

## FINDING A PATH OUT OF THE DARKNESS: FAITH AND FEAR IN *BATMAN BEGINS*

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As its title suggests, the 2005 film *Batman Begins* recounts the origin of the comic book superhero Batman. On the literal level, the film narrates how, after the murder of his billionaire parents, Bruce Wayne is consumed with rage and the desire for revenge; how he travels to Asia and learns to be a ninja assassin from the mysterious League of Shadows; and how he returns to his childhood home in Gotham City to fight organized crime and government corruption dressed as a costumed vigilante. On the philosophical level, however, *Batman Begins* is a meditation on a universal theme: the nature of justice and its relationship to vengeance and vigilantism.<sup>1</sup> It is also an exploration of the way this universal theme relates to the particular historical situation in which the film was made: America's "war on terror". But what is perhaps most interesting about the film's philosophical ruminations is its seeming inability to find a coherent response to terrorism. At the heart of *Batman Begins* there is a deep ambivalence about the use of violence to achieve justice. Indeed there is a deep ambivalence about the nature of justice itself. Perhaps this uncertainty is a reflection of a similar ambivalence in the soul of American liberalism. And perhaps this is a place where only the radical call of the Gospel of Jesus Christ can bring coherence and clarity.

There is a conflict in the film between conservative ideas of individual responsibility and progressive ideas of social justice. In some ways, this can be seen as the conflict between Batman and his alter ego Bruce Wayne. Bruce Wayne is the lover of humanity created by the legacy of his philanthropist father Thomas, and Batman is the monster created by the terrorist Ra's al Ghul, leader of the League of Shadows. This war between Thomas Wayne and Ra's al

Ghul is not only the war in the heart of Bruce/Batman; it is the war in the heart of post-9/11 America. As it stands today American society is an uneasy amalgamation of progressive and conservative ideas, but the composite is unstable and unsustainable – like the moral message of *Batman Begins*. After exploring the ambivalence towards vigilante justice in the attitude of *Batman Begins*, I will present what I take to be Christianity's alternative attitude towards the themes of the film. After defending my view from an important objection, I will then explore how a Christian perspective can help resolve the ambivalence in the film. In this way we will be able to see beyond the conservative/progressive deadlock about justice and find a path toward a radically Christian critique of revenge and violence.

Batman is an odd sort of character to consider a “hero”. Unlike other superheroes such as Superman or Spiderman, Batman is not motivated by a sense of responsibility to use his powers for the good of humanity. In fact, Batman does not even have any actual “superpowers”. Rather than Batman it is an ordinary person (albeit one with great wealth, intelligence, and training) motivated by revenge. The darkness in the so-called “Dark Knight” is found less in his black and blue costume than in his bruised psyche, and he has usually been portrayed in recent years as more or less mentally and emotionally unstable.<sup>2</sup> What makes *Batman Begins* philosophically interesting is the way it connects vengeance and vigilante justice (the standard themes of Batman's mythology) with *the power of fear* (a less standard theme emphasized in the film).<sup>3</sup>

The film immediately establishes fear as one of its major concerns. The opening scene is Bruce's recurring nightmare about falling into a cave full of bats as a child. Later we see Bruce's father Thomas Wayne rescue him from this bat cave. He tells Bruce “You know why [the bats]

attacked you, don't you? They were afraid of you." Thomas notes that "all creatures feel fear", adding "especially the scary ones."

The fact that the film is an exploration of the relationship between fear and vigilante justice helps explain why the filmmakers chose as the first villain of this new series the lesser known Scarecrow instead of a more famous villain such as the Joker, Penguin, Catwoman, etc. Scarecrow is the alter ego of Dr. Jonathan Crane a psychopharmacologist who has developed a hallucinogenic drug which induces a paralyzing fear on his victims. Dr. Crane understands the power of fear. In the film he says that, while, in the outside world, power can be gained through physical strength, in the insane asylum where he works "only the mind can grant you power". He says, "I respect the mind's power over the body. It's why I do what I do". In this context, the reference to "what I do" is, literally, psychopharmacology, but can refer also to his criminal activities as the Scarecrow.<sup>4</sup>

Produced during the 2004 Presidential Election, *Batman Begins* was obviously influenced by the fear-shrouded zeitgeist. As Scott Bader-Saye reminds us:

The presidential campaign of 2004 was nothing if not a fear-fest. Each party dressed itself in flag and uniform and portrayed the other party as dangerous. The Democrats were painted with the "soft-on-terror" brush, while the Republicans were decried as "reckless unilateralists." The moral of the campaign: if you can't woo voters, scare them.<sup>5</sup>

Even before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans lived in a culture of fear in which various interest groups used fear to manipulate the public for their own ends.<sup>6</sup> But since the start of the war on terror, it seems that the rhetoric of fear has reached absurd new heights. Not only do politicians in both parties use fear to coerce votes (If you don't vote for the Republicans, then Mexicans come to your small Midwestern town and take your jobs away! vs. If you don't vote for the Democrats, then global warming will destroy all the penguins and polar bears on earth!) but the broadcast news uses fear to boost their ratings (What everyday household

item could cause permanent brain damage? See our exclusive investigative report on the Channel 3 Evening News! or How many serial killers live in your neighborhood? Find out tonight at 11!), and marketing campaigns of all kinds claim to protect consumers from any number of deadly threats (Only our patented formula can kill 99.9% of all poisonous bacteria from the soles of your shoes! or If you've ever had itchy skin you may have a flesh eating virus; ask your doctor about Fleshsil today!) *Batman Begins* is obviously troubled by this cultural phenomenon.<sup>7</sup>

But if the film is clearly about fear, what it is trying to say about fear is less clear. In the view of Ra's al Ghul, fear is a weakness that can be used as a weapon. As we will see, the film's attitude seems to waver between supporting and rejecting this idea. Ra's al Ghul turns out to be the film's primary villain, but not before becoming the source of Batman's powers. According to al Ghul, the reason Bruce was "unable to avenge" himself and to "do what it necessary to defeat evil" is that Bruce was hindered by the weakness of pity and compassion. When al Ghul (disguised as Henri Ducard) comes to recruit Bruce for the League of Shadows, he says "what you really fear is inside yourself. You fear your own power. You fear your anger, the drive to do great or terrible things." Then he adds that "to conquer fear, you must become fear. You must bask in the fear of other men." Bruce initially buys this argument. When he arrives at al Ghul's monastery to seek training, Bruce says "I seek the means to fight injustice. To turn fear against those who prey on the fearful." Later, during his drug induced training, al Ghul tells Bruce: "feel the terror cloud your senses, feel its power to distort, to control. And know that this power can be yours. Embrace your worst fear. Become one with the darkness." This teaching of the League of Shadows is why Bruce Wayne creates the character of Batman: "Bats frighten me. It's time my enemies shared my dread."<sup>8</sup>

Contrasting with the theme of the power of fear is the theme of *the power of love*. When the Wayne family butler Alfred Pennyworth implies that Bruce needs to forgive his parents' murderer and give up his desire for vengeance, Bruce asks if he must simply bury his past. Alfred replies: "I wouldn't presume to tell you what to do with your past, sir. Just know that there are those of us who care about what you do with your future" adding that he will "never" give up on Bruce (a line repeated later). There is a dim recognition here that the power of love is the only thing that can heal violence, not more violence and revenge. This is the significance of Thomas's dying words to his son: with love in his eyes, his last words are, "It's okay. Don't be afraid."

In flashback scenes to Bruce's childhood we see that Thomas Wayne is an old-money East Coast billionaire from a long line of wealthy liberal do-gooders. Alfred tells Bruce that "In the Civil War, your great-great-grandfather was involved in the Underground Railroad, secretly transporting freed slaves to the North." Thomas inherited the powerful family business Wayne Enterprises, but, like his ancestors, was more concerned with philanthropy than capitalism, choosing to spend his time building and running a hospital while leaving the management of his company to "more interested men".

One of Thomas's repeated lines in the film is the platitude: "Why do we fall, Bruce? So we can learn to pick ourselves up." But his attitude should not be interpreted as a political conservative's rejection of welfare in favor of self-reliance. Like any good liberal, Thomas recognizes the importance of the genetic lottery. This is dramatized in the scene when, Thomas insists on traveling with his family via public transportation, despite the fact that he is wealthy enough to own a limousine. On the way to the opera, dressed in a tuxedo and surrounded by

lower class Gothamites taking the train out of necessity rather than choice, Thomas tells Bruce that “Gotham’s been good to our family, but the city’s been suffering. People less fortunate than us have been enduring very hard times.” Thus Thomas Wayne’s emphasis on learning to “pick ourselves up” seems less to indicate a bootstrap ideology than it does the view of a liberal who wants to create a level playing field so that people who work hard can actually succeed in picking themselves up. He is a business man, but one who believes in the social responsibility of business. During a Wayne Enterprises board meeting in which Thomas’s successor (Mr. Earl, the “more interested man”) is taking the business in a new direction, an older board member quips, “I don’t think Thomas Wayne would have viewed heavy-arms manufacture as a suitable cornerstone for our business.”

Later Alfred reveals to Bruce that “In the depression, your father nearly bankrupted Wayne Enterprises combating poverty. He believed his example could inspire the wealthy of Gotham to save their city.” And, in a way, Thomas succeeded. Alfred adds: “[Your parents’] murder shocked the wealthy and the powerful into action.” The murder scene itself is one of the most important scenes for understanding Thomas Wayne’s moral vision. Outside the opera house in downtown Gotham, the Waynes are robbed at gunpoint. The robber is obviously agitated, *afraid*. Bruce’s father keeps repeating, “it’s fine” and “take it easy”, trying to relieve the robber’s fears, and he hands over his wallet without a fight. But the frightened criminal’s gun goes off and, dying, Bruce’s father takes his son’s hand in a final act of compassion. His last words are the words of comfort, understanding, and forgiveness: “It’s okay. Don’t be afraid.”

At the end of the film Ra’s al Ghul reveals that the League of Shadows tried attacking Gotham with the more “sophisticated” weapon of economics but were stopped by the Wayne family:

Gunned down by one of the very people they were trying to help. Create enough hunger and everyone becomes a criminal. Their deaths galvanized the city into saving itself and Gotham has limped on ever since. We are back to finish the job. And this time no misguided idealists will get in the way. Like your father, you lack the courage to do all that is necessary.

In this liberal vein, the film not only links crime with desperation, but also links fear with ignorance and violence. When Thomas tells Bruce that “especially the scary” creatures feel fear, we can hear the suggestion that the violence inflicted on people by animals is motivated by fear more than cruelty. The implication is that if we could remove fear from the world, violence would cease. This reading is supported by the scene in which Scarecrow’s toxin has been released all over Gotham City, making the entire populace hallucinate. During the ensuing riot, police detective Flass looks at some innocent children but, under the influence of the drug, sees them as demons and starts to shoot them (until Detective Gordon, having been given the antidote to the toxin, arrives and stops Flass). Likewise the people Batman is trying to help during the riot, turn and attack him (recalling the line about Bruce’s parents being killed by “the very people they were trying to help”).

The connection between fear and ignorance is made explicit when Bruce confronts Gotham’s most powerful criminal, Carmine Falcone. The mob boss tells him

you think because your mommy and your daddy got shot, you know about the ugly side of life, but you don’t. You’ve never tasted desperate. You’re Bruce Wayne, the prince of Gotham. You’d have to go a thousand miles to meet someone who didn’t know your name. So don’t come down here with your anger, trying to prove something to yourself. This is a world you’ll never understand. And you always fear what you don’t understand.

Taking this as wise advice, Bruce does indeed travel over a thousand miles to Asia and lives in poverty where he “started to pity [criminals]”. He tells Ra’s al Ghul that “the first time I stole so that I wouldn’t starve, I lost many assumptions about the simple nature of right and wrong. And when I traveled, I learned the fear before a crime and the thrill of success.” In this way Bruce is

given the resources to understand and hence to forgive his parents' murderer – though it is unclear whether he ever does indeed forgive him.

But despite these obvious manifestations of a liberal worldview, the film also exhibits the influence of a more conservative emphasis on individual responsibility. Besides the somewhat ambiguous line cited earlier about learning to “pick ourselves up”, the character of Bruce's childhood friend Rachel Dawes exhibits a strong libertarian streak. Rachel is often contrasted with Jonathan Crane. Using a parody of a liberal theory of justice, Dr. Crane helps the mobsters get their henchmen declared insane and moved into his asylum: “In my opinion, Mr. Zsaz is as much a danger to himself as to others and prison is probably not the best environment for his rehabilitation.” As assistant district attorney, Rachel accuses Crane of being “corrupt” and implies that Zsaz “deserves” to be in prison. Later she tells Crane “I do what I do to keep thugs like Falcone behind bars, not in therapy”, suggesting that she holds to a conservative retributive theory of punishment rather than the more stereotypically liberal rehabilitation theory of justice. This same attitude is revealed by her statement to Bruce that “Deep down you may be the same great kid you used to be, but it's not what you are underneath, it's what you do that defines you.” The suggestion is that one's past doesn't matter – all that matters is what one does. Hence when one commits a crime, one deserves to be punished no matter what one's motives were.

The moral ambivalence in *Batman Begins* is seen most clearly in the film's many such discussions of the nature of justice. Consider the sequence in which Bruce is angry that Joe Chill, the man who murdered his parents, is getting out of prison for making a deal to testify against Falcone. The liberal district attorney argues that Chill be let out of prison because “The depression hit working people like Mr. Chill, hardest of all. His crime was appalling, yes, but it

was motivated not by greed, but by desperation.” Bruce plans to murder Chill but is stopped when Falcone has Chill assassinated. Bruce calls the assassination “justice”. When he confesses that he wanted to kill Chill himself, Rachel slaps him and says “your father would be ashamed of you.”

Bruce: My parents deserve justice.

Rachel: You’re not talking about justice. You’re talking about revenge.

Bruce: Sometimes they’re the same.

Rachel: No, they’re never the same. Justice is about harmony. Revenge is about you making yourself feel better. Which is why we have an impartial system.

Bruce: Your system is broken.

Rachel: You care about justice? Look beyond your own pain, Bruce. This city is rotting. They talk about the depression as if it’s history. It’s not. Things are worse than ever here. Falcone floods our streets with crime and drugs, preying on the desperate, creating new Joe Chills every day. Falcone may not have killed your parents, Bruce, but he’s destroying everything they stood for. . . . We all know where to find him. As long as he keeps the bad people rich and the good people scared, we can’t touch him. Good people like your parents, who’ll stand against injustice, they’re gone. What chance does Gotham have when the good people do nothing?

At the end of the film, Bruce admits that he was “just a coward with a gun” and says he now knows that “justice is about more than revenge”. Rachel replies that his father would be proud of him after all. In these scenes, Rachel is portrayed as having the moral high ground. She clearly distinguishes justice from revenge by defining justice as retribution delivered by an impartial system. And since, despite her rejection of the DA’s liberal argument that crime is motivated by desperation not greed (an argument one suspects Thomas Wayne would accept, given his belief that “all creatures” act violently when afraid), Rachel is positioned as the heir of the Wayne crusade for social justice, we are led to think that Thomas Wayne would approve of her definition of justice.

Apparently intended as the other end of a spectrum, is the League of Shadows. Ducard comes to Bruce in jail and tells him of “Ra’s al Ghul, a man greatly feared by the criminal

underworld. And a man who can offer you a path” adding that, “you have become truly lost.” Al Ghul’s path is “the path of a man who shares his hatred of evil and wishes to serve true justice. The path of the League of Shadows.” Ducard denies that the League are vigilantes, and his reasoning is interesting in comparison to Rachel’s:

A vigilante is just a man lost in the scramble for his own gratification. He can be destroyed or locked up. But if you make yourself more than just a man – if you devote yourself to an ideal – and if they can’t stop you – then you become something else entirely. ... A legend.

Here Ducard (who is really al Ghul in disguise) distinguishes vigilantism from true justice in the same way that Rachel distinguished revenge from justice. Both characters agree that vigilantism and revenge are about an individual’s “own gratification” and making himself “feel better”. And both agree that true justice is about transcending the individual’s desires. But where Rachel puts her trust in the “impartial system” of human courts, al Ghul thinks the courts are irredeemably corrupt and argues that the solution is to transcend humanity by becoming “more than just a man”.<sup>9</sup>

The film positions Ra’s al Ghul as being in fundamental opposition to the ideology of Thomas Wayne. Bruce feels somewhat responsible for his parents’ death, but he tells al Ghul that “my anger outweighs my guilt”. Al Ghul responds that “you have learned to bury your guilt with anger. I will teach you to confront it and to face the truth.” The truth is that “your parents’ death was not your fault. It was your father’s. Anger does not change the fact that your father failed to act” adding that “the will to act” is “everything”. Here al Ghul is decidedly established as a contrast for Thomas Wayne. So when al Ghul continues by saying that anger is like “a poison in your veins” that only “vengeance” can stop, we can’t help but think that Thomas would disagree with al Ghul’s theory of justice. This reading is confirmed when al Ghul proclaims, in clear opposition to Thomas Wayne’s attitude of compassion, that “There are those without

decency that must be fought without pity.” To demonstrate his ability to fight without pity, Bruce is expected to execute a farmer who “tried to take his neighbor’s land and became a murderer.” Bruce refuses, but al Ghul argues that the execution is “justice”, adding that “crime cannot be tolerated” since “criminals thrive on the indulgence of society’s understanding”, a justification that recalls Rachel’s rejection of the rehabilitation theory of justice. Does this link between Rachel and al Ghul reveal that she is not in fact the true heir of Thomas Wayne’s moral vision? Bruce seems closer to his Wayne family heritage when, in response to al Ghul’s prediction that “your compassion is a weakness your enemies will not share”, he replies “That’s why it’s so important. It separates us from them.”

It seems safe to say that the film presents Rachel’s view of justice as superior to al Ghul’s, but it is more difficult to say what the difference is supposed to be. Is it simply that Rachel has faith in the “system” while al Ghul feels that it needs to be transcended? This reading can’t be right since, in the end, Rachel (arguably) turns out to agree with al Ghul. The film represents Batman as a vigilante. Commissioner Loeb sets up what Gordon calls “a massive task force” to catch Batman, saying “no one takes the law into their own hands in my city.”<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the film seems sympathetic to Batman’s mission since the police are all either corrupt or ineffectual. Note the scene with rich people talking about Batman:

Person 1: He’s done something the police have never done.  
Person 2: You can’t take the law into your own hands.  
Person 3: Well, at least he’s getting something done.

Rachel *seems* like the opposite of Ra’s al Ghul because she is reveres the memory of Bruce’s father (who is clearly set up as a contrast with al Ghul). And she makes a distinction between justice and vigilantism, but she also says in the end that Gotham “needs” Batman’s vigilantism. Moreover, both Rachel and al Ghul say justice is “harmony”. Al Ghul also says it is “balance”.

The film seems to take these as synonyms, but are harmony and balance really the same in the context of theories of justice?

Al Ghul says:

Gotham's time has come. Like Constantinople or Rome before it, the city has become a breeding ground for suffering and injustice. It is beyond saving and must be allowed to die. This is the most important function of the League of Shadows. It is one we've performed for centuries. Gotham must be destroyed.

The League's plan is to release the toxin into the entire city and "then watch Gotham tear itself apart through fear." He's not worried about the lives he will destroy because

Only a cynical man would call what these people have 'lives,' Wayne. Crime. Despair. This is not how man was supposed to live. The League of Shadows has been a check against human corruption for thousands of years. We sacked Rome. Loaded trade ships with plague rats. Burnt London to the ground. Every time a civilization reaches the pinnacle of its decadence we return to restore the balance. ... When a forest grows too wild, a purging fire is inevitable and natural. Tomorrow the world will watch in horror as its greatest city destroys itself. The movement back to harmony will be unstoppable this time.

Note al Ghul's reference to Plato's theory of justice as "harmony". But later al Ghul reveals that he does not hold to Plato's theory of justice when he says "justice is balance". On Plato's view justice involves the parts a thing (whether the soul or the city) being in their properly ordered relationship.<sup>11</sup> Hence, for Plato, justice is another name for (moral) health.<sup>12</sup> In this way the Platonic theory of justice as harmony is the forerunner of the modern liberal theory of justice as rehabilitation. Both Plato and modern progressives see the just society as one which makes it possible for all people to fulfill their natural potential. Al Ghul's desire to "restore the balance" of civilization sounds initially similar to Plato's idea of justice as harmony (especially given his reference to the way "man was supposed to live" which recalls Plato's moral health theory), until we realize that what al Ghul means by balance is the *lex talionis* (the principle of an-eye-for-an-eye), as seen by the fact that he uses the balance principle to justify burning down Wayne Manor

just as Bruce burned down the League's monastery. Thus it turns out that al Ghul shares Rachel's retributive theory of justice, though (like Plato) he extends it to include entire societies. Bruce, however, refuses to believe that there is no hope of rehabilitation for Gotham, saying that he just needs "more time" to continue his father's project of mobilizing the "good people" of the city. Thus Bruce agrees with the extension of justice beyond individuals to societies, but he rejects the retributive nature of justice. And yet it is hard to see Bruce as unambiguously endorsing his father's moral vision since Batman makes use of al Ghul's methods of fear and vigilante justice.

In the final analysis, we can distinguish at least three theories of justice in the film: the progressive and Platonic theory of justice as rehabilitation (exemplified in Thomas Wayne), the conservative theory of justice as retribution against individuals by legitimate social system (as exemplified by Rachel Dawes), and the vigilante theory of justice as retribution against either individuals or societies by individuals who are not themselves part of the legitimate social authority but have still placed themselves beyond the limitations of humanity (as exemplified by Ra's al Ghul).<sup>13</sup> But there are two related questions still unanswered: Which theory does Bruce Wayne endorse through his activities as Batman? And which theory does the film present as superior?

When Thomas Wayne rescues the young Bruce from the bat cave, he reaches out a hand to his son, saying "it's okay". This is a recurring line in the film. Repeatedly throughout the film, one character is frightened and another character offers the reassuring phrase "it's okay".<sup>14</sup> As mentioned above, during the robbery, Bruce's father keeps repeating, "it's fine" and "take it easy" and his last words are "It's okay. Don't be afraid." Similarly, Jim Gordon, Gotham city's

last honest police officer, repeats to Bruce “it’s okay” when the frightened boy is in the police station after his parents’ murder. This reassuring line is related to another repeated phrase: “always mind your surroundings”. Ra’s al Ghul first says this to Bruce during a martial arts training session. The lesson al Ghul is trying to teach Bruce through this proverb is that the way to “master” your fear is by understanding your surroundings, to know what is going on around you so you can safely negotiate the threats. It is in part because you can’t protect yourself against something you don’t understand that, as Falcone tells Bruce, “you always fear what you don’t understand”.

There is wisdom here, but the lesson is not quite what Ra’s al Ghul and Carmine Falcone think it is. It is true that you fear what you don’t understand, but it is not true that simply by understanding a threat you can protect yourself against it. If you face overpowering danger, then minding your surroundings can increase your fear rather than dispel it. And yet, the foolish wisdom of Christ is that there can be no overpowering danger. When you truly understand the nature of your surroundings, you will realize that the cosmos is a safe place for the people of God. Once you realize that God is in control, you know that everything truly is “okay” and fear is replaced with trust in God’s providence. That the filmmakers have some vague sense of this truth is seen through the character of a child who recurs several times throughout the film. When a child first sees Batman on the fire escape outside his bedroom window, the child is instinctively unafraid. This is an interesting contrast with the terrified reactions the criminals have the first time they encounter Batman. More importantly, when Rachel and the child are being terrorized during the riot, the child dramatizes the link between fearlessness and faith in providence: in order to reassure himself, he keeps repeating his faith that “Batman will come” to

save them (a hope which, of course, is fulfilled). Faith in something more powerful than one's enemies is what dispels fear.

The child's attitude recalls the moral vision of the New Testament in which fear is the opposite of faith. This is seen most clearly when Peter attempts to walk on the water with Jesus.

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, *he became frightened*, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*" (Matthew 14:28-31 NRSV, my emphasis).

The reason Jesus attributes "little faith" to Peter is his "fear". This makes sense when we realize that the Greek word we translate "faith" is *pistis*, which literally means "trust" or "confidence". So this is not faith in the modern sense of believing something without evidence; it is faith in the sense of trusting someone who is faithful and reliable. When Peter became frightened, he revealed that he did not really trust Jesus to keep his word that Peter would be able to walk on the water. In other words, Biblical faith is about trusting God to keep his promises.

The discussion of faith in Hebrews chapters 10-11 also helps us see this point. In 10:19-23, the author says we should have "confidence" in Jesus and approach God "in full assurance of faith ... without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." In 10:26-31 the discussion shifts to the "fearful prospect of [God's] judgment", nothing that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." But immediately the author adds that the people of God "are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved". In other words, because we "have faith" that God will keep his promises to forgive our sins through Jesus, we need not "shrink back" in fear. This is what separates us from the "demons" of James 2:19 who "believe" (*pisteuo* = have faith or trust) that God will keep his promises (since they know the universe is ruled by "one" God and not many warring deities), but

“shudder” when they realize what God has promised when he judges those who are not in Christ. Those of us who are in Christ, says 2 Corinthians 5:5-7 have been given “the Spirit as a guarantee” that God has forgiven us and are “always confident, even though ... we walk by faith and not by sight.” We know that God is faithful, so we trust him to take care of us even when we don’t see for ourselves what he is up to. Instead, all that we should worry about is seeking God’s kingdom and his righteousness.<sup>15</sup> This idea of trusting in the unseen fulfillment of God’s provision is what the author of Hebrews goes on to discuss throughout Chapter 11. He says “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”, recalling the Pauline distinction between walking by faith and walking by sight) and reminds us how Abraham “obeyed” God’s call “and he set out, not knowing where he was going” and how he and Sarah “considered him faithful who had promised” to give them children in the new land. These heroes of the faith couldn’t “see” where God was leading them, but they had “faith” that he was in control. As Jesus says in Matthew 6:25-31, those who are “worried” about their lives have “little faith” because they don’t know that God will provide for his people.

The New Testament vision of fearlessness is remarkably similar to Plato’s argument for the invulnerability of virtue, as given in the *Apology*. On Plato’s view, “a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death.” This is because your soul, but not your body, is eternal. You can’t take your health and wealth with you to the afterlife, but you *must* take your character. And your character is harmed by doing unjust and impious things. In other words, the only way to harm your soul is by performing unjust actions. And no one can force you to do unjust things. All they can do is hurt your body, which does not hurt “the real you” (your soul). And even death doesn’t harm your character; it just separates your soul from your body (or at worst causes your soul to cease existing). In short, you can only be harmed by your own choices. Hence Plato

writes that “you are wrong, sir, if you think a man who is any good at all should take into account the risk of life or death; he should look to this only in his actions, whether what he does is right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good or a bad man”. In other words, “Death is something I couldn’t care less about, but my whole concern is not to do anything unjust or impious” because “I do not think it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse”. The upshot is that allowing yourself to be coerced by fear into acting violently harms you (by harming your character) more than allowing your body to be harmed by the violence of your enemy

St. Augustine of Hippo draws on this Platonic tradition for his own argument that fear is a sin. On Augustine’s view every created thing is good, but “though it is good, it can be loved well or ill; well when the proper order is observed, and ill when that order is disturbed. ... Hence it seems to me that a brief and true definition of virtue is ‘rightly ordered love’.”<sup>16</sup> So sin is not loving something (whether God, other people, yourself, or any other created thing) in the proper amount. For example if you love money more than you love people, that is a sin. And if you love anything more than you love God, that is a sin. But this leads to an argument that fear is a sin: “All wicked people, just like good people, desire to live without fear. The difference is that the good, in desiring this, turn their love away from things that cannot be possessed without the fear of losing them. The wicked, on the other hand, try to get rid of anything that prevents them from enjoying such things securely. Thus they led a wicked and criminal life, which would better be called death”.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the origin of crime is fear of losing temporal goods, which reveals a failure to value the eternal goods of God in their proper degree. On this view, then, killing in self-defense would be a sin because it would reveal that you love your own temporal life more than you love the life of your enemy.

So we have three arguments that fear is sin. First, fear involves a lack of faith in God's providence. Second, fear involves a love of physical health more than moral health. Third, fear involves loving self more than God. Moreover, understanding faith in providence as the opposite of fear helps us diagnose the source of the ambivalence in *Batman Begins*. The film instinctively links fear with revenge and justice, but does not see the precise nature of the link. But once we become aware of the link between fearlessness and providence we can see why revenge and vigilante justice are sins. The desire to take justice into one's own hands reveals a lack of trust that God will providentially bring about justice in the world. Hence fear and the desire for revenge/vigilantism come from the same lack of faith within the human soul. In the world of *Batman Begins*, however, there is no suggestion of providence. Trusting God to bring about justice is not a live option. Thus Bruce Wayne is torn between the three visions of justice mentioned above. His father's vision of rehabilitation is not possible without a solution to the problem of organized crime, so retribution is necessary. But Rachel's vision of retribution by a legitimate authority is not possible since the system is controlled by mobsters. He is left with only one live option: Ra's al Ghul's vision of a super-human persona with the power of coercive fear. Bruce tries to temper his vigilantism with his father's compassion and pity, but he is for all that no less a disciple of al Ghul. This is the source of the ambivalence in the American soul, embodied in the psychic struggle between Bruce Wayne and Batman. That *Batman Begins* makes it possible for Americans to recognize this fact about themselves is the film's greatest philosophical virtue.

Before continuing our examination of Bruce Wayne's ambivalence, we must consider some important objections to the view that fear is always sinful. While recognizing the destructive

nature of disordered fear, Scott Bader-Saye, argues that there is a proper way to fear. In Bader-Saye's view life without any fear at all would be a life without love. He defends a Thomistic-Aristotelian view of fear against the more Augustinian-Platonic view of fear I am suggesting.

Bader-Saye argues that

According to Aquinas, fear arises from apprehension of a possible future evil that is great enough to cause us harm and imminent enough that it cannot be ignored. Yet it is not sufficient to think about fear only in relation to evil because the actual source of fear is love. Following Augustine, Aquinas notes that 'fear is born of love, since man fears the loss of what he loves.' We fear evils because they threaten our loves. Thus, we should not make it our goal to rid ourselves of fear. To the contrary, we would need to be concerned if we had no fear because it would be a sign that we had no love. Therefore Aquinas calls fearlessness a vice.<sup>18</sup>

*Batman Begins* reveals an awareness of this issue when Bruce confronts Falcone. Bruce says he's not afraid, but Falcone replies "Because you think you've got nothing to lose. But you haven't thought it through. You haven't thought about your lady friend in the DA's office. You haven't thought about your old butler. People from your world have so much to lose."

In her book *The Fragility of Goodness*, Martha Nussbaum raises some similar Aristotelian difficulties for any view (such as that of Christianity or Platonism) according to which the virtuous life is invulnerable.<sup>19</sup> Aristotle links fear to suspicion (lack of trust) and vulnerability (lack of control).<sup>20</sup> Aristotle argues that, since we are finite, we can't control everything and hence can't trust everyone. Hence, fear is inevitable and appropriate. But, while it is true that we can't fully trust human beings, can't we trust that God is in control of all things? If God is for us, who can be against us? Aristotle seems right that fear involves a sense of lacking control, but this is precisely why faith in God's Providence overcomes all fear. In faith we relinquish all control (and illusions of control) to God who we trust to take care of us. Thus, Aristotle is right to reject the Platonic idea that we ought to have no fear because we control everything that is truly valuable, but he is wrong to think that this lack of control makes us

vulnerable. As Nussbaum points out, the problem with the Platonic theory is that its strong dualism entails that harming the body is not actually *bad*. Augustine often seems to agree with this view,<sup>21</sup> but Aquinas follows Aristotle in admitting that physical harms are bad, though in a typically Platonic/Aristotelian synthesis, Aquinas adds a warning not to fear physical harms too much since they are not *as bad* as spiritual harms. But if we add the idea that God can providentially overcome all tragedy with good, then wouldn't that imply that it is still irrational to fear physical harms at all even though they are technically bad?

For example, suppose we admit that physical pain is always bad. It would still be irrational to fear the pain associated with going to the dentist (assuming you trusted your dentist's competence). Instead, it seems that we should fear *not* going to the dentist since if we did not submit to the prevenient harm of the dentist's drill, we would have to suffer the greater future harm of a painful cavity. Thus, while the pain of the dentist is bad, it is not as bad as the pain of not going to the dentist. Therefore we ought to fear the latter and not the former. Analogously, while it is true that physical harms are bad, the physical harm is not as bad as the spiritual harm that would occur if we submitted to the fear of the physical harm, and so we should only fear the spiritual harm that the physical harm might cause, not the physical harm itself. And, to extend the analogy, we should not simply tell ourselves not to fear the pain of the dentist; we should brush and floss our teeth regularly enough so that going to the dentist does not cause pain. This means that we should not put ourselves in the position that we might be tempted to fear physical harms. Though, because we cannot always control whether and when we are physically threatened, this preparation will take the form of spiritual discipline.

This analogy shows us how to respond to Nussbaum's argument that fear is linked to grief and pity and Bader-Saye's argument that fear is linked to love. While we might be able to

give an Augustinian argument that grief is wrong (as in the *Confessions* Book IV), surely Christians can have pity, compassion, and love. But, as Aristotle points out, we can't pity someone unless we agree that they are really suffering and that their suffering is not their own fault. According to Nussbaum, Christianity is supposed to deny that suffering is bad since God can use suffering to produce good. There are both a logical and theological errors here. First, as Christians, we *can* have pity on someone who is suffering due to their own sin. So even if Nussbaum were right that Christians are committed to the view that all suffering is due to a sinful lack of faith, we can still pity people's lack of faith. Secondly, as our analogy with the dentist shows, it is possible to admit that suffering is bad while still arguing that we should not fear it since fear is worse than pain.<sup>22</sup>

Let us return now to *Batman Begins* and the question of whether the film ultimately endorses Ra's al Ghul's vigilantism. Despite its obvious sympathy with Bruce Wayne's desire to bring justice to a corrupted society, the film does question his methods. One important scene on this topic is when Alfred scolds Bruce for the Batmobile's high-speed chase.

Alfred: It's a miracle no one was killed.

Bruce: I didn't have time to observe the rules of the road, Alfred.

Alfred: You're getting lost inside this monster of yours.

Bruce: I'm using this monster to help other people, just like my father did.

Alfred: For Thomas Wayne, helping others wasn't about proving anything to anyone, including himself.

Bruce: It's Rachel, Alfred. She was dying. She's downstairs, sedated. I need you to take her home.

Alfred: Well, we both care for Rachel, but what you're doing has to be beyond that. It can't be personal or you're just a vigilante.

Here Alfred returns to the discussion of justice vs. vigilantism, but he also suggests a connection between vigilantism and self-destruction: "You're getting lost inside this monster of yours."

This recalls the scene in which, when Batman is interrogating him, Flass says "I swear to God",

and Batman replies, “Swear to me!”. It is a typical macho fear tactic, but it does reveal a connection between vigilantism and idolatry.<sup>23</sup> Thus, however inchoately, the film recognizes that taking justice into one’s own hands reveals a lack of faith in God’s providence.

But, as mentioned above, faith is irrational in a world without providence, and the film’s logic continues to follow the inevitable path toward violence. Despite her reservations, even Rachel, the character most committed to the court system, admits that a vigilante is necessary. When Rachel says something about Bruce’s “mask”, he replies “Batman’s just a symbol” but she touches his face and says

No this is your mask. Your real face is the one that criminals now fear. The man I loved, the man who vanished, he never came back at all. But maybe he’s still out there somewhere. Maybe someday, when Gotham no longer needs Batman, I’ll see him again.

This scene helps make sense of Rachel’s earlier claim that “Deep down you may be the same great kid you used to be, but it’s not what you are underneath, it’s what you do that defines you.” In calling Batman the “real face” and Bruce the “mask”, she is arguing again that it is what Bruce does, as a vigilante, that is his true self, not who he is under the bat costume. And she is recognizing that Batman’s questionable deeds have swallowed up the “great kid” Bruce Wayne used to be “underneath”. But she also admits that Gotham “needs” Batman. And, in her next lines, she says she is “proud” of him and that his father would be, too. In Rachel’s view, Bruce has sacrificed himself for the good of the community. He is becoming a monster, but this is a necessary evil.<sup>24</sup>

If the movie ended there it would be an acceptance of the ambivalence: we can neither live with nor without violence.<sup>25</sup> But the film does not stop there. The last scene, designed to set up the sequel by introducing the character of the Joker, raises the problem of escalation, tipping the balance back in favor of Thomas Wayne’s nonviolent solutions to terrorism.

Gordon: You really started something. Bent cops running scared. Hope on the streets.  
Batman: But?  
Gordon: The Narrows is lost. And we still haven't picked up Crane or half the inmates of Arkham that he freed.  
Batman: We will. We can bring Gotham back.  
Gordon: What about escalation?  
Batman: Escalation?  
Gordon: We start carrying semiautomatics, they buy automatics. We start wearing Kevlar, they buy armor-piercing rounds.

The recognition of the inevitability of escalation is perhaps a sign that the filmmakers are aware on some level that Bruce's parents, not Batman, know the right way to combat evil. We should be escalating love (Romans 12:10, NRSV) – which, of course, in this broken world, can only end in the ultimate love of self-sacrifice. Nevertheless, from the other side of the Cross of Christ we can see that it is only this escalation of love that can lead us out of a world of fear, not an escalation of violence.

Interestingly, the theme of escalation is one theme of *The Prestige*, director Christopher Nolan's 2006 follow-up to *Batman Begins*.<sup>26</sup> This is not the place for a detailed analysis of *The Prestige*, but suffice it to say that, in the later film, there is a clear recognition that revenge destroys the soul of the vengeful and can only lead to self-destruction. Thus from these two films we learn that, in the face of terrorism, our choice is this: the self-destruction that comes from the embrace of violence, or the self-sacrifice of taking up our cross in Christ-like love. Either way we face a loss of self. But walking in the way of the cross, by giving up our selves to the service of God and God's people, we find it to be, not the way of death and destruction, but none other than the way of life and peace.

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<sup>1</sup> *Batman Begins* was directed and co-written by Christopher Nolan, for whom revenge seems to be an ongoing concern. Nolan's films deal with philosophical issues of personal identity, but he tends to explore this theme in terms of the implications of creating an identity for yourself out of

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fear and revenge. The main characters in *Memento*, *Batman Begins*, and *The Prestige* all construct their own identity around the desire for revenge. Their life goals, then, involve Nietzschean resentment rather than life-affirmation. These are all seen to be empty and self-defeating. In *Memento*, the hero is trying to get revenge on the man who gave him a memory problem, but his lack of memory means that even if he gets revenge he won't remember it (and he ends up creating false targets of revenge to keep his identity going). *Batman* (or so I will argue in this paper) dramatizes how, through his desire for revenge rather than justice, the hero actually makes himself into his enemy such that he cannot defeat it without self-destruction. Finally, in *The Prestige* both main characters end up losing everything they have for the pursuit of revenge on one another: one character literally ends up killing himself over and over again! In all three films we can see how a self-identity structured around revenge necessarily ends in self-destruction.

<sup>2</sup> The most important source of this theme is Frank Miller's 1986 graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*. Miller's subsequent *Batman: Year One* was a major influence on the characters and story of the film *Batman Begins*.

<sup>3</sup> One of the most interesting lines from the teaser trailer did not make it into the final cut of the movie: "They told me there was nothing out there, nothing to fear. But the night my parents were murdered I caught a glimpse of something. I've looked for it ever since. I went around the world, searched in all the shadows. And there is something out there in the darkness, something terrifying, something that will not stop until it gets revenge... Me."

<sup>4</sup> This theme is seen also when Bruce Wayne confronts the mobster Carmine Falcone to show him that "not everyone in Gotham is afraid of you". Falcone replies: "Only those who know me, kid. Look around you. You'll see two councilmen, a union official, couple off-duty cops, and a judge. Now, I wouldn't have a second's hesitation of blowing your head off in front of them. Now, that's power you can't buy. That's the power of fear."

<sup>5</sup> Bader-Saye, Scott. *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (Brazos, 2007), p. 19

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Frank Fueredi's *Culture of Fear: Risk Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation* (Continuum, 1997; revised ed. 2002); and Barry Glassner's *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (Basic Books, 1999)

<sup>7</sup> Other recent popular films that explore the culture of fear include *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2002), *The Village* (Shyamalan, 2004), and *Star Wars: Episode III - Revenge of the Sith* (Lucas, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> It is not coincidental that the scenes of Batman battling criminals are shot with cinematic techniques reminiscent of a horror movie, with Batman in the role of the monster and the criminals in the role of the victims.

<sup>9</sup> Along these same lines, Ra's al Ghul later says that "theatricality and deception are powerful agents. You must become more than just a man in the mind of your opponent." But during the climactic battle he says that Bruce's inability to do what is necessary has prevented Batman from becoming legend: "You are just an ordinary man in a cape. That's why you couldn't fight injustice, that's why you can't stop this train."

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, when Batman attacks Crane's asylum, a henchman asks "What do we do?" and Crane replies "What anyone does when a prowler comes around. Call the police." Note that he says this not because he has corrupt cops on his side, but because the police force is against Batman.

<sup>11</sup> See *Republic*, Bk. IV, 433 ff.

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<sup>12</sup> *Republic*, Bk. IV, 444c5-e2

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that all three theories reject the legitimacy of individual revenge.

<sup>14</sup> Though when, during the riot at the climax of the film, Rachel tells a child that “It’s okay, it’s okay, no one’s gonna hurt you”, Scarecrow shows up and replies “of course they are!”.

<sup>15</sup> Compare the story of Mary and Martha at Luke 10:38-42.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine. *City of God*, trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge, 1998), Bk xv Ch 22, p. 680.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine. *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Hackett, 1993), Bk I.4, p. 7-8

<sup>18</sup> Bader-Saye, Scott. “Thomas Aquinas and the Culture of Fear” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25:2 (2005), p. 100. The references to Aquinas are from *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 43, art. 1; Q 19, art. 3; and Q. 126, art. 1. Another film that deals with these issues is *Fearless* (Weir, 1993). The hero escapes death and feels invulnerable because he is a “ghost” – the woman says “angel”, but his wife says “he is a human and can’t live up there.” The hero seems to be expressing a Platonic view of fear and invulnerability, while his wife (and the film’s overall point of view) seems to share Bader-Saye’s view that lack of fear entails lack of ability to relate to other humans. But, unlike the Platonic view, the Christian view of invulnerability cannot be read as encouraging a lack of personal relationships. The therapist in *Fearless* says the hero has to relive his near death experiences to keep up the “high” of fearlessness. (This is confirmed by the fact that the hero endangers himself whenever his real life starts to close in on him again). But as Christians we need not be angels or ghosts or physically invulnerable to escape our fear. We don’t have to “live up there” because Christ has come down here. And through the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist we are reminded of our death in Christ and life through him. Like hero of *Fearless*, we can’t fear death because we have already died. But this does not entail an inability to acknowledge vulnerability and to relate to humans. The Christian view is closer to a Heideggerean being-towards-death: an acknowledgement of finitude which gives value to our present embodied moments. But what Christianity adds is the Schleiermachean feeling of dependence/creaturehood that comes along with finitude: once I recognize that I am not God, I can encounter the true God and relinquish control to him, thereby overcoming fear.

<sup>19</sup> Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, revised ed. (Cambridge, 2001), p. 383-386

<sup>20</sup> On fear and trust, see *Rhetoric* 131b28-33; on fear and control, see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1382b30-33.

<sup>21</sup> For example, in *On Free Choice of the Will* and *Confessions*, though he softens his dualism in *City of God*.

<sup>22</sup> Note that on one reading this could be the lesson of Job: physical suffering is not important if we remember that providence is in control. The Psalms and Proverbs could easily be interpreted to say that providence is always arranged for our individual benefit in this life, but Job corrects this view with a broader view of providence as what is good for the whole.

<sup>23</sup> Compare Ducard’s rhetorical question at Bruce’s birthday party: “Is Ra’s al Ghul immortal? Are his methods supernatural?”

<sup>24</sup> One suspects the filmmakers intend us to see a parallel between Rachel’s attitude about the necessity of turning Bruce into a monster and the attitude expressed by those who argue for the necessity of turning America’s 18 years olds into killers and sending them to war.

<sup>25</sup> This is a classic Hollywood theme that goes back to John Ford’s late films *The Searchers* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*.

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<sup>26</sup> There is another link between *Batman Begins* and *The Prestige*. When Batman has Ra's al Ghul pinned during the final battle, al Ghul asks "Have you finally learned to do what is necessary?" Batman replies "I won't kill you. But I don't have to save you." This is an interesting response in light of debates about pulling out of Iraq which were raging during the production of this film. It's hard not to see the climactic line about not saving the terrorist as a reference to Iraq and the liberal idea that we should cut and run, leaving the terrorists to the tear their own society apart. This reading fits with my reading of *The Prestige* as a reference to the insanity of obsession that leads to the death of innocent persons. From this perspective, *The Prestige* is a critique of America's obsession with winning in Iraq due to the haunting memory of the defeat of Vietnam.