Self-Defense for Superheroes in *The Hawk and the Dove*

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§1. Introduction

Superhero comics are burdened with certain narrative expectations. Chief among them is a violent confrontation between hero and villain or, in all too familiar cases of manipulation and misunderstanding, violent confrontation between hero and hero.[1] Unsurprisingly, then, superhero comics offer a staggering number of ways in which expectations of violent confrontation can be met. Superpowers vary wildly but usually in ways that serve to magnify the intensity of violent conflict. Settings are altered but often to embed characters in increasingly dangerous surroundings. Superhero teams are constituted and reconstituted but usually in ways that deliver novel permutations of previous violent confrontations. Rendering these confrontations in novel and jaw-dropping detail is among the central artistic aims in many superhero comics. But, as with any other genre, authors and artists have sought out ways to challenge, invert, or otherwise frustrate the narrative expectations of superhero comics. While strategies for defying the norms of violence in superhero comics come in a variety of forms, one strategy for thwarting the narrative expectation of violence remains exceptionally rare: the presentation of a pacifist or putatively non-violent superhero.

Perhaps the most famous effort of this kind is found in Steve Ditko and Steve Skeates' 1968 series *The Hawk and the Dove*, which stands out as an unusual exercise in upending the expectations of violence that underpin superhero comics. The peculiarity of this series stems from the genre-defying characterization of one of its two focal heroes, Dove. While Dove's counterpoint, Hawk, is preternaturally eager to fight, Dove is the picture of servility, stricken with an anxiety to avoid conflict at apparently any cost. And, while craven characters are familiar enough in superhero books, they are almost never heroes, much less titular characters.

The central narrative conceit of *The Hawk and the Dove* has its origin in the political conflict regarding America's military involvement in Vietnam. In early 1968, DC editor Carmine Infantino seized upon the largely derisive terms, "hawk" and "dove", popularized in public debate over the war.[2] Infantino then tasked Ditko, with editorial support from Dick Giordano, to draw and plot a comic reflecting these labels. Later, with Skeates scripting dialogue, the book would emerge as one of the stranger sixties spins on superhero comics due to its efforts to explore the tension between these exaggerated, stereotypical views regarding violence. The awkward central conceit of the book, when coupled with Ditko's peculiar style and plotting, presents a frequently

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[1] On violence and its typical modes in superhero comics, see Gavaler (2018: 24-28). On pacifism in superhero comics, see Wanner (2016).

[2] The figurative association of doves with peace is longstanding; however, the use of "hawk" and "dove" as polarizing terms regarding military violence is often traced to the Cuban Missile Crisis. See, in particular, Alsop and Bartlett (1962).

exhausting and perpetually anxious view of civil society under political stress and emotional strain.

Although the impetus for Hawk and Dove's creation was the Vietnam War, the narratives that run throughout the series steer conspicuously wide of direct engagement with the war itself. And, while superheroes featured in war comics usually embody or typify patriotic values, Hawk and Dove are "war characters" of an attenuated and especially strange sort. They are not intended to serve as heroic personifications of national ideals, but, rather, as embodiments of the derisive stereotypes that arise in political debates regarding military violence in Vietnam and elsewhere. And, while personifications of national and moral ideals are quite familiar in both war and superhero comics, Hawk and Dove stand out for being heroic personifications of negative stereotypes drawn from the political meta-commentary surrounding war.

Given the odd circumstances of their conception, it is unsurprising that Hawk and Dove begin their narrative lives with little characterization beyond their stereotypical attitudes towards violence. Since these attitudes are, by design, incompatible with each other, the stories featuring Hawk and Dove are marked by rapid and overwrought debates over the permissibility of violent intervention. As a result, Ditko and Skeates' *The Hawk and the Dove* functions largely as an experiment concerning the boundaries of superhero comics and the norms of violence that inform them. Repeatedly, the reader finds herself engaged with a narrative thought experiment that plays out on the page: What happens when a superhero engages crime without the possibility of deploying violence? More generally, can a character opposed to violence *really* be a superhero?

Because of its unusual lead characters, *The Hawk and The Dove* affords us a helpful tool for uncovering some of the implicit moral presuppositions of superhero comics, especially as they concern the ethics of violence. This essay takes up this project and begins, in Section Two, by surveying the publication history and narrative details of *The Hawk and the Dove* with an eye towards its ethical underpinnings. In Section Three, the peculiar attitudes of the series towards violence are presented by examining Hawk and especially Dove's characterization. Prior to concluding, Section Four takes up a puzzle regarding superheroes and the ethics of self-defense that Dove's narrative status brings into sharp relief.

§2. *The Hawk and the Dove*

Hawk and Dove's debut in DC's *Showcase* #75 (cover date: June 1968) sets out the characters' origin and concludes with an advertisement for a continuing *The Hawk and the Dove* series, which would run for only six issues prior to its cancellation in June 1969. In a somewhat ironic turn, the political opposition that undergirded the rhetorical conceit of the book also played out among Hawk and Dove's co-creators. Ditko, a staunch conservative, and Skeates, a self-described "hippie," were immediately at loggerheads about the characterization of Dove. As Skeates would describe it, "A lot of changes would happen after I turned in a script. Quite often, my idea of what to do with the Dove was have him do brave stuff – and then it would be changed by either Dick or

Steve into the Hawk doing that stuff. They'd say it was out of character for the Dove. They seemed to be equating Dove with wimp, wuss, coward or whatever." (Skeates 72) Perhaps for this reason, the production of the series was notably unstable with Ditko leaving after only three issues and Skeates leaving after issue four. Gil Kane took over primary art duties with issue four and both writing and art duties in issues five and six. Much of the discussion below focuses on the internal character dynamics first set by Ditko and Skeates, with the aid of Infantino and Giordano, though Kane's contributions prove significant in working through the initial conditions established in this first *Showcase* issue. Additionally, in light of Skeates' remarks about the editorial process and the frequent revision of his scripting by Ditko and Giordano, there is reason to believe that Ditko had a primary role in establishing certain characterizations and narrative dynamics.

In keeping with their typical dialogue throughout the continuing series, the alter egos of Hawk and Dove, Hank and Don Hall, are introduced mid-argument. The brothers' roles as exemplars are made immediately manifest: they are positioned near opposed groups of protesters on a college campus—one group, aligned with Don, decry a conspicuously unnamed war, the other group, aligned with Hank, protest in favor of the generic war with signs that read "Keep up the bombing." Don, the slight blonde, is bow-tied and cardigan-clad, while Hank—red-haired and sneering—is balled up in a state of angst and frustration. The protests quickly erupt into violence, although no indication of what triggers this escalation is given nor is any resolution of the brawl shown. Instead, the scene immediately shifts to a courtroom where the boys' father, Judge Irwin Hall, is handing down a maximum sentence to a recently convicted criminal.

The didactic role of Judge Hall is swiftly established with Ditko and Skeates directly positioning him as the counterpoint to the pair of brothers. Where the reader is invited to see both Don and Hank as foolhardy and hostage to their emotions, Judge Hall offers unvarnished albeit frustratingly opaque appeals to "reason" and "logic" as the proper arbiter of moral issues regarding violence. Judge Hall intervenes in Hank and Don's squabbling as follows:

> Oh, and you think you're right! Well then, suppose you explain to me just what it is that makes YOU right and THEM wrong! Time and again I've asked you and Don to explain your beliefs to me! But neither of you seem able to do so! As far as I can see, neither of you have thought this thing out! That means you're BOTH wrong! As I've said before, it's not enough to repeat slogans! You have to have more REASONING behind your beliefs! (Ditko *et al.* 11-12)

Later, Judge Hall adds:

> Sometimes it surprises me that MY two sons could act so irrationally! You're always arguing, but neither of you know what you're talking about! You've got to learn—the ONLY way to solve problems is through logic! (Ditko *et al.* 12)

For all its didacticism regarding the ethics of violence, the moral undergirding of *The Hawk and the Dove* remains woefully unclear. Evidently, Ditko and Skeates envision Judge Hall and his interaction with Hank and Don to be saying *something* about the ethics of violence, but what exactly? Is it merely a means for demonstrating the untenability of any middle ground regarding the ethics of violence and so anticipates the uncompromisingly brutal ethics made explicit in Ditko's later work?

A natural place to look for interpretive guidance is moral philosophy, but, even here, importantly different readings of Hawk and Dove suggest themselves, several of which push us in a notably different direction than familiar gestures towards Rand's influence on Ditko. The most straightforward of these invites an Aristotelian reading that hinges on the virtue ethics espoused by Aristotle.[3] Such a reading enjoys some support from Ditko's engagement with Aristotelian themes and ideas, though these were invariably refracted through Ditko's urgent preoccupation with Randian objectivism.[4] When read along Aristotelian lines, Judge Hall is naturally positioned as an embodiment of an Aristotelian conception of virtue, which distinguishes virtuous moral traits by situating them as "the golden mean" on a spectrum between vicious extremes. (By way of example, the virtue of courage falls between the vicious traits of recklessness and cowardice.) So interpreted, Judge Hall's putatively moderate views on violence would emerge as virtuous precisely because of their intermediary position between the polarizing vices of Don's servility and Hank's irascibility.[5] When cast against this Aristotelian backdrop, the extreme nature of Hawk and Dove's stances immediately presents the two as vicious and morally problematic. It seems, however, that, while Ditko and Skeates find fault with Hank and Don, there is a sustained effort to cast them (or at least Hawk) in a broadly heroic light. In addition, a broadly Aristotelian reading fails to account for what is perhaps the most striking feature of the series' frequent moralizing: Judge Hall's labored and peculiar insistence that moral justification issue from "logic" alone.[6]

Judge Hall's remarks regarding violence and ethics are puzzling for both their prominence and their opacity. Don and Hank plainly attempt, at various points, to

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[3] The watershed in virtue ethics is Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* though myriad views regarding the structural relations between virtues and vices have been subsequently developed. On virtue ethics in its contemporary guise, see Hursthouse (1999).

[4] For example, Ditko repeatedly appeals to, "A=A," which Rand alleges is a distinctively Aristotelian thesis, in characterizing the Randian exemplar, Mr. A. See Bell (2008: 111). While Ditko seems to think this captures the law of identity and the essence of Aristotle's philosophy, most philosophers would find this a highly idiosyncratic reading of Aristotle (or the content of a tautology). In similar homage, Vic Sage's confidant in *The Question* stories was pointedly named 'Aristotle'. On Ditko's intellect ties to Rand, see Bell (2008) and Brühwiler (2014).

[5] Such a reading is complicated by, but conforms with the requirements of the Comics Code Authority which mandate that a figure of authority like Judge Hall "never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect." On the CCA, see Nyberg (1994).

[6] There are resources available for an Aristotelian reading here that point to *phronesis* or practical wisdom as a source of moral knowledge, but the inculcation of virtue along Aristotelian lines places an emphasis on the role of habituation that squares poorly with Judge Hall's role.

provide justification for their preferred stances (though, admittedly, neither offer any very compelling grounds). But Judge Hall swiftly dismisses each of them for failing to rely upon logic or reason. It seems, then, that if Judge Hall is to insist that moral beliefs be grounded in "logic," the intended sense of "logic" must be of an especially substantial sort. Presumably, it must be a conception of reason or logic that ensures a robust link between logic or reason and moral value; in particular, it must be an epistemic link that ensures moral principles are discoverable through purely logical or rational reflection.[7] Accounts of our moral knowledge that hold reason or logic to play a foundational role in our knowledge of moral facts are not uncommon in the history of ethics. Such views—usually labelled as instances of *moral rationalism*—often draw an analogy between our knowledge of logic or mathematics and our moral knowledge insofar as each body of knowledge is discoverable via reason alone rather than sentiment or experience.[8] As Samuel Clarke, the 18th century English philosopher, vividly describes the connection between reason and moral objectivity:

> There are therefore certain necessary and eternal differences of things; and certain consequent fitnesses or unfitnesses of the application of different things or different relations one to another; not depending on any positive constitutions, but founded unchangeably in the nature and reason of things, and unavoidably arising from the differences of the things themselves. (Clarke 38)[9]

Clarke later maps out the tie between reason and moral judgment:

> Thus it appears in general, that the mind of Man cannot avoid giving its Assent to the eternal Law of Righteousness; that is, cannot but acknowledge the reasonableness and fitness of Men's governing all their Actions by the Rule of Right or Equity: And also that this Assent is a formal Obligation upon every Man, actually and constantly to conform himself to that Rule. (Clarke 190).

Viewed through the lens of moral rationalism, Judge Hall's critique can be read straightforwardly, since Don and Hank's moral beliefs are grounded exclusively in sentiment and emotion, which affords no prospect of moral knowledge. *Moral sentimentalism*—roughly, the view that our moral knowledge is grounded in our affective states such as anger or sympathy—is caricatured as cartoonishly implausible, delivering either Hank's brutish hostility or Don's unprincipled timidity. In neither case,

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[7] There is, to be sure, a Randian source for Ditko's interest in such a view as evidenced directly in Judge Hall's dialogue: "Right and wrong cannot be a matter of convenience! A society must be governed by objective laws—and man by objective principles! Think about it and let me know what guides you two!" (Ditko *et al.* 40) Here, our interest is looking further back and philosophically deeper than the limited attention to moral epistemology Rand provides.

[8] On moral rationalism and its contrast with sentimentalism, see Gill (2007).

[9] Cf. Kant on moral rationalism: "the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason." (Kant 3)

does Ditko leave space for the idea that our affective sympathies might ground our knowledge of right and wrong. Judge Hall gives clearest voice to this strain of moral rationalism, while admonishing a criminal mid-sentencing: “"Sir, this is a court of law! Law is based on facts, on logic... Not on emotion! You’re here to answer for what you DID! How you feel about it NOW is irrelevant!” (Ditko *et al.* 61)

The dynamic between Don, Hank, and Judge Hall points the reader to a striking but historically influential view of morality on which the world admits of an intrinsic moral order discoverable via reason alone. The idea that moral demands are stitched directly into the fabric of reality is echoed in remarkable fashion when Don and Hank are gifted their powers. With Judge Hall in danger, a mysterious voice emerges, seemingly unbidden and without explanation, in order to provide Hank and Don the power necessary to save their father.[10] The voice instantly imbues Hank and Don with powers carefully tailored to address exclusively imminent threat. While these powers can be summoned by uttering ‘Hawk’ and ‘Dove’ respectively, they cannot be activated without the presence of wrong-doing and, upon conclusion of conflict, Hawk and Dove revert to their ordinary state. Rather strikingly, the voice ensures a perfect proportionality of Hawk and Dove’s powers as means for redressing evil, not through the aptness of Hank or Don’s emotional sentiments, but by an unexplained, infallible kind of moral dynamics. In this way, the mysterious voice serves as a narrative embodiment of the moral rationalist presupposition that there is an exacting moral structure to the world which places precise and objective demands upon agents. More striking still, we might hope to find ourselves in something like Hank and Don’s position, where the world’s basic moral principles could be spoken to us, directly and unambiguously, so long as we “listen” with reason and logic rather than relying upon our inconstant emotions and sympathies.

§3. Violence’s Limits

The Hawk and the Dove presents a species of moral rationalism according to which reason is the ultimate source of and singular means for discovering ethical principles. And, while it is notable for its vivid treatment of the *epistemology* of morality, it remains an open question what the series implicates regarding the *content* of morality and, specifically, which ethical principles govern or bear upon the morality of violence.[11] Extracting a verdict on what, if any, kinds of violence are morally permissible in the narrative world of Hawk and Dove therefore requires especially close attention to their respective characterization and the narrative mechanics of the series.

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[10] The panels in which the mysterious voice emerges not only collapse our conventions regarding text and image in a manner that prefigures Ditko’s much later work, especially his *Witzend* work and subsequent Mr. A comics where the visual space of the panel is replete with text as physical space.

[11] The distinction here is one between the first-order epistemology of ethics, which concerns the source of our justification regarding moral beliefs, and normative ethics, which (roughly) concerns which, if any, ethical claims are true. Moral rationalism is, strictly speaking, silent on matters regarding normative ethics.

Once subject to close scrutiny, *The Hawk and the Dove* is rightly seen as one might expect: it is both an eerily dismissive engagement with pacifism and an insubstantial investigation into the harms of unreflective violence. Note that, while Hawk is consistently chastised by Dove for attacking people without hesitation or reflection, Hawk's predilection for violence never leads him to assault bystanders or gravely harm innocents. Nor do Hawk's attacks upon those unambiguously singled out as criminals lead to grievous injury. So, if there is any remotely substantial critique of Hawk's attitude towards violence, it is not by way of the most direct and perhaps familiar concerns about violence—namely, that it endangers innocent parties or typically transforms proportionate responses into acts of brutality. To the contrary, the only consequences of Hawk's tendency towards violence that are marked as concerning are its strategic unpredictability and its role in generating emotional conflict with Dove. Given Skeates' remarks about the views of Ditko, Infantino, and Giordano regarding violence, it is perhaps unsurprising that Hawk's affinity for violence is portrayed as a mere strategic miscalculation rather than as grounds for serious moral condemnation.

While Hawk's stance on violence receives at best a modest reprimand in the series, Dove's resistance to violence is portrayed far less favorably. At various points, his hesitance to engage in violence permits criminals to escape, results in considerable injury to himself and Hawk, and, in one rather harrowing turn, leads police to shoot and kill a criminal who might have otherwise been non-fatally subdued. Throughout the series, Dove's avowal of non-violence is presented as inseparable from his cowardice and thereby amplifies the standard and derisive associations of the "dove" epithet. Dove's narrative arc provides no inkling whatsoever that a resistance to violence might issue from a principled moral commitment or reflect any sort of inner moral rectitude. If anything, Dove's reluctance to engage in violence is consistently marked by two salient features: a manifest incoherence and a bizarrely facile view about the nature of violence.

The futility of Dove's brand of non-violence is made clearest when we witness him, in *The Hawk and the Dove* #2, subdue a criminal almost exclusively by weathering enough blows to exhaust his opponent. Here and in other instances where Dove refrains from striking criminals, the incoherence of his attitudes emerges as he merely shifts the task of engaging violence to Hawk. In other cases, where Dove's physical powers permit the opportunity to physically subdue his attackers with minimal harm, his efforts to avoid violence merely abet Hawk's subsequent brutality. Repeatedly, Dove is presented as merely forestalling or redirecting violence, but never genuinely preventing it from taking place. Worse still, at various points his remarks suggest a flatly incoherent conception of non-violence with Dove claiming "I'll fight them my way!" (Ditko *et al.* 53) Notably, this incoherence is eventually acknowledged but only after the cancellation of the original series in 1970's *Teen Titans* #29, written by Skeates who returned to the character without Ditko. While attempting to place a criminal in a wrestling hold, Dove thinks:

> Gotta hold onto this guy till Hank finishes with Ocean Master! Then Hank'll be able to take care of this one, and I'll... Wait a minute! I'm counting on Hank's

> methods to pull us through--? How can I be a Dove? If I count on Hank's violence, then I'm no better than he is! (Skeates *et al.* 16)

Along with the dubious coherence of Dove's views regarding violence in the initial series, Dove's remarks regularly present a bizarre view of the nature of violence and what might distinguish it from non-violent intervention. Not only is it highly unclear what Dove views as genuinely violent behavior, it remains entirely unexplained why he might view violence as morally impermissible. At some points, Dove seems to merely reject brutality rather than violence *per se*, remarking to Hawk "No! I Still don't think excessive violence is necessary! Or justifiable!" (Ditko *et al.* 130) Stranger still, Dove places characters in locks or holds, strikes hands in order to dislodge weapons, and trips or binds attackers. Upon forcibly restraining one assailant, Dove congratulates himself, remarking "I DID it! I proved that I could beat him WITHOUT violence! I... I proved it!" (Ditko *et al.* 79) Such remarks suggest, not a coherent form of pacifism, but a moral code that fetishizes actions like punching or kicking as the salient moral divide between violence and non-violence.

Viewed through the lens of any familiar ethical theory, Dove's characterization relies upon an exceptionally strange point at which to draw any ethically significant distinction. Although there is precious little agreement in ethics regarding what is permissible, there is near-consensus that proportionate response for the sake of self-defense is morally permissible. Indeed, as Uniacke (1994: 1) notes, "Self-defence is widely regarded and cite as a paradigm of morally permissible private homicide." We are not, it seems, acting wrongly when, in an effort to save ourselves from manifestly lethal assault, we respond with violence. For this reason, there is nothing *intrinsically* immoral about certain sorts of physical actions—e.g., Dove's punches, trips, and holds. Instead, their moral status is determined by contextual matters—namely, whether they are responses to unjust assault, reflect illicit attitudes, or generate harmful consequences.

The oddity of Dove's attitudes is further compounded by the conspicuous absence of any clear grounds for his eschewing violence. While different rationales for non-violence or pacifism can be given, the most compelling of these stem from a prohibition against doing harm to others. Puzzlingly, Dove is stricken with fear of engaging in violence, but expresses remarkably little concern about harm itself or the aim of preventing it. When engaging with a criminal, Dove is primarily focused on whether his own conduct might be described as violent and only secondarily concerned with whether others are being harmed. In this way, his commitment to non-violence is portrayed in a manner that renders its motivations, not as commendable albeit extreme, but, instead, as alien, implausible, or otherwise wrong-headed. Indeed, the dramatic watermark of the series comes in the fifth issue where Dove's commitment to non-violence collapses in spectacular and disturbing fashion. Fearing that a gunman has slain Hawk, Dove stalks and pummels the shooter while ranting "KILLER! KILLER! FILTHY, ROTTEN KILLER!" (Ditko *et al.* 153) Later, he confesses to a convalescing Hank: "I don't know what's real anymore!" (Ditko *et al.* 157) Although it is tempting to read Dove's breakdown as an effort to bring Dove in line with the standard features of the

superhero genre (or to address lagging sales), the central effect is to paint Dove as deeply unstable and, by doing so, retrospectively undermine any sense that his prior commitment to non-violence owes to moral principle rather than psychological instability. As a short-lived experiment in a narrative of a non-violent hero, Dove's arc ends in what seems to be an even less intellectually and psychologically stable position than it began.

§4. Unreasonable Self-Defense?

Up to this point, our efforts have focused on understanding the views regarding moral knowledge as well as the ethics of violence that emerge from *The Hawk and the Dove.* With all its peculiarities in view, we can now turn to the question of what this narrative experiment might tell us about the broader norms of violence within the superhero genre. To this end, we are best served by considering what are surely the strangest moments in the series: the points at which, given Dove's extreme views regarding violence, he seemingly abides physical assault without asserting his apparent right of self-defense.

For critics of pacifism, Dove's actions mark the hinge-point at which the ethical requirements of (stereotypical) pacifism lapse into manifest implausibility. After all, even those philosophers who offer famously strict prescriptions about what might permissibly be done in defense of self or others have typically endorsed the permissibility of proportionate use of force in self-defense. Notice, however, that Ditko's wildly unsympathetic portrayal of Dove's pacifism relies upon a critical assumption (one that we have left intact above): that Dove is foolishly neglecting to assert his right to self-defense. As I will now suggest, this assumption turns on a conception of self-defense and the permissibility of violence that, while widespread in the superhero genre, eventually collapses under closer scrutiny.

To see why, notice that appeals to one's right to self-defense in justifying violence can be undermined for two familiar reasons. First, if you are, in fact, immune to significant harm, it is *prima facie* impermissible for you to use violence in the cause of self-defense. When, for example, a small child sets out to clobber me with a balloon, I have no plausible claim to permissibly shove her to the ground, provided I am aware of the circumstances.[12] Second, if you have knowingly thrust yourself in harm's way (without complicating considerations), it is similarly impermissible for you to employ violence for the sake of self-defense. Suppose, for example, you decided to jump onto a bobsled track mid-race. Had some fiendish bobsledders conspired to assault you on a sidewalk without your knowledge, your right to self-defense would permit proportionate response. But, if you have simply thrust yourself in harm's way while well aware of impending danger, you have seemingly forfeited your right to, say, blow up the bobsled track to save yourself.

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[12] Concerns about proportionality are critical axis of complexity concerning accounts of self-defense. See Uniacke (1994) and Ryan (1983).

In light of the just-noted considerations, asserting one's right to self-defense proves a nuanced and morally fragile matter.[13] And, if immunity to significant harm and actively generating the potential harm one faces can undermine a claim to rightful self-defense, the assumption that pervades Dove's characterization—namely, that using violence against criminals would be justified by way of self-defense—proves mistaken. Dove, like Hawk, is a super-powered individual and notably impervious to injury. Moreover, Dove's encounters with violence are almost entirely the product of tossing himself headfirst into imminent danger. So, while we might be initially inclined to think that Dove's use of violence while fighting back against criminals would be morally permissible by virtue of constituting self-defense, it is far from obvious that this constitutes self-defense in any uncontroversial sense.

This point generalizes beyond the case of Hawk and Dove and draws out the fact that our ordinary conception of self-defense can only rarely justify the typical violence undertaken by superheroes. After all, superheroes are plausibly viewed as both typically immune to harm and as intervening with full knowledge of risk. To be sure, the prospect of potential harm is made salient through the craft of storytelling, but, again and again, superheroes exhibit a remarkable immunity and, at each turn, they appear to seek out risk and danger albeit for sympathetic reasons. Although the pervasive violence in superhero comics is only rarely justified by appeal to self-defense, this does not, on its own, show such violence to be unjustified. But, unless the ethics of violence in superhero comics involves a radical suspension of our ordinary moral beliefs such that standing moral principles are abandoned, readers' apparent belief that superhero violence is permissible or even praiseworthy still calls for some principled moral explanation.

If self-defense is insufficient to explain our moral approbation of superhero violence, then we must presumably appeal to some sort of broadly consequentialist principle. Such a principle will ratify violence precisely because superheroes, unlike mere normal individuals, are uniquely and specially equipped and entitled to protect the innocent. Indeed, it looks as though this principle emerges as a necessary ethical commitment of the genre. But, if this moral commitment is what allows readers to stomach violence in superhero comics, we can see why the aesthetic experiment with Dove leaves only a sour taste in the mouth of readers. At every turn, his reluctance to undertake violence runs directly contrary to what the ethical norms and moral expectations that the superhero genre is steeped in and depends upon. So, while draped in all the trappings of a typical superhero, he refuses to play along with a foundational commitment of the genre: that violence by superheroes is somehow morally unproblematic. By rejecting violence, he forces the reader to attend to questions about the complex and concerning ethics of violence that the superhero genre crucially relies upon its readers to deftly and seamlessly ignore.

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[13] It is difficult to understate the complexity of variation among extant accounts of self-defense. Numerous complications are elided here. See Thomson (1991) and Doggett (2011).

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