THE VIRTUES OF
CAPTAIN AMERICA

MODERN-DAY LESSONS ON CHARACTER
FROM A WORLD WAR II SUPERHERO

Second Edition

MARK D. WHITE

The Virtues of Captain America

*To my father, who never lost his love for his country
even when disheartened by the people who ran it.
He will always be my Captain America.*

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Introduction

This is a book I've wanted to write for years, and I'm very excited finally to share it with you.

That's how I began the introduction to the first edition of this book, published in 2014. If I was excited then, you can imagine how I felt when I was given the opportunity, a decade later, to update it to include all the new developments in Captain America's saga since the first edition appeared!

In these pages, I will explain how Captain America—the fictional World War II super-soldier and modern-day Avenger familiar from comic books, movies, and animated TV series—provides an example of the personal virtues that philosophers since ancient times have put forward as defining personal excellence, as well as the ideals and principles upon which the United States of America was founded. To do this, I will combine my love of superhero comics with my background in moral and political philosophy to show how we can be better people—for ourselves, our family, and our communities—if we pay attention to the choices made by the Sentinel of Liberty.

Captain America—or simply "Cap"—has been one of the premier comic-book superheroes for over eighty years. Steve Rogers, the scrawny kid from New York who was transformed into a super-soldier by the United States government with super-soldier serum and Vita-Rays, was introduced when Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's *Captain America Comics* #1 hit the newsstands on March 10, 1941, nine months before the attack on Pearl Harbor.[1] The book lasted until the end of the 1940s, suffering the fate of most superhero comics as readers' interests turned to romance, horror, and Western comics. After a short-lived revival in the mid-1950s, Captain America was not seen again until 1964, when *Avengers* #4 told the now-famous tale of how Iron Man, Thor, Giant-Man, and Wasp found Steve Rogers frozen in a block of ice, his super-soldier serum preserving his

body in a state of suspended animation.[2] For the sixty years since, Cap has been a central player in the ever-expanding Marvel Universe, both in his own solo title and various Avengers books as well as the epic crossover stories that have become an annual event in comics publishing since the mid-1980s. Add to those the *Captain America* and *Avengers* films and his appearances in animated series, videogames, and other media, and it's easy to see why Captain America remains as much a heroic icon today as he was during World War II.

For all their groundbreaking ideas and innovative artwork, the "Golden Age" superhero comics published in the 1940s were not big on characterization, focusing mostly on exciting action and pure heroics. But that changed with the revival of superheroes in the late 1950s and early 1960s, especially when the Fantastic Four and other new heroes were introduced by Marvel Comics. Once simply a patriotic symbol meant to inspire a nation at war, upon his return Captain America became a tragic figure, along with his fellow Avengers and other Marvel superheroes. Just as the Fantastic Four's Thing was disfigured by cosmic rays, Iron Man's heart was under constant threat of encroaching shrapnel, and Spider-Man bore the guilt of inadvertently causing the death of his beloved Uncle Ben, Captain America found himself a "man out of time," uncomfortable in the modern age with its new technology, social customs, and values. This sense of displacement, established almost immediately by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Don Heck upon Cap's reappearance in comics like *Avengers*, *Tales of Suspense*, and his own title, came to define the character for years to come. And nothing epitomized Cap's "strangeness" more than his "old-fashioned" values, forged in the Great Depression and World War II and thought by many of his fellow superheroes to be relics of a simpler time.

Ironically, it is this code of ethics, backed by Captain America's steely resolve and sound judgment, that makes his participation and leadership invaluable to the Marvel Universe. Soon after his reappearance, Cap became the moral center of the superhero community, a figure to whom all other heroes would compare themselves and against whom they would argue their own moral positions. This was most obvious during the "Civil War" when Captain America and Iron Man stood against each other over the issue of superhero registration. (We'll talk about this conflict much more throughout the book, because "Civil War" is a storyline incredibly rich in moral and political concepts.) Soon afterwards, when Cap was apparently shot and killed, the Marvel Universe came under the control of a madman, Norman Osborn (formerly Spider-Man's nemesis the Green Goblin), in

what was called the "Dark Reign," which ended only after Captain America returned from the "dead."[3] With the simple command, "It's time to take back this country," Cap rallied the other heroes to defeat Osborn, launching what was called the "Heroic Age."[4]

While Cap was gone (not dead but rather thrown back in time), the Marvel Universe was literally a ship without its Captain, and without his leadership, Norman Osborn was able to take control of the world. After Cap came back during Osborn's siege on Thor's home of Asgard and helped to set the world right again, the moral center of the Marvel Universe was restored at last. Many years later, Steve Rogers found himself unable to perform the duties of Captain America, and passed the name and shield to another hero, Sam Wilson, otherwise known as the Falcon, who had served as Cap's partner and fellow Avenger for years. After Rogers was able to resume his duties and serve as Cap again (alongside Sam), he somehow became corrupted, and the hero who had always stood for democracy and freedom suddenly advocated for fascism and control. This forced the Marvel Universe into what was possibly its greatest moral dilemma ever: What to do when the person everyone had looked up to for years betrays that trust? And even after the "real" Steve Rogers returned, could he ever earn that trust back?

Acknowledging Captain America's traditional role as the moral center of the Marvel Universe is not to say that the other heroes—or the readers—always agree with him on what the right thing to do is. There are valid arguments to be made against his ethics, just as there are against anybody else's. But the strength and constancy of Cap's core moral positions provide a valuable source of debate and disagreement in the comics—and they also give us a lot of material to draw from throughout the course of this book!

I'm going to present Captain America's personal morality in terms of *virtue ethics*, a type of moral theory originating with ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and the Stoics. There are other ways to describe Cap's ethics, certainly, and I'll draw from these other traditions when appropriate. But I chose virtue ethics as my main framework because it has clear intuitive appeal, does not require a lot of fancy philosophical language to explain, and is easily applicable to the personal and political issues of today. Literally speaking, if we look at them this way, Cap's values *are* old-fashioned, dating from about 2500 years ago, but many philosophers (including myself) regard the work of the early virtue ethicists as timeless, and innovative work continues in the tradition today.

The original virtue ethicists incorporated wonderfully perceptive observations about human nature into their prescriptions for behaving morally and promoting the "good life." This allowed them to avoid the strict rules and formulas of the ethical systems that followed, and instead they offered the flexibility of moral judgment that people need to make decisions in complex real-world situations. As advanced as we like to think we are in the modern world, the essential moral problems of respecting each other, getting along, and working together have not changed much in the last several thousand years. In fact, because technology, along with its many gifts, has also expanded the scale and scope of the ways we can hurt each other, the lessons of the virtue ethicists are more important now than ever—and a "man out of time" such as Captain America can see that better than anyone.

Throughout this book, I'll argue that Cap's "old-fashioned" moral code is exactly what we need to restore kindness and respect in the twenty-first century in our personal and civic lives. He is what the ancient philosophers—yes, more ancient than Cap—called a *moral exemplar*. Today we'd call him a role model, but both terms refer to a person we can look up to and use as an example of how to act in certain situations. Role models today are often political figures, entertainers, or athletes—all of whom are real people (whether alive or dead). But can a fictional character be a role model? We'll talk about that soon, but obviously I would answer yes, we *can* learn things from fictional characters (while keeping in mind that many of the details or stories we "know" about real-life role models are just as fictional).

This book starts with an introduction to basic ethics in Chapter 1 and discusses several issues with using fictional characters such as Captain America as role models in Chapter 2. After that, we start looking at Captain America in detail, using examples and quotations from the last sixty years of his stories in the comics. In Chapter 3, we'll discuss several of the individual virtues that Cap exemplifies, such as courage, humility, and perseverance, and show how virtue ethics shows them to be more subtle and nuanced than they might seem. In Chapter 4, we'll look at qualities that describe Cap's moral character more broadly, such as honor and integrity, and we'll explore his adherence to principle and duty, both of which influence how Captain America exercises his virtuous character traits—and provide a valuable example for us in the twenty-first century as well.

While these virtues and characteristics describe the basic themes of Captain America's ethics, they aren't much help when it comes to making hard choices in specific circumstances. As we'll see, having the virtue of courage doesn't tell you just how brave you should be in different circumstances; for that, you need

judgment, which we'll discuss in Chapter 5. We'll borrow some ideas from legal philosophy to show how we can use judgment in moral dilemmas in the same way judges make decisions in difficult legal cases: by balancing our personal principles to arrive at a decision that maintains our integrity. We'll also see how Captain America's judgment regarding some issues like killing and torture may have changed over the years—and then we'll ask why. Did the world change in such a way that Cap had to make moral compromises, or was it his moral character that changed? I'll present the evidence, and you be the judge.

In Chapter 6, we'll move from the personal to the political by exploring the "America" in Captain America. We'll see what patriotism means to philosophers and how Cap's particular brand of patriotism is inclusive and cosmopolitan rather than exclusionary and jingoistic, and we'll go deeper into the American ideals that Cap defends and promotes around the world. Next we'll discuss his ongoing battle with fascism, including his recent experience of being transformed into a tool of the fascist organization Hydra. Finally, we'll talk about "the American dream," the idea that Cap repeatedly cites as his guiding light, and the various meanings it has for different people—including Cap himself.

In the last chapter we'll discuss how Captain America consistently puts principle above politics, including the orders of his own government, which is a reflection of his moral integrity and sense of honor. This applies as well to his successor, Sam Wilson, who recognizes and values the same principles that Steve Rogers does, but sometimes balances them in ways that demonstrate each hero's unique approach to applying those principles. This chapter reinforces the point that Captain America—*any* Captain America— stands for the basic ideals of America, not its politics or government, which explains how he can serve as a symbol of these ideals to all Americans as well as people around the world.

Most of the examples I use in this book are drawn from the various *Captain America* and *Avengers* comic books published over the last sixty years by Marvel Comics, many of which are available in collected editions in your local comics shop, bookstore, or online. (A complete listing appears at the end of the book.) But I promise, you don't have to be familiar with any of this source material to appreciate the points I make—ultimately, this is a book about philosophy, not superheroes. (You can consider them a bonus!) Just sit back and enjoy the book—and if it inspires you to pick up a *Captain America* comic or a copy of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, all the better!

Notes

1 Cap's origin has been retold a number of times since his first appearance, my favorite being *Captain America*, vol. 1, #255 (1981).
2 "A" Captain America (actually the villainous Acrobat in disguise) was seen in a story titled "The Human Torch Meets … Captain America" in *Strange Tales*, vol. 1, #114 in 1963, to test the waters and see if readers wanted the real Cap back. (Guess we know the answer to that, don't we?)
3 Death in comic books is rarely what it seems, so I use quotation marks and words like "apparently" a lot. They're not legal disclaimers, but they're very close!
4 *Siege* #2 (2010).

Acknowledgments

Notes on Source Material

1. Throughout this book I quote from many comics, and most of these quotes are of dialogue. Comic book dialogue—usually displayed in word balloons arranged throughout the artwork—has a number of unique conventions, including the frequent use of boldface, italics, ellipses, and dashes. Not all of these translate well here, especially the boldface and italics that spruce up word balloons in comics but look excessive on a staid page of text. By the same token, ellipses and dashes, which help connect the dialogue across multiple word-balloons, look choppy when reproduced in a continuous series of words on a page. So I had to make choices: I omitted the boldface and italics except when essential to the meaning of the quote, but I kept ellipses and dashes, especially where I thought they were important to the dialogue. Also, comics writers use a *lot* of exclamation points! Often after every phrase!! *Like this!!!* That's just the nature of superhero dialogue; it can be corny but it's part of the charm of the medium. So the exclamation points stay!

2. Because Captain America has appeared in various forms and media over the years, there are many versions of the character out there. To keep things simple, in this book I focus mostly on one: Steve Rogers, who was introduced in *Captain America Comics* #1 in 1941, revived in *Avengers* #4 in 1964, and is still appearing regularly in various comics to this day. Occasionally I mention the other individuals who have served as Captain America in the comics, especially Sam Wilson, whom I discuss at length in Chapter 7. Although I don't reference them often, the versions of Captain America who appear in the *Avengers* and *Captain America* movies, as well as animated series such as *Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* and *Ultimate Spider-Man*, are also very close to what I consider to

be the "real" Captain America, based on the character traits reflected in his words and actions. In terms of the comics themselves, I stick to the mainstream Marvel Universe (also known as Earth-616), not the various other universes in the "multiverse," many of which have a Captain America of their own (whoever that person may be and whatever character traits they may have).

About the Author

Mark D. White is Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at the College of Staten Island/CUNY, where he teaches courses in philosophy, economics, and law. In addition to writing many books, journal articles, and book chapters in these areas, he has authored several other books on superheroes and philosophy, including *Batman and Ethics* (2019) and the *A Philosopher Reads* volumes on Marvel Comics' *Civil War* (2016), *Thor* (2022), and *Daredevil* (2024). He has also been a frequent editor and contributor to the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture series, having edited or co-edited (and contributed essays to) books on Batman, Superman, Iron Man, Green Lantern, Doctor Strange, *Watchmen*, and the Avengers, as well as contributing essays to volumes on Spider-Man, Wonder Woman, Black Panther, and the X-Men. Online, he blogs at the companion site to this book (https://thevirtuesofcaptainamerica.com/), as well as for *Psychology Today*, *Economics and Ethics*, and *The Comics Professor*, and he is active on various social media platforms as @profmdwhite.

You can find more details about his work at http://www.profmdwhite.com.

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Superhuman Ethics Class

Never let it be said that superheroes don't take ethics seriously! After his fellow Avengers engaged in some questionable activities during an interstellar conflict in the "Galactic Storm" storyline, Captain America started a "Superhuman Ethics" class; later, the young heroes-in-training at Avengers Academy took the same class as part of their regular curriculum (taught by founding Avenger Hank Pym).[1]

Even though the situations faced by superheroes may seem extraordinary, often involving aliens, wizards, or time travelers, most of them actually boil down to the same issues each of us face on a regular basis: the right ways to manage our interactions with other people given the various ways we can affect them in good ways and bad. We may not have super-strength or fire energy bolts from our eyes, but we can still use our very human abilities and the tools at our disposal to help or hurt people (including ourselves). Even if we're of a mind to help people—like the heroes we are—questions nonetheless arise regarding when to offer help, how to do it when we decide to, and whom to help if we have to make choices or set priorities. We also have to consider that the help we offer may come at a cost, not just to ourselves but possibly to other people, which also deserves consideration. Compared to the complexities of moral decision-making, all of the flying, punching, and mind-reading might seem like the easier part of a hero's day! But these ethical dilemmas are the types of problems that we in the real world face all the time in our ordinary lives, and in the comics they lend an important sense of humanity to even the most super of heroes.

Before we get into the various schools of ethics, however, I want to clear up a popular misconception about philosophy professors (including myself). Some people think that when we teach ethics courses, we simply tell our students the difference between right and wrong by instilling our own ethical principles in them. But nothing could be farther from the truth. What we do is help students refine their own ethical beliefs by introducing them to the terminology and concepts that philosophers have used to discuss moral issues for thousands of years. We want to help students better understand their *own* values by helping them to describe their ethical positions more precisely and challenging them to consider their views in light of alternative ones. After reflecting on their own ethical views, students may want to adjust or reject them—perhaps if they find inconsistencies or contradictions in the way they think about moral questions—but whether or not they do is entirely up to them. If both the professor and the students do their jobs, by the end of the term the students will have the tools to think about moral questions more clearly. They will be able to express themselves better, engage in rational discussion about ethical issues with other people, and better appreciate other people's points of view (without necessarily agreeing with them). And by discussing ethics with our students, we professors often come out with a better idea of our own morals—and sometimes our students challenge *us* to look at moral issues in new ways. Everyone wins!

In this spirit, I am going to briefly talk about the three basic schools of ethics—utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. This will not only help us situate Captain America's ethics within moral philosophy more broadly, but it will also help us understand the ethical points of view of other people in the Marvel Universe, especially when they debate moral issues with Cap in the comics. (I'm looking at you, Iron Man—do you think I don't know you're sleeping under that helmet?)

Utilitarianism

The most straightforward school of ethics is *utilitarianism*, which stems from the work of the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.[2] Utilitarians maintain that a morally good choice is one that makes people happier, and the morally best choice is the one that promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. Another way of saying this is that the best choice will result in the greatest surplus of pleasure over

pain, or, as Bentham put it, "when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it."[3] These descriptions capture the basic point of utilitarianism, but we need a little more detail to see the arguments for and against it.

To be precise, utilitarianism is a specific type of *consequentialism*, a term that refers to any system of ethics that judges the moral worth of actions based on their outcomes or results (as opposed to looking at the action itself or the person who performed it). Consequentialism is more general than utilitarianism in that it doesn't say what *about* the outcomes of an action should be considered, or how those qualities of outcomes should be combined or weighed against each other, to form a moral judgment of the action itself. It merely says that outcomes are what matters, and philosophers can fill in the details to specify which form of consequentialism—such as utilitarianism—they want to use to evaluate moral choices.[4]

According to utilitarianism in particular, the outcome of an action is assessed according to its *utility*, which can be defined as the happiness, pleasure, or well-being it creates. There are varieties of utilitarianism that claim that each of these is the "right" understanding of utility. This is a crucially important issue for philosophers, because the way we define what is morally good affects the judgments we make. If we consider utility to be happiness, we'll do things to promote that, but if we define utility as a broader or deeper conception of well-being, we may find ourselves making different ethical recommendations.

For our purposes, we can keep things general and say the utility of an action is simply the *good* it produces for people. When Captain America saves a child from a burning apartment building, he increases the amount of good experienced by the child, her family, and the firefighters who otherwise would have (willingly) risked their lives to do the same. Actions that produce more good—or less "bad"—are said to have more utility, and actions that produce less good (or more bad) have less utility (or more *disutility*). It doesn't matter if we look at Cap's actions as increasing a family's utility or decreasing its disutility; either way, their utility is higher because of his action, which makes his action ethical according to this simplistic utilitarian judgment. (We'll discuss complications later, but it's pretty safe to say that saving children from burning buildings is usually a fine thing to do.)

Regardless of how utility is defined in any particular version of utilitarianism, it's the answer to the second question—how should the utilities of various people be combined?—that grants the system much of its moral

power. In utilitarianism, the utilities of individual persons are simply added up, which implies that each person's utility or well-being counts no more and no less than anybody else's. In other words, utilitarianism is based on the idea that all people have equal moral status. As you can imagine, this was a revolutionary thought in the eighteenth century, not just in terms of race and gender but also socioeconomic class. This rebellious streak in utilitarianism suited Bentham, a social reformer who wanted to see governments acknowledge the well-being of the lower classes as well as the rich when making decisions; it appealed to Mill as well, who advocated strongly for women's rights alongside his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill.[5] This moral equality forces us to think of everyone who is affected by our actions, not just those close to us (such as family or friends) or similar to us (in race, gender, or nationality).

Despite its simplicity and intuitive appeal, there are some problems with utilitarianism that are widely acknowledged by philosophers (including those partial to it). First, you have to determine how much utility is produced (or disutility prevented) by an action, which is often difficult to measure. It is one thing to say that helping an elderly neighbor with his groceries makes him better off, but it's another thing entirely to say *how much* it helps him. In most cases this isn't necessary; let's be honest, we can all afford to help each other out more, especially when it comes at little cost to ourselves. But if you can help your neighbor only at the expense of delaying a commitment you made to someone else, you need to be able to determine the utilities of those two actions before you can compare them and choose the best action. This may seem like a simple problem of estimation or measurement, but because the definition of utility—defining what the good is—is an ethical question in itself, any attempt to measure it involves a value judgment as well.

Second, you have to be able to determine a *lot* of utilities—and do a lot of math—in order to know that you have arrived at, not just a good action, but the best action. To start with, a utilitarian needs to compute the change in utility of every person affected by her action. She also has to forecast all the ripple effects of her action as they spread out in the world and figure out those utilities. But we're not done—the world is an uncertain place, after all, and any action will have many possible consequences, some more likely than others. As a result, the utilitarian has to determine the probabilities of each possible outcome and discount the utilities of those outcomes by their likelihood. (All else the same, more likely outcomes deserve more consideration than less likely ones.) These complications aren't going to be

very important when deciding whether to help your neighbor with his groceries, but if you're using utilitarian logic to help make a big decision like what to major in in college, what job to take, or whether to have a child, all of the possible outcomes you will want to consider can be mind-boggling. Ironically, the complexities of utilitarian decision-making might suggest that engaging in it sacrifices too much utility, especially with regard to minor decisions, and that you should just make a choice with the information you have. It makes sense, after all, that you would spend weeks shopping for a house but just seconds choosing a Captain America toothbrush.[6]

More important from a moral point of view—and perhaps just as surprising—the principle of equality that grounds utilitarianism has down-sides too. For instance, some people are what philosophers call "utility monsters" who derive extraordinary amounts of utility (or disutility) from ordinary actions.[7] We all know people who are like this in certain situations: our best friend who lives to see his favorite movie star in her latest film, or our cousin whose eyes roll back in her head in ecstasy when eating Belgian chocolate. Utility monsters can go the other way too, getting incredibly sad or upset at relatively small disappointments, such as missing a cab or watch-ing your cousin take the last piece of Belgian chocolate. True utility mon-sters get exaggerated amounts of utility, positive or negative, from certain things. The problem is that, even though their utility doesn't count any more than anyone else's, they get so much more of it from things that changes in their utility tend to overwhelm everyone else's. If I'm deciding who to give the last piece of chocolate to, I might decide that, because your cousin would get more pleasure out of it than anyone else, she should get it—and she might get *all* of it because she loves it so much. But that hardly seems fair, does it? Even though utilitarianism is based on equality, people don't have equal capacities for getting utility from things, and this can bias the results of utilitarian decision-making so that actions are always chosen in utility monsters' favor.

There's a more serious problem with the equal consideration of utilities: it's not obvious that, in every situation, everyone deserves to have their util-ity counted equally, if at all! Certainly we should start from an assumption of equal treatment, but there are circumstances that may lead us to question it. In one story, Captain America and another hero, Nomad—about whom we'll hear more later in the book—were fighting a villain on a yacht that suddenly burst into flame.[8] Cap's first priority was to save the unconscious villain in front of him, but Nomad chose to ignore the villain, telling Cap

that he's "not worth the effort of saving" and looking for any (innocent) passengers left on the boat. To Nomad, the villain's wrongful acts made his utility less worthy of consideration than the passengers, while Cap felt that all life is equally worth protecting regardless of any one person's record of wrongdoing. But if you could only save one person, the villain or an innocent, would their ethical histories make a difference to you? In less extreme—but more realistic—circumstances, we can ask if the disutility of convicted criminals from time spent in prison should count against their punishment, or if that consideration is waived because of their criminal acts.[9] Without taking either side, there is a case to be made that the utilities of every person should not necessarily count equally in all cases, even though the standard version of utilitarianism demands that it does.

Deontology

We left the most significant problem with utilitarianism until last because it leads directly to the next approach to ethics. Because utilitarianism puts the sum of utilities above all other considerations when it comes to picking out the best action, it runs the risk of ignoring other moral factors that some may feel are more important than maximizing well-being.

One example often used by philosophers deals with a despotic government faced with a growing angry mob of citizens. The ruler thinks that the mob can be scared into submission, saving numerous lives, if he plucks an innocent person out of the crowd and executes him. In essence, the ruler would be sacrificing one life to save many, which makes sense in terms of utilitarianism—assuming all lives are valued equally in terms of utility— but nonetheless seems wrong to many people.[10] A more down-to-earth example could be lying about your education to get a promotion at work, which may be recommended by utilitarian logic if the benefits from the promotion exceed the possible costs of being caught. However, this doesn't consider the widespread intuition that lying is wrong regardless of the possibility of good consequences on the whole. But unless there is something about lying that *always* results in less utility for all, it's difficult to reconcile the wrongness of lying with a utilitarian approach to it.

Another way of stating this problem with utilitarianism is that, by ignoring any moral aspects of an action other than the utility it produces, it implies that the "ends justify the means." In other words, utilitarianism places no limits on what can be done (the means) to produce the greatest

amount of happiness for the greatest number of people (the end). But this flies in the face of common-sense morality, which maintains that some means are simply wrong and should never be used, even when they promote good ends.[11]

This phrase is common enough that it's often used in comics when characters discuss ethics, especially considering that Captain America is not fond of the idea! For example, when Cap criticized Iron Man for some extreme actions he'd taken in the past in pursuit of otherwise noble aims, Iron Man told him, "I knew you could never understand that—you don't believe that the ends justify the means."[12] At the end of a recent battle between the Avengers and the X-Men—which resulted in the death of Professor Xavier, the X-Men's mentor—their leader Cyclops told Cap that change always involves sacrifice, to which Cap responded, "if only it was that simple. If only the ends always justified the means."[13]

The aspect of common-sense morality that conflicts with utilitarianism derives from our second major school of ethics: *deontology*. Deontology is much harder to define than utilitarianism and consequentialism are. It would be easy to say simply that deontology is the opposite of consequentialism, but that wouldn't be accurate—deontology is both more and less than "anti-consequentialism." Deontologists don't necessarily rule out any ethical role for the outcome of an action; they just don't think it's the only factor at play in every situation. If utilitarians say that the ends *always* justify the means, deontologists are the ones in the back of the room pointing out "*not* always." As Yogi Berra might have said, the ends justify the means except when they don't, and the role of deontology is to explain exactly in which cases they don't.

But … if we shouldn't rely on consequences to make moral choices, what should we use? In the examples we gave above, something about the means themselves seemed to rule them out. Regardless of the possible good outcomes, we simply *shouldn't* kill innocent citizens or lie to our employers. There's something intrinsically wrong about such actions that outweighs any consideration of their consequences. That's what deontology contributes to ethical deliberation: the belief that there are some moral wrongs that sometimes, but not always, take precedence over consequences. As Captain America told Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers) when she supported a planetary defense shield that he thought was immoral, "You think there's some amount of effectiveness that allows you to divorce a solution from the morality of it. It doesn't work that way, Carol. If something is wrong, it's wrong whether it succeeds or not."[14] Another way to put this is

that sometimes the "right" has to come before the "good," or that principle is sometimes more important than outcomes (as good as they might be).[15]

That still leaves us with a question: what are these principles of right and wrong and where do they come from? The answer differs from one deontologist to the next, just as utilitarians have different ideas of what "the good" is. For our purposes, that issue is less important than the fact that principles of right and wrong can take precedence over consequences. Nonetheless, I'll briefly introduce the most developed and influential version of deontology, courtesy of the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant's ethical theory is best known for its emphasis on *duties*, moral commands that tell a person what to do or not do, such as "do not lie," "do not kill," and "be kind to others." In fact, Kant's version of deontology has become so influential that sometimes deontology is described as simply "duty-based ethics."[16]

These duties are derived from Kant's *categorical imperative*, his formalization of "the moral law," which can be expressed in several ways. The first version is the most widely known: "act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."[17] In other words, if we want to do something, such as lie, we have to be able to let everyone do it (or *universalize* it), and if this results in a contradiction, that means it's wrong to do. In terms of lying, if we allow everyone to lie because we want to lie, it would result in so much lying that no one would believe anything we said—which would defeat the purpose of the lie we want to tell! Based on that contradiction, we can derive a duty not to lie.

This seems logical—which Kant claims was the key to its appeal—but it strikes many as morally empty. After all, how can issues of right or wrong be derived from logic? Just because something might not work well doesn't make it morally wrong. The moral content of this version of categorical imperative doesn't come from the logic, however, but from why we universalize in the first place: an attitude of reciprocity based on equal moral status for all. Sound familiar? This is the same principle that motivates the summing-up of individual utilities in utilitarianism, but Bentham got it a few decades too late. Kant was the first major philosopher to argue that all persons, by virtue of their *autonomy*—the ability to make moral decisions independent of external authority or internal drives—have an intrinsic and incomparable worth or *dignity*. No one should be considered better than anyone else based on race, gender, or privilege of birth—which is just as radical an idea in Kant's world as it was in Bentham's (not to mention many parts of the world today). The utilitarians adopted this principle as their

foundation and built a different moral system upon it, but the central idea of both schools of ethics is the same.

This respect for the dignity of persons is more obvious in another version of Kant's categorical imperative: "act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means."[18] This formula results in the same duties as the first—according to Kant, all the versions of the categorically imperative were merely different ways to express the same moral law—but the reasoning behind it is more directly ethical (if less formal). For instance, the duty not to lie results from this formula because, when we lie, we use the person we lie to as a means to whatever end we're trying to further by lying, without letting that person in on the ruse—or, in Kant's words, without treating them "at the same time as an end." This is not to say we can't use people to get things we need; we do that every time we buy coffee, hire a lawyer, or get our shields buffed. What it does mean is that we have to do these things while considering other persons as ends in themselves, treating them with respect and kindness rather than being deceitful or coercive.

As I said above, Kant's duties represent just one source of deontological rights and wrongs. Another deontological philosopher, W.D. Ross, also held that duties were important to ethics but believed that they were derived from intuition.[19] In his opinion, everyone "knows" that killing and lying are wrong, so we don't need a categorical imperative to figure that out. Other deontologists prefer the language of rights instead of duties, but just like duties, these rights can take precedence over utility. Consider, for example, the right to free speech that appears in the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which implies that individuals have the right to speak their mind even if it bothers or offends other people (that is, if it subtracts from their utility). As the legal and political philosopher Ronald Dworkin wrote, sometimes rights "trump" utility—but other times they don't, as in cases of "clear and present danger," a famous exception to the right to free speech.[20] There is a clear link between rights and duties—for instance, a right to one's property implies that others have a duty not to steal it—so the two approaches to deontology are not so different. The important thing is that they both identify an issue that can be of higher moral importance than utility, an instance of the "right" that can block considerations of the "good."

Notice I keep saying "can" rather than "do"—that's very important, lest we become deontological absolutists. (Worst superhero team name ever.) Although deontology has a certain appeal, especially in cases in which

issues of right and wrong clearly seem more important than outcomes, there are cases in which it can look extreme. Sticking to your principles and fulfilling your duties are great, even noble, but there are sometimes significant or even enormous costs to doing so, which is a consequence that even a dedicated deontologist will find hard to ignore.

One famous example that Kant gave deals with someone trying to kill your best friend.[21] Imagine this: Your friend Susan pounds on your door one day. After you answer, she begs you to hide her because someone is chasing her and wants to kill her. Five minutes after locking her in your bathroom, there is a second knock on your door: it's a burly stranger who asks if Susan is there while he holds what seems to be a large battle-axe behind his back.

What's an ethical person to do: tell the truth to the stranger or lie to him to save your best friend? Kant said that even in this situation you mustn't lie—which is fine for you, but not so great for Susan, who ends up paying the cost for your ethically "clean hands."[22] Are you willing to incur that cost—or, more precisely, have Susan incur that cost—in order to preserve your honesty? I think most people would say no: honesty is important, but not as important as our friend's *life*. No matter how strongly a person adheres to a principle, there is almost always some cost, either to that person or someone he cares about, that will force him to reconsider it.[23] This is not cynicism, such as when people say "every man has his price." It's simply the recognition that there are many things of moral importance, and no single one, whether consequence or duty, always takes precedence over all others. Morality—like life in general—is more complicated than that, as we will see many times throughout this book.

A Civil War … of Ethics!

The conflict between utilitarianism and deontology took center stage in "Civil War," a storyline which dominated most Marvel comics during much of 2006 and 2007 (and was adapted in the 2016 film).[24] A series of disasters involving the superhero community—including a battle between a supervillain and a team of teenaged heroes in Stamford, CT, that resulted in the death of hundreds of people, mostly schoolchildren—led Congress to pass the Superhuman Registration Act (SHRA). This law required all superpowered heroes to register with the government, reveal their identities, and submit to training when necessary. After trying but failing to stop passage

of the SHRA, Tony Stark (Iron Man) took charge of its implementation while Captain America led an underground resistance movement, with the rest of the Marvel heroes taking one side or the other (and the X-Men playing Switzerland).

Iron Man justified the SHRA and his involvement with it on utilitarian grounds.[25] He recognized both the tremendous power heroes have and the lack of oversight or accountability for how they use it, especially regarding the consequences when things went wrong. These issues were not simply academic for him. Just before the Stamford incident, a villain took over Tony's mind and forced him, as Iron Man, to kill hundreds of people. Even though a friend assured him he wasn't responsible, that the armor was like a gun and the villain pulled the trigger, Tony replied, "Every super hero is a potential gun … and the last time I checked, guns required registration."[26] As an alcoholic in recovery, Tony was all too familiar with losing control in other ways as well; as he said to Cap during the Civil War, "You know how dangerous a drunk is behind the wheel of a car? Imagine one piloting the world's most sophisticated battle armor."[27]

After looking at the big picture, Tony decided to take charge of registration to minimize the harm to his fellow heroes. Even before Stamford, he showed other heroes an early draft of the SHRA and said, "I'm telling you: this is happening. Right now.… An environment of fear has been created where this can not only exist but will pass."[28] As he told Cap, "It was coming anyway. I always thought it was inevitable, though I did try to delay it. But after Stamford there was no stopping it."[29] Once the SHRA became law, Iron Man became its public face and chief enforcer, leading a team of other heroes in rounding up unregistered heroes. After the Civil War ended, Tony said, "I knew that I would be put in the position of taking charge of things. Because if not me, who? Who else was there? No one. So I sucked it up."[30]

Tony Stark considers himself a futurist as well as a genius, uniquely able to look at everything that's going on and see what's coming, so he took responsibility for managing the implementation of the SHRA using his intelligence and judgment. And as a good utilitarian, he took whatever means necessary to do his job, such as enlisting the help of convicted supervillains to help capture unregistered heroes and building a prison in another dimension to detain them indefinitely—using the ends to justify the means, as he had many times before (much to Captain America's chagrin).[31]

Speaking of Captain America, he did not see things the same way his fellow Avenger did. Although we'll describe him primarily in terms of virtue ethics in this book, many of Cap's attitudes and actions, especially during

the Civil War, can also be cast in terms of deontology, especially the way he favors principles over consequences. Throughout the Civil War saga, he maintained that registration sacrifices the liberty and autonomy of heroes trying to help people; that heroes have to stay above politics unless they want the government telling them who the villains are; and that politicians are all too quick to trade freedom for security. He summed up the situation in the simplest deontological terms when he said that "what they're doing is wrong. Plain and simple."[32] This isn't to say that Cap didn't also see negative consequences from registration; he often cited the danger to heroes and their loved ones if their identities are leaked. But he tied this to the issue of autonomy: while some heroes have public identities, such as the members of the Fantastic Four, that openness was their choice, not the result of a failure of database security (or government corruption). Cap felt that heroes should have the choice to keep their identities secret to protect their loved ones, and that registration endangered this choice.

More personally, Captain America doubted Tony Stark's ability to consider the countless factors in the situation as well as he thought he could. Cap cited Tony's previous failures of judgment, telling him that "you've always thought you knew best by virtue of your genius. And once you decide, that's it."[33] What Cap may have been implying is that a brilliant mind can process a great deal of information, but moral decision-making takes more than data—especially if it wants to account for issues of right and wrong, as deontology requires. And even a genius cannot possibly take *every* contingency into account, much less assess the likelihood of each one. As we know, utilitarian decision-making depends critically on these estimations, and one forgotten possibility can turn the "best" decision into one of the worst, as Cap pointed out by recounting some of Tony's past disasters. Even worse, the judgment calls that any utilitarian must make can be warped, even unconsciously, by a person's desires, such as when Cap accused Tony of making decisions in his own interests rather than for the greater good.[34] This twisting of moral decision-making is possible within any system of ethics, but the data-driven nature of utilitarianism makes it especially susceptible to manipulation while retaining the appearance of objectivity ("it's just math").

But in the end, even Captain America acknowledged the limits of standing firm on principle. During the epic final battle between the pro- and anti-registration forces, Cap was about to deliver the final blow to Iron Man when several civilians pulled him off. Cap begged them, "Let me go! Please, I don't want to hurt you," but they pointed to the destruction the heroes had