Batman and (the evilness of) evil

By Ash Cocksworth.

The Dark Knight (2008) was a huge box-office success. It is the second instalment in Christopher Noland's series (following *Batman Begins*, 2005) and continues the retrieval of the darkened Batman mythology that was cruelly lost in the recent Batman spin-offs: e.g. *Catwoman* (2004) and Joel Schumacher's (painfully) pantomimic rendition of *Batman and Robin* (1997) and *Batman Forever* (1995). It successfully matches the menacing eeriness that we saw during the Burton era (1989-1992) without falling into Burton's (trademark) over-theatric surrealism – that in my opinion is better left in the nineties.

In this movie, Batman is up against (for the second time) the Joker. However unlike the Joker's almost comic insanity that we saw in *Batman* (1989), Heath Ledger, in a performance of a lifetime (literally), emerges behind the perversion of a psychopathic madman, a self confessed 'freak', the 'agent of chaos' – a very different sort of villain indeed. His face caked in that flaking paint which terrifyingly exaggerates his horrific scars and impossibly lifeless eyes have immortalized the Joker as a hideous yet thrilling villain. He was utterly fantastic. And in a weird sort of way, the audience is left wondering whether Ledger's tragic death had anything to do with immersing himself into the depths of psychotic disturbance that were required in order to pull off such a convincing performance.

Behind the theatrics and costume, though, the Joker is a very interesting character. What interests me is that he personifies an account of evil that protects the <u>evilness of evil</u> in ways that most contemporary philosophical and theological accounts of evil fail to do. And an understanding of evil, of course, is vital in our understanding of our ethical situation and it informs the way in which we

respond to evil. Therefore, *The Dark Knight* is much more than just a Hollywood movie or a night of entertainment, it has something very important to say to us all. There is also lots that can be said of the (typological) comparisons between Batman and Christ (particularly in the final scene), and also the fascinating Batman/Joker, good/evil dialectic (that is evident throughout); but for now, I am going to concentrate on evil. (*Beware: spoilers*).

The movie deliberately tests our moral assumptions about the 'good' and the 'bad'. Take for instance, the Joker's 'social experiment'. In taking hostage two of the ships that are fleeing the Joker's campaign of terror – one harbouring Gotham's 'sweet and innocent civilians', the other the city's 'scumbags', the murderers and thieves – the Joker aims to prove that Gotham's 'moral code…drops at the first sign of trouble. When the chips are down, these civilised people will eat each other', he tells Batman. So, he demands the sacrifice of one ship for the survival of the other. In doing so, the Joker calls into question the very categories of morality we employ to measure the (seemingly) 'good' and 'bad'. On the 'bad' ship, the criminals dismiss the choice as an impossible decision, their only choice is to destroy the detonator. The 'good' ship, however, reverts to a good democratic vote to settle the dilemma – and the anonymous vote favours the murder of the criminals, 'who', after all, 'have had their chance'. The democracy, however, cannot produce an individual to follow through the detonation. The 'good' as well as the 'bad', therefore, refuse to facilitate the Joker's depravity and, as Batman gloats, 'this city just showed you [the Joker] that it is full of people who are ready to believe in the good'. Nevertheless, it is the prisoners who come out looking (slightly) more 'virtuous'. In other words, the 'good' people are not so good after all and are only separated from the 'bad' by a very thin line of morality. Here the filmmakers are using the Joker to interrogate the very structure of our self-constructed and self-preservatory moral system. In fact, here we have fallen right into the Joker's trap; he too wants to rid Gotham of all such categories (of which neither the Joker nor Batman, by nature of his vigilantism, fit into), replacing them with a sadistic anarchy – 'the only sensible way to live in this world is without rules', we are (ironically) told by the most sense-less character of the movie. The Joker is so senseless that he successfully ruins that which we call 'bad' and leaves the audience questioning the point of even having these categories of morality if they fail to contain the wickedness exemplified in the Joker.

The Joker comes across so evil because there are no external motivations that explain the criminality of Gotham City's prime terrorist. In fact, he defies the very category of stereotypical villainy by claiming complete unconcern for the pursuit of the (rational) rewards that tempt the average villain. For example, he has no interest in climbing the echelons of Gotham City's underworld – the movie opens with the Joker's unabashed betrayal of all his fellow armed robbers. At another point, he even burns a stockpile of stolen cash – the tenet of comic criminality. The Joker's motivation, however, is simply to cause boundless terror and chaos for no reason (and following no strict plan) other than for the sake of terrorising. 'Some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money, they can't be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with, some men just want to watch the world burn', said Alfred in characteristic poignancy. The Joker is not content with just burning the

world for the sake of burning the world, he actually wants to sit back and enjoy watching the tortuous burning and smelling the sizzling flesh – this is why the Joker's weapon of choice is the knife and not the gun. He really lives up to his reputation as a 'new class of criminal'.

The Joker remains so wicked throughout the film not only because his actions are entirely inexplicable but also because the origin of his evilness is unknown. At various points, the Joker is asked of the origins of his dramatically ugly scars, distorted face and repulsive image (that Jack Nicholson's Joker previously accredited to an accident in a chemical factory and botched plastic surgery). However, in a ploy to undermine the attempt to locate his evilness, the Joker offers conflicting answers – child abuse, self-mutilation etc. This serves only to indulge and tempt the interrogators' demand (which the audience also shares in) for explanation who unbeknown to each other is led to believe that they hold the key to the Joker's insanity. Even Batman is reminded by Alfred that 'with respect, maybe this is a man you don't fully understand'; not because Batman can't but because the Joker defies explanation. It seems that unlike DC Comics and Burton, Noland intentionally decided against providing a meaning behind the Joker's evilness, he refused to satisfy the fanboy's desire for description because without an explanation, evil is ever more meaningless, it is ever more evil. Furthermore, this Joker remains nameless (unlike Nicholson's character, Jack Napier) as if a name would humanise and naturalise the evil we see in the Joker. For the same reason, Noland refuses to place the Joker within a wider narrative arch (Napier, of course, murdered Batman's parents in the 1989 incarnation). He has no humanity, he is utterly inhuman. The distortion is intensified as it is set against the backdrop of the image of a clown, an image usually associated with happiness, laughter and joviality – we could even say that the Joker is a distortion of a good (at one point, the Joker appears as a nurse, the same principle applies).

Modernity has been obsessed with finding the root cause of evil, as if to say 'Well, there's your problem!' and as if an explanation is in anyway comforting to those on the suffering end of evil. In theological language, this is called a theodicy, which attempts to (dis)solve the problem of evil (i.e. how to account for the presence of evil in a creation created good) along logical lines. In this way (and this is the problem) evil is treated as an entirely explainable phenomenon. However, once explained, evil has to occupy a specified place in the created order under the alibi of goodness (as all things created, according to the writer of Genesis 1, are good). It becomes naturalised, domesticated and written into our system – and therefore evil cannot be horrendously evil. Back to Batman, if there was either a motivation, or a category that could contain, or an explanation of the origins of the Joker's wickedness then the Joker would not be all that wicked. He would posses the generic qualities of the comic bad-guy – who is scary, but not terrifying and not corrupting, not *really* evil – Two Face, for example. Unlike the Joker, Two Face's evilness is accounted for: it is the product of an accident and defined by a broken heart. He is motivated by revenge and is therefore a completely different sort of villain, and one who is easily dispensed with.

The Christian scriptures also refuse an account of how or why the serpent was present in the garden of Eden, it was just (inexplicably) there. Evil, then, is not an alternative principle that is waged

in a spiritual battle against the good (the Christian vs. the devil dualistic mentality of many contemporary, subjectivistic and externalistic, understandings of evil) and can therefore be marginalised as something that only 'others' do. Rather, it is the *distortion of a good*, it is the scars to the Joker's otherwise scar-less face, but not the face itself. And in an important sense, we all bear the scars of evil (though less pronounced than the Joker's), we are all implicated in evil, no matter how pious our intentions are – not just those 'baddies' (the ones in prison uniforms) who fall into the category we have called 'immoral'. Darkness descends over the whole of Gotham; as the Joker seductively tempts, 'You can *all* be like me', which works from the presupposition that there is an evil in us all waiting to be unleashed. This is confirmed in the Joker's eventual corruption of the 'White Knight', 'the face of Gotham's bright future' who becomes the personification of hopelessness (illustrated in his turn to a moral construct based purely on the laws of baseless and meaningless chance).

By protecting the evilness of evil, *The Dark Knight* teaches to our violence-obsessed culture that evil is not something to be trivialised or glorified. The Joker is not a character to be mimicked and the 'good' and the 'bad' are not easily as categorised as we may have thought. Therefore there is a real ethical dimension to *The Dark Knight*. It asks a very important question that shifts attention away from the language of theodicy which serves only to satisfy our (modern) desire for linearity onto actually facing the horrendously beastly presence of evil in the world. The point I am making is that by beginning to understand what evil is, which the Joker helps us to do (the Joker's final scene is him hanging upside down which alludes to the upturned cross – the emblem of Satanism), we begin learn how to respond to it – however, Batman doesn't do quite as good a job at explaining how to respond to evil properly as although he is motivated by the good, he arrives at the good via a morally ambiguous and violent route. Our proper response to evil takes the form of (active) hope in Christ.