Review of Gavaler and Goldberg's *Superhero Thought Experiments: Comic Book Philosophy*
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§1. Introduction: Journey into Mystery

While films have found their way into widespread use in introductory and other philosophy courses, comics almost never make an appearance. Thankfully, things are changing and, with this change, there's work to be done in bridging the gaps between comics, philosophy, and comics studies. Gavaler and Goldberg's book is a welcome and useful effort on this front. There's a wealth of philosophical content here and careful attention to a host of comics. If we distinguish between *philosophy of comics*, which examines the nature of the medium, and *philosophy through comics*, which explores philosophical issues via comics, this book is primarily of the latter sort, though it offers some contributions of the former kind as well. On balance, the result is a pedagogically accessible and philosophically sophisticated work that would be a natural choice for a course concerned with philosophy through comics.

The methodological framework for the book is an appealing one. Given the familiar reliance upon thought experiments within philosophy and the affinities between philosophers' exotic scenarios and superhero comics, Gavaler and Goldberg claim "[c]ombining superhero comics and philosophy could be a powerful way to explore thought experiments because it merges the strengths of each."(8) The book's eight chapters, which I'll survey below, each pluck out episodes within mainstream superhero comics and draw upon them to introduce core philosophical concepts and map out debates ranging across ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language. The exceptions are the final two chapters, which investigate the interpretation and authorship of comics.

§2. Overview: Tales to Astonish

If you've taught *Watchmen*, you're already acutely aware of the temptation to extract moral theses about nihilism, consequentialism, and fatalism from the magisterial comic. In their first chapter on ethics, Gavaler and Goldberg warm up to an engagement with *Watchmen* by working through some early issues of *Action Comics* and *Detective Comics* in order to trace the distinction between consequentialism and deontology. The contribution from the comics studies side is especially welcome here. Rather than attempting to offer hedged generalizations about eighty years of Superman and Batman, narrowing the focus to the dawn of the Golden Age makes for a tractable discussion of these popular characters. Although the proposed treatment of *Watchmen* on which Dr. Manhattan is a consequentialist seems tendentious, the ultimate aim here is nicely accomplished: after reading this chapter, students will be equipped with a robust grasp of core versions of utilitarianism and deontology.

Gavaler and Goldberg pivot to metaethics in their second chapter and consider the semantics of moral terms. Here, structural similarities between Horgan and Timmons' Moral Twin Earth and DC's multiverse seem to disproportionally drive the discussion. This topic would, under other circumstances, be an unlikely candidate for inclusion in an introductory course, given its embedding within the debate over synthetic ethical naturalism. Perhaps for this reason, the chapter is largely a means for considering alternative moral possibilities—e.g., Bizarro worlds or worlds ruled by the Crime Syndicate, a morally inverted Justice League—and the

challenges that arise in interpreting the moral discourse native to them. Students are likely to have a tough time pinning down the precise philosophical stakes here given the niceties involved. Consider, for example, that there are concerns about the behavior of thick moral terms like 'crime' that don't get addressed nor is it obvious that Bizarro worlds are an apt point of comparison given Bizarro's frequent indifference to logical consistency. That said, one especially accessible issue broached in this chapter arises from the intersection of philosophy and comics studies: what is the status of "superhero morality" and, in turn, is there an ineliminably moral component to the superhero genre?

In Chapter Three, the authors sketch Cartesian skeptical scenarios and then zero in on parallel cases that arise within *Miracleman* and *The Avengers*. There's ample material here for classroom discussion and this chapter has a fair claim to being the clearest example of how the depth of fictional engagement can amplify rather than obscure the aim of comic book thought experiments—in particular, working through the pictorial narration of fantastical skeptical scenarios renders these epistemic threats even more acute.

Chapter Four tackles debates in the metaphysics of time, taking Doctor Doom's time travelling as a springboard for presenting views on temporal ontology and the paradoxes of time travel. This chapter promises to make for a fun week in class, however, the philosophical details are thornier than the authors let on. While we're told that, in the debate between eternalism and presentism, the former but not the latter view permits the possibility of "changing the past" or an "open future," this assumption does much of the work in this chapter despite papering over a variety of both eternalist and presentist options—e.g., presentists are well within their rights to endorse extreme forms of fatalism and, paired with hypertime, eternalists can abide a mutable past and future. Despite this, students are likely to leave this chapter with a passable grip on some key elements of the philosophy of time.

Seriality is the norm in superhero comics and Chapter Five offers a rational reconstruction of the reboot/retcon distinction that figures heavily into our understanding of comics continuity. The authors assert that reboots "replace the past with new information" while retcons "reveal the past in new ways."(106) This distinction is exploited to argue that a suitable treatment of the semantics of fictional names in the context of retcons is incompatible with descriptivism while our linguistic practices surrounding reboots are held to show referentialism to be false. The dialectical thread here, perhaps more than elsewhere in the book, threatens to lose students given the complexities that arise in aptly characterizing descriptivism. For instance, while it is tempting to take descriptivism to hang on the individual mental representations tokened by speakers (indeed, it seems the authors do precisely this), this rules out by fiat a range of descriptivist options like causal descriptivism, which require only that names are synonymous with definite descriptions regardless of the occurrent mental representations individuals might have.

Chapter Six takes up the history of swamp monsters within comics and pairs it with an investigation into the causal-historical account of content advanced via Donald Davidson's swamp-Davidson thought experiment. There's a delightful amount of careful attention to comics creatures constituted from muck and mire here. That said, the philosophical pivot from Swamp Thing to mental content does raises a general methodological puzzle that warrants closer consideration: how deep ought we dive into the details of comic book thought experiments? The authors point to Moore's Swamp Thing as a creature without the causal-historical pedigree

needed for contentful mental states (though they ultimately reject Davidson's intuitions). But, as we learn later in Moore's run, Swamp Thing has a lengthy secret history as an elemental. This point doesn't undermine the authors' central contention, but it's unclear how to individuate thought experiments within the context of serial fiction. One view would take total fidelity to the fiction to be required for successfully presenting the thought experiment. Another view might hold that we are really presented with myriad overlapping Swamp Thing thought experiments. Given the authors' methodological commitments, some guidance as to how we ought to most fruitfully carve out or individuate superhero comics thought experiments would be welcome.

The first of two chapters focused on the medium of comics sketches an application of Grice's theory of implicature to the case of pictorial representation within comics. There's a tidy overview of the Gricean scaffolding for students and the authors' proposal suggests some ways they might seek to work out its consequences. At the same time, the specifics of the proffered view of depiction are harder to parse. The authors point towards a distinction between conventional and conversational depiction with Ditko's Spidey Sense as an exemplar of the former, but it's not obvious how to characterize the other side of the divide especially since the authors apply the label of conventional depiction to both pictures *and* to layouts, which do not clearly depict anything. Stepping even further back, although the Gricean maxims are sure to elicit broad intuitions about pictorial content, the overall coherence of the view warrants greater scrutiny once we recall the Gricean supermaxim, "Try to make your contribution one that is true." In the domain of fictive pictures, it's not clear how we can obey (or even fail to obey) such a maxim.

The final chapter, which precedes a brief summative conclusion, takes up the question of how to ascribe authorship within the comics medium. There's some especially helpful work detailing the byzantine complexities of credit and production in the hybrid medium of comics. Those interested in the critical practice will, however, find much to mull over with the seemingly revisionary proposal that most superhero comics are correctly described as having a pluralistic author—roughly, an irreducibly plural entity correctly ascribed intentional states over and above those of the relevant individuals. Perhaps such a view is the best account of authorship, but if fidelity to the practices internal to comics is our chief concern, it's not clear in what contexts we would care about "authorship" rather than the medium-specific credits like writer, penciller, inker, and so on.

§3. Assessment: Strange Adventures
Superhero comics and philosophy can be delightfully strange, but thought experiments are wielded in philosophy toward highly specific ends. Although superhero comics do implicate certain philosophical notions, realizing the stated aim of this book requires extracting clear and substantive conclusions from the comics investigated. Above, I've noted a few spots where one might quibble with the handling of the concepts at issue, but there is a more serious and more general challenge to the proposed methodology that would benefit from more direct examination. Consider the discussion of time travel where the authors suggest that the text and image present a narrative according to which eternalism obtains. Suppose that's correct. Does this tell us anything about the real, non-fictional world? Since what's being presented in our comics are fictional and typically fantastical worlds, it initially seems that the best these thought experiments

can establish is that theories like eternalism meet the standards of coherence typical of fiction. But, since we almost always hold philosophical theories to higher standards of clarity and coherence than fictional works, it's not clear that even this proves all that valuable. The puzzle of how to move from what holds true in a fictional world to a substantive philosophical discovery about our world seems most serious when we consider some of the cryptic conclusions the authors arrive at. For example, when the authors conclude their discussion of the semantics of singular terms, we're offered only the enigmatic claim that "both referentialism and descriptivism are here to stay."(125) To be clear, I agree with Gavaler and Goldberg that we can extract substantive philosophical conclusions from superhero comics, but only under the right conditions and in suitably circumscribed philosophical domains. Spelling out what these conditions are is, however, no small matter.

It's worth noting a practical pedagogical concern familiar to those teaching courses that engage comics and philosophy. There's a purely logistical challenge that comes with bringing comics into the classroom—namely, how to assign and successfully distribute comics to students. Other things being equal, it would be ideal to have a small cluster of complete comics accessible for students to read and study. In pursuit of philosophical points, Gavaler and Goldberg's book ranges freely over mainstream superhero comics making brief and often disconnected pit stops. As a result, its structure doesn't suggest any easy answers about which comics ought to show up on the syllabus or how to weave together systematic engagement with comics and philosophical texts outside of the classroom. (Online services like Marvel Unlimited are an option, but have the familiar vices of online subscription resources.)

Nitpicking metaphysical niceties in a book that delves into the minutiae of superhero comics is an easy way to invite comparisons to the Comic Book Guy from *The Simpsons*. As philosophers, that's a risk we should be willing to run so long as we're also clear about the big picture. And here the big picture is quite clear: this is a much needed, frequently delightful, and largely successful book for those of us invested in philosophy and comics. I look forward to teaching it.