

2-19 (2A): Exploring Morality in Marvel's Daredevil

(1949 Words)

Introduction

Rationale

Television fiction traditionally served to satisfy “a basic human motivation: the motivation to divide the social world into good people and bad, and to morally praise and condemn them accordingly”. (Pizarro, Baumeister & Rosenberg, 2013, p. 2) However, the morally ambiguous character has become more and more prevalent in popular television fiction and film (Raney & Janicke, 2013). One concern is that the morally conflicted content might tarnish the viewer's moral compass, and as a result might lead to audience members not understanding the difference between right and wrong (Askar, 2011; Polatis, 2014). Thus, this paper will aim to examine the inherent ambiguity of moral conflicts in Daredevil and give audience members a clearer picture of the theme of morality in Daredevil.

Thesis Statement

Moral ambiguity is heavily portrayed in Daredevil, as evidenced by the lack of clarity in ethical decision-making in characters' internal conflicts as well as the dilemmatic moral approaches as presented in external conflicts with other characters, which serves to be the central theme in Daredevil.

Research Questions

1. In the internal conflict of Murdock and the external conflict between Murdock and Wilson Fisk as well as Daredevil and the Punisher, what are the moral imperatives at play?
2. In the internal conflict of Murdock, how do his actions portray his moral quandaries, with respect to such quandaries being reflective of an inherent conflict between two moral imperatives?
3. In the external conflicts between Murdock and Fisk as well as Murdock and Punisher, what is the end goal that both characters seek to achieve and how do their actions present a moral dilemma with regard to achieving such goals?

Limitations

The Daredevil series has only spanned two seasons thus far, which may give us an unclear image of the full extent of the moral conflicts. Daredevil is also set in Hell's Kitchen where crime and corruption is rife. This may have given characters imperatives to deliver their own set of justice, ultimately culminating in moral conflicts. Thus, the representation of moral conflicts in Daredevil may not be relevant in today's society due to the incompatible societal conditions in Hell's Kitchen.

Literature Review

Ethical Theories and Frameworks

The Kantian Moral Theory is a set of deontological or duty-based ethics. (Weiss, 2009). This means that the reasons and motives of actions matter while the consequences do not. (Greene, 2008) The “reasons and motives” according to the theory refer to an adherence to moral law or our personal reason, which Kant believed serves to guide the will in doing what is inherently good. Thus, an action is only considered good, when it has passed the test of our rationality, which Kant details in his “categorical imperatives”.

Mill’s Utilitarian Theory is a form of consequentialism, which entails that the end result should be the most important consideration in any act implemented. Whether an act is morally right in this theory depends only on consequences as opposed to the circumstances or the intrinsic nature of the act. (Sinnot-Armstrong, 2011) More specifically, the action that produces the greatest wellbeing for the largest number is the morally right one, which is in stark contrast to the Kantian Moral Theory

The Divine Command Theory is a set of deontological ethics that states that “to be right is to be commanded by God, and to be wrong is to be forbidden by God”. (Tuggi, 2005 p.53) To explain the theory in terms of meta-ethics, it states that it is the divine free will of God, which is not subject to any reason or requirements, that establishes morality and renders any action good or evil by command and prohibition. (Al-Attar, 2015) The theory thus asserts that good actions are morally good as a result of their being commanded by God; what is morally right is what God desires. (Austin, 2006)

Analysis of Theories

“Competing Conceptions of Modern Desert: Vengeful, Deontological, and Empirical (Robinson, 2008) details deontological (Kantian and Divine Command) views on moral wrongdoing. It posits that such ethics are identified by “the principle of retaliation that a punishment inflicted should correspond in degree to the offense of the wrongdoer”

The Secret Joke of Kant’s Soul (Greene, 2008) establishes the relationship between utilitarianism and moral wrongdoing stating that “Punishment is justified solely by its future beneficial effects, through deterrence and the containment of dangerous individuals.”

From the two perspectives, we can derive certain limitations of each theory of criminal justice which is a central theme in Daredevil. Deontological criminal justice is inherently retributive and reveals an inherent disregard for criminal law as there is no consideration for the consequences of

such punitive measures. The inherent flaw of Utilitarian criminal justice arises when prison systems often fail to rehabilitate criminals leading them back to a life of crime after release.

Such limitations in Deontological and Utilitarian criminal justice, as well as the moral imperatives themselves, thus allow us to more closely examine moral conflicts in Daredevil. In external moral conflicts, such limitations are brought up by characters, during conflict dialogue. Hence, these limitations in the moral approaches of the characters ultimately result in such external conflicts being inherently dilemmatic. In internal moral conflicts, the inherent contradiction between moral imperatives within the character is present through dialogue as well as his actions. This results in a lack of clarity in their ethical decision-making, proving our thesis that moral ambiguity is heavily portrayed in Daredevil, either through internal or external moral conflicts.

Gaps in Literature

From the reviewed literature on ethical studies, we have concluded that most journals focus on the application of said ethical theories in straightforward and non-conflicting paradigms such as business and marketing (Murphy, 2010). This results in the underexposure of the application of ethics in moral conflicts, where multiple moral imperatives are at play and obeying one would result in transgressing another. Hence, our paper will attempt to apply the aforementioned ethical theories to complicated moral conflicts in Daredevil, in order to shed light on the significance of examining moral conflicts and to value-add to the field of ethical studies.

Methodology

The Kantian Moral Theory, Mill's Utilitarian Theory and the Divine Command Theory will be used to form the research framework for the analysis of the specific moral conflicts in Daredevil. We will be using 6 scenes in Daredevil stemming from 3 moral conflicts: Murdock (Daredevil)'s internal conflict with Catholicism, Murdock's conflict with Wilson Fisk and Murdock's conflict with the Punisher. These scenes are a mix of action and conflict dialogue scenes which capture the characters at their most intimate moments, allowing us to better understand each character's moral imperative and hence the moral conflicts themselves. In each scene, the research framework will be used to identify the moral imperatives of each character and hence explain the moral ambiguity of each conflict.

Discussion

Murdock's Internal Conflict with Catholicism



Murdock consults his priest Father Lantom after suffering from a long-standing internal conflict. He asks Father Lantom whether the “devil” exists and Father Lantom tells him about a chilling story in Rwanda before concluding that the devil does exist and comes in many forms.

This scene encapsulates Murdock’s moral conflict as the “devil” refers to Wilson Fisk, a criminal overlord who kills his enemies and bribes policemen to get his way in Hell’s Kitchen. Daredevil sees Wilson Fisk as a threat to peace in Hell’s Kitchen but efforts to bring him down legally through his law firm have proved futile. Murdock knows that by killing Wilson Fisk himself, he will save Hell’s Kitchen from widespread crime and unrest. However, this obviously encroaches on his Catholic moral code, in which the fifth commandment states “Thou shalt not kill”. Hence, moral ambiguity presents itself as a struggle between Daredevil’s utilitarian motivations and his Catholic moral code.

Despite this, it must be noted that Murdock’s internal conflict is not as convincing as other moral conflicts, due to his waning reliance on Catholicism as a tool in ethical decision-making. In season one, he goes to church regularly and even attends Sacraments of Reconciliation to repent for his sins. In season two, this narrative is toned down significantly as he rarely goes to church and never meets his pastor. This, along with his increasingly regular transgression of the Catholic moral code, ultimately weakens Murdock’s internal conflict and compromises the validity of the conflict itself.

Murdock's Conflict with Wilson Fisk



Murdock unexpectedly sees Fisk as the Scene Contempo Gallery and the two engage in light-hearted conversation before it takes a serious turn, when Fisk mentions that "the city has suffered long enough under poverty and decay". Both parties agree afterwards that the welfare and safety of Hell's Kitchen was important to them.

Crucially, Murdock's tactics as a lawyer by day and vigilante by night have received criticism as it is often ineffective in deterring crime due to his refrain from using excessive force. His belief in the criminal justice system, where criminals will be sent to prison and subsequently rehabilitated before re-entering society, is also problematic due to the ineffectiveness of such rehabilitation programmes.



Fisk's ruthless beheading of Anatoly Ranskahov

On the other hand, Fisk's methods, despite being extra-legal, have proved to be effective in deterring criminals, due to the large-scale criminal activities that he oversees as well as his excessive use of lethal force. This was evident with the beheading of Anatoly Ranskahov, a member of the Russian Mafia, after he lost his patience with him over a deal to take over the Velez Taxi Company. This points to a longstanding area of controversy, that advocates of utilitarianism have regularly disregarded, or even violated human rights. (Alexander, 2003)

Upon the confrontation with Murdock, Fisk comments that he is nothing but a “lone man who thinks he can make a difference”, prompting the audience to consider the morality of extra-legal methods which end up being more effective than legal ones. Thus, moral approaches in the external conflict of Fisk and Murdock are presented as inherently dilemmatic with regards to protecting Hell’s Kitchen despite both approaches being utilitarian.

Murdock’s Conflict with The Punisher



After losing consciousness, Daredevil wakes up on a rooftop only to find himself being the Punisher’s captive. Punisher then puts a gun in Daredevil’s hand and makes Grotto, a member of the Irish Mob crime syndicate, confess to his murders which included an innocent old lady in order to convince Daredevil that he deserved to die. However, Daredevil still refuses to shoot Grotto and promises Punisher to hand Grotto over to the NYPD. Instead, Daredevil shoots at the chains and frees himself but is unable to prevent Punisher from shooting Grotto in the chest, killing him.

Kant, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, states that “all the guilty must be punished and made to suffer the equivalent of the losses they inflicted”. Punisher serves as a testament to Kant’s philosophy, by believing in what Kant calls “retributive justice”. Punisher’s moral absolutist stance thus transcends the particular situation at hand and embodies principles of right and good, and thus will produce justice without regard to the political and social conditions, which is consistent with Kant’s views on Punishment. (Robinson, 2008)

Murdock, by preferring to hand over Grotto the NYPD, believes in a utilitarian approach to criminal justice, also known as corrective justice. To him, punishment is justified solely by its future beneficial effects, primarily through deterrence and (in the case of criminal law) the containment of dangerous individuals. (Greene, 2008).

Hence, the moral approaches of both characters present a clear moral dilemma. Given the ineffectiveness of the criminal system in Hell’s Kitchen, Murdock’s actions prove to be morally sound but may result in the improper rehabilitation of Grotto, perpetuating the cycle of crime. Punisher’s actions, on the contrary, certainly contravene the law in Hell’s Kitchen but will prove to be more effective in ending crime due to the absolutist stance that he takes. Hence, this clear moral dilemma reflects a blurred portrayal of morality in *Daredevil*, showing how the Kantian

moral approach of Punisher and the Utilitarian moral approach of Murdock presents itself as inherently dilemmatic with regards to protecting Hell's Kitchen.

Conclusion

In Daredevil, moral ambiguity is hence heavily portrayed. The regular conversations between Murdock and Priest reveals Murdock's attempts to correct his internal compass, as a result of an inherent conflict between his Catholic faith and his utilitarian motivations, while the shared motivations of Murdock, Fisk and Punisher to deter crime evolves into a point of contention as the utilitarian and Kantian imperatives of the characters are transgressed through their actions to deter crime.

This research is especially important as it comes at a time when societal morality is characterized by the pervasiveness of individual unethical behaviour, but at the same time a desire to maintain a positive moral self-image. (Gino, 2015) This highlights an inherent moral contradiction between the individual's desire and their actions. Given such circumstances, viewers who have experienced moral conflicts would be able to better understand the reasons behind them and thus make better informed moral decisions in the future by identifying the moral imperatives and developing options based on said imperatives, to navigate these conflicts. (Josephson & Hanson, 2002)

References

- Pizarro, D. A., Baumeister, R., & Rosenberg, R. (2013). Superhero comics as moral pornography. *Our superheroes, ourselves*, 19-36.
- Raney, A. A., & Janicke, S. H. (2013). How we enjoy and why we seek out morally complex characters in media entertainment. *Media and the moral mind*, 152-169.
- Askar, J.G. (2011). The rise of the anti-hero on TV and the impact it could have on kids. Deseret News. Retrieved from <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700208623/The-rise-of-the-anti-hero-on-TV-and-the-impact-it-could-have-on-kids.html?pg=all>
- Polatis, K. (2014). Why moral ambiguity is popular on TV and the big screen. Retrieved from <http://national.deseretnews.com/article/1640/Why-moral-ambiguity-is-popular-on-TV-and-the-big-screen.html#WHAFjJUVkYB77dbw.99>
- Gino, F. (2015). Understanding ordinary unethical behavior: Why people who value morality act immorally. *Current opinion in behavioral sciences*, 3, 107-111.
- Weiss, J. W. (2009). *Business Ethics: A Stakeholder & Issues Management Approach*. Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage Learning.
- Greene, J. D. (2008). The secret joke of Kant's soul. *Moral psychology*, 3, 35-79.

Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (Winter 2012). Consequentialism. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Retrieved on 28 April 2018 from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/consequentialism/>.

Tuggi, D. (2005) "Necessity Control and the Divine Command Theory," *Sophia* 44, 1: 53–75.

Al-Attar, M. (2015). The ethics and metaphysics of divine command theory. The Routledge companion to Islamic philosophy. New York: Routledge.

Austin, M (21 August 2006). "Divine Command Theory". Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved 28 April 2018.

Robson, T. (1995). Divine command theory and the foundations of ethics (Doctoral dissertation, Durham University).

Murphy, P. E. (2010). Marketing, Ethics of. Wiley Encyclopedia of Management.

Kant, I. (2017). Kant: The metaphysics of morals. Cambridge University Press.

Robinson, P. H. (2008). Competing conceptions of modern desert: Vengeful, deontological, and empirical. *The Cambridge Law Journal*, 67(1), 145-175.

Alexander, A.; (2003) Bentham, rights and humanity: a fight in three rounds. *Journal of Bentham Studies*, 6 pp. 1-18.

Josephson, M. S., & Hanson, W. (2002). Making ethical decisions (pp. 27-29). Los Angeles, CA: Josephson Institute of ethics.