect anything that big! You can only protect what you can hold.” Larfleeze’s point seems to be that ownership motivates people to protect things, a common point made in discussions of private property.

Another strange case is that of hope. The Blue Lantern Corps was founded by Ganthet and Sayd in the hopes of preventing the *Blackest Night*.<sup>14</sup> Given the involvement of these well-spoken former Guardians, you might wrongly expect that they make the reasoned case for hope’s importance. Unfortunately, all we are told is that hope is the most powerful emotion, and that those who wear the blue ring are the saints of the universe.<sup>15</sup> These aren’t really arguments, but assertions. These Lanterns don’t have an argument for hope being the most significant emotion—instead, what they have is *hope* that it is. Similarly, these Lanterns never give reasons why they think they will succeed in their goals; instead, they speak of hope that they will.

Despite not being able to give reasons for the supremacy of hope, the Blue Lanterns still try to dominate the other corps. When Hal Jordan asks Ganthet if he created the Blue Corps to replace “us,” meaning the Green Lanterns, Ganthet responds, “No. To aid you.”<sup>16</sup> This suggests that the Blue Corps see a place for the two corps to coexist, but then they immediately try to talk Hal into leaving the Green Lanterns for their corps. Additionally, within the first few pages of our meeting the first Blue Lantern, Saint Walker, he uses his ring to soothe the anger he senses in another Green Lantern from Earth, John Stewart.<sup>17</sup> In the end, it seems that while the Blue Lanterns aren’t openly hostile toward the Green Lanterns, hope still tries to dominate the green light.

### **Finding the Perfect Mean: A Job for Golden Lanterns?**

While the representatives of the various color corps are able to make convincing cases for the moral significance of their emotions (or at least hope for that significance), philosophers stop short of defending the relevance of a single emotion over all others. Beginning with Plato (circa 428–348 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE), philosophers have argued that our emotions interact with reason when we engage in moral deliberation.

While Aristotle saw emotions as significant, he understood them very differently than do the members of the color corps, and this understanding is integral to his moral philosophy. For Aristotle, morality is all about becoming a particular kind of person—someone with a well-rounded character and the practical wisdom to recognize the right thing to do in any situation. Aristotle recognized that emotions have a strong influence on our actions, and, realizing their power, he thought carefully about the best way to harness them into service of the good. Emotions are not individual character traits, but rather

exist on a series of spectrums. For any emotion, there are two extremes—an excess of the emotion at one end and a deficit of it at the other. In between is just the right amount of that emotion, which Aristotle called a virtue, and the goal of those striving to be good people is to harness this just-right amount of emotion.<sup>18</sup>

Aristotle thought that the key to achieving the proper amount of each emotion is reason, which gives moral agents the guidance needed to temper their emotions and to use them in service of the good. Without reason, agents will act in service of their own appetites, controlled by their passions rather than by a desire to do good.<sup>19</sup> Reason is the cool, unemotional component of our psyches that can carefully assess each situation and determine how much of each emotion is called for. Consider this analogy from Plato: Just as a general is the person in charge, directing his soldiers who do the legwork, so reason should direct the emotions, which provide the motivating force for the action. Just as with the general and the soldiers, both reason and emotion are essential, but the person, like the army, will function well only if reason is in charge.<sup>20</sup>

Let's think about this in terms of an example: the virtue of courage, which is the perfect midpoint between the extreme emotions (or vices) of foolhardiness and cowardice. It is good to act decisively in the face of fear, while running away from battles you are capable of fighting is cowardly and charging headlong into situations you can't handle is foolhardy. Reason tells us when we can handle a frightening situation and when the wise action is to back away. In other words, acting from either extreme is intemperate. Once you are able to use reason to consistently hit the sweet spot—the “Golden Mean”—you possess the virtue of that mean, in this case, courage.<sup>21</sup>

For Aristotelians, the first mistake made by all of the color corps is that they are all acting in excess, something even the



characters recognize about one another. Take the following exchange between Atrocitus and Sinestro in *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #36 (January 2009):

Atrocitus: You believe fear to be the most powerful force in the universe? Fear is inaction. Fear is hiding away. Fear is cowering and begging. Rage is action. Rage is spilling blood.

Sinestro: Rage is uncontrollable.

Both observations bear out when we look at the Green Lantern comics. The beings Sinestro and his corps instill with fear are unable to act; even Green Lanterns can't use their power rings when they are afraid. Meanwhile, Atrocitus's rage makes him unfocused. He is so busy fuming and fighting that he misses several opportunities to do what he has set out to do—kill Sinestro and the Guardians. Similarly, the Violet Lantern Fatality removes her former enemy, Green Lantern John Stewart, from battle in an attempt to show him love and forgiveness; however, this renders Stewart unable to save his fellow Green Lanterns, whom he cares for deeply.<sup>22</sup> Fatality's single-minded devotion to love prevents her from recognizing that other elements and emotions are at play. Fatality's focus on love to the exclusion of all other considerations enrages Stewart and causes him to reject her, because it resulted in his failure to help people he cared about.

### **The Rainbow of Emotions and the Prism of the Will**

The second mistake made by the members of the color corps, if we follow Aristotle's account, is that by acting out of a single emotion, they fail to see the interrelation of emotions and the *unity of the virtues*. According to Aristotle, if you have one of the virtues, then you have them all, and his explanation for this involves reason and judgment. In order to always hit the

Golden Mean between emotional extremes, you must possess prudence, or right judgment. Without prudence, while you might still occasionally hit the Mean, you do not fully possess the virtue. With right judgment, you will always reason your way to hitting the mark, and if you have reason enough to do this for one of the virtues, then you have reason enough to do it all of the time (although this will take some practice).<sup>23</sup>

Aristotle is obviously correct that emotions are interrelated, something the color corps fail to acknowledge. On an intuitive level, we can see the interrelation between emotions in the lives of several of the corps' leaders. In the case of Atrocitus, love for his family and his species, along with hope that the Guardians would be brought to justice, led to the development of his rage. In the case of Sinestro, love for his home world and avarice about being the best Green Lantern led to his use of fear to keep his home world free of crime.

Looking at the color corps stories as allegories, we can also see plenty of evidence to suggest that reason alone is not sufficient for moral decision-making. The most significant evidence for this is that the primary hero of the stories, Hal Jordan, invariably puts on one of the rings of the new corps in order to defeat the enemy he is facing. When fighting the Sinestro Corps, Hal puts on several yellow rings. When fighting Larfleeze, it is the combined use of the blue and green rings that enables him to defeat the Orange Lantern.<sup>24</sup> While these moments are exciting for fanboys, we can also see that it is only when the emotions are channeled through the will or reason of the green ring that Hal can win the day. Similarly, throughout the *Blackest Night* miniseries, we see that the new Black Lanterns (the reanimated corpses of fallen heroes, villains, and loved ones) can be injured only when they are attacked by a Green Lantern's light combined with any other color of the emotional spectrum. Again, it seems that reason and emotion are both needed, although ultimately emotion is subservient to reason, as Aristotle recommended.

Aristotle's account of the role of emotions in ethics is not just an indictment of the single-minded emotional approaches of the new corps, but also of the Green Lantern Corps' exclusive focus on will over emotion. Going back to the example of courage, you will recall that acting with no fear is considered vicious. As a person accustomed to thinking of Green Lanterns as heroes, this should shock you. After all, Hal Jordan, the quintessential Lantern, is prone to saying that he's not afraid of anything. But Aristotle is clear: If an individual literally has no fear, he can't be a good person. Consider also that the new third law in the Book of Oa forbids physical relations and love between Green Lanterns, implying that Green Lanterns are often required to ignore these feelings when making decisions.<sup>25</sup> For Aristotle, will alone isn't enough, since it is simply a prism through which emotion needs to be filtered in order to get to right action.

### **John Stuart Mill's Green Approach to Emotion and Reason**

Aristotle gives us good reason to reject the single-minded emotional approaches of the color corps. Does agreeing with Aristotle on that point mean that we must adopt his specific approach to morality, especially his claim about the unity of the virtues? Since this would require us to see the Green Lantern Corps in a negative light as well, it is a good thing that the answer is no.

Another option, more sympathetic to the Green Lantern Corps, can be found in the moral theory known as *utilitarianism*. Rather than focusing on a range of emotions from the outset, utilitarianism begins with the belief that the right action is the one that maximizes happiness and minimizes suffering for everyone impacted by it. Morality, in this view, is focused on producing good consequences and avoiding bad ones. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), one of the founders of utilitarianism,

advises us to achieve this goal by approaching moral decisions from the perspective of a “benevolent, disinterested spectator,” concerned equally for everyone’s well-being, with no special consideration given to one’s own preferences or to the interest of loved ones.<sup>26</sup> It was in an attempt to develop such disinterested spectators to police the universe that the Guardians created the robotic police force, the Manhunters.

Many criticize utilitarianism as being too far removed from human emotion, requiring the evaluator to be a detached observer. If this criticism sounds familiar, it is because it is often leveled against the Guardians as well (in fact, Atrocitus did so earlier in this chapter). So common is this criticism that Mill takes the time to specifically address and respond to it. He argues that the important thing is not the motivation for action, but merely the result, which makes sense if all you are concerned about is consequences. Many people will do the right action for emotional reasons, and that is not a problem in this theory, since the important thing is that good consequences be maximized. Mill thinks the most reliable way to get that result is through dispassionate reason, but he recognizes that there is more than one way to achieve the goal and advocates using whatever method necessary to get there.<sup>27</sup> It was the failure of the Guardians to account for emotion in the programming of the Manhunters that led the robot police force to attempt to wipe all life from the Vega system; it’s also what led them to create the Green Lantern Corps. They realized that the best candidates to police a universe full of emotional individuals are beings who understand emotion but strive to overcome it, as Green Lanterns do.

Where the Guardians fail is not in being detached observers, as Green Lanterns like Guy Gardner often argue; rather, they fail in their assumption that they are, in fact, wholly detached. The Guardians, like all other species in the universe, are emotional beings, even if they wish they were not. Often, they make big decisions out of fear. As Sinestro points out, the

decision to approve lethal force against Sinestro Corps members was made out of fear.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, when they agreed to let Larfleeze keep his orange ring so long as he stayed in the Vega system, it was because they were afraid of having the power at large in the universe.<sup>29</sup> On the lighter side of the emotional spectrum, Ganthet and Sayd made it clear that Guardians are capable of emotion when, out of hope, they left to form the Blue Lantern Corps.<sup>30</sup>

Mill acknowledges that even the best utilitarian will have other motivations besides utility: “Ninety-nine hundredths of all our actions are done from other motives, and rightly so.”<sup>31</sup> However, he cautions that good agents will be aware of the impact of these other motivations and guard against them when engaging in moral decision-making, where they can be detrimental. The Guardians are great at manipulating the emotions of others for positive consequences (for example, by exploiting Larfleeze’s desire to kill a Guardian by promising him one of their own if he will help them defeat Nekron).<sup>32</sup> Still, they would have done well to also apply this principle to themselves. Given that they are clearly emotional beings, they should recognize their own emotions and take them into account when computing their moral calculus. If the Guardians were more self-aware, they could have recognized that Scar was in the midst of a breakdown after her battle with the Anti-Monitor, and could have acted to prevent her actions that caused the Blackest Night.<sup>33</sup>

### **Triumph of the Will**

So, where does this leave us? While at first it seemed that the new color corps posed interesting alternatives to the Green Lantern Corps, ultimately they all fall flat. The criticism of these single-emotional approaches from Aristotle, and the characters themselves, show that ultimately something other than just one emotion is needed in our moral decision-making process.

While Aristotle's theory offers one way to approach morality with an understanding of emotion and reason, it criticizes the Green Lantern Corps just as much as the other corps. The alternative approach to moral reasoning offered by utilitarianism offers a way to understand the role of emotion in moral reasoning that is more in line with our intuition that the Green Lantern Corps and the Guardians are getting it right. Not only does this theory allow us to see the Green Lanterns as heroes, but the debate regarding the appropriate amount of emotion in moral reasoning lets us account for the moral growth of the Guardians from their creation of the Manhunters to their realization, only recently, of the emotion within themselves. Now that the Guardians have recognized themselves as emotional beings, they will be able to move forward in a clearer way in their mission to protect the universe.<sup>34</sup>

## NOTES

1. White and black corps have also been introduced, but since they represent life and death, rather than emotions, they will not be discussed in this chapter.

2. The way the green light is discussed in the comics can be a little confusing. When the emotional spectrum is discussed, the green light is included, suggesting that it should be understood as an emotion. At other times it is discussed as the ability to overcome fear (when a green ring approaches a new candidate for the corps, for instance). There is a long tradition in philosophy of referring to man's ability to reason as his will, and it is in this tradition that we can best understand what the Green Lantern Corps represents. My discussion of the Corps and the Guardians in the last section of this chapter offers some textual (read: comic book) support for this position.

3. This first came to light in *Green Lantern*, vol. 2, #7 (July–August 1961), reprinted in black and white in *Showcase Presents Green Lantern Volume One* (2005) and in color in *The Green Lantern Chronicles Volume Two* (2009). For a full account of Sinestro's actions on Korugar and the fallout from them, see *Green Lantern: Emerald Dawn II* (1991).

4. Sinestro explains this to Hal Jordan in *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #26 (February 2008), reprinted in *Green Lantern: Rage of the Red Lanterns* (2009).

5. *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #35 (November 2008), reprinted in *Green Lantern: Secret Origin* (2008). For more discussion of Sinestro's motivations and how they might be justified, see Dryden's chapter "The Greatest Green Lantern" in this volume.

6. The character of Star Sapphire actually goes all the way back to the Golden Age, making her/its first appearance in *All-Flash Comics* #32 (October–November 1947);

her first Silver Age appearance (as Carol Ferris) was in *Green Lantern*, vol. 2, #16 (October 1962), reprinted in *Showcase Presents Green Lantern Volume One*.

7. *Green Lantern Corps*, vol. 2, #30 (January 2009), reprinted in *Green Lantern Corps: Sins of the Star Sapphire* (2009).

8. *Blackest Night* #0 (May 2009).

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #33 (July 2008), reprinted in *Green Lantern: Secret Origin*.

11. *Final Crisis: Rage of the Red Lanterns* (October 2008), reprinted in *Green Lantern: Rage of the Red Lanterns*.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #38 (February 2009), reprinted in *Green Lantern: Rage of the Red Lanterns*.

14. *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #25 (January 2008), reprinted in *Green Lantern: The Sinestro Corps War, Volume 2* (2008).

15. *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #26 (February 2008), reprinted in *Green Lantern: Rage of the Red Lanterns*.

16. *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #36 (January 2009), reprinted in *Green Lantern: Rage of the Red Lanterns*.

17. *Ibid.*

18. A minor point, but one worth mentioning, is that Aristotle had a much more expansive list of emotions than discussed in the current Green Lantern storylines. While the Green Lantern list has just six (plus will), Aristotle not only takes there to be three emotions for every domain (cowardice, foolhardiness, and courage in the domain of fear, for example), he also has a more robust understanding of the domains of emotion, including things like a desire to please others and reaction to the success of others.

19. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2:3–4.

20. Plato lays out this theory in detail in Book IV of the *Republic*.

21. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2:10–12.

22. *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #42 (June 2009), reprinted in *Green Lantern: Agent Orange* (2009).

23. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6: 12–13.

24. *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #42.

25. *Green Lantern Corps*, vol. 2, #31 (December 2008), reprinted in *Green Lantern Corps: Sins of the Star Sapphire*. For more on that law and the relationships between emotion and reason, the chapter by Donovan and Richardson in this volume.

26. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1863/1906), 25.

27. *Ibid.*, 26–28.

28. *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #26.

29. *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #41 (May 2009), reprinted in *Green Lantern: Agent Orange*.

30. *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #25.

31. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 26.
32. *Green Lantern*, vol. 4, #48 (November 2009), reprinted in *Blackest Night: Green Lantern* (2010).
33. *Green Lantern Corps*, vol. 2, #28 (April 2010), reprinted in *Green Lantern Corps: Sins of the Star Sapphire*.
34. I would like to thank Ruth Tallman for her helpful comments on this chapter.