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# JOKER

## AND PHILOSOPHY

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

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# **JOKER AND PHILOSOPHY**

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# **JOKER AND PHILOSOPHY WHY SO SERIOUS?**

Edited by

**Massimiliano L. Cappuccio,  
George A. Dunn, and Jason T. Eberl**

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*Kody W. Cooper*



# Notes on Contributors

**Walter Barta** is a student and researcher at the University of Houston. In order to pay off the cruel practical jokes which are his student loans, he has also started teaching freshmen at Wharton County Junior College, which his mentors assure him is basically the same as being a (bad) stand-up comedian.

**Utku Cansu** is a PhD candidate in political philosophy at Princeton University. His dissertation focuses on Nietzsche's political thought and explores the important and subtle role played by rhetoric and education, especially through the thinker's dialogue with the ancient thinkers. His other research interests include contemporary populisms, Machiavelli's writings on the military, and the political challenge posed by decentralized forms of digital ownership. Like Joker, Utku is a fan of Charlie Chaplin and silent cinema.

**Massimiliano L. Cappuccio** is a senior researcher in the School of Engineering & Technology of the University of New South Wales Canberra. He is a cognitive philosopher and a technology ethicist interested in human performance and autonomous technologies from a 4E cognition perspective. His current research focuses on philosophy of skill and expertise, philosophy and theory of AI, social robotics, human–robot teaming, and the strategic and ethical implications of autonomous technologies. He has previously worked on social cognition (mirror neurons and empathy), choking effect and unreflective action, joint attention, gesture, and foundations of computationalism. When he was a student, he used to have naturally healthy, vigorous, green hair, which completely fell out the first time he attended a conference of formal epistemologists.

**Erich Christiansen** teaches philosophy at Seattle University and the University of Washington, Bothell. He specializes in existentialism and Continental philosophy in general, especially in regard to political philosophy and ethics. He has contributed chapters to the Blackwell Philosophy

and Pop Culture series volumes *Black Sabbath and Philosophy* and *Saturday Night Live and Philosophy*. He has written about jazz for *A Gathering of the Tribes* and about jazz and comics for *Pulse: Berlin*. His poetry has appeared in *Bad Newz* and *Maitenant*. He was taught to read with a 1970s reprint of *Batman* #1.

**Roy T. Cook** is CLA Scholar of the College and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, and also Resident Fellow and Member of the Governing Board of the Minnesota Center for Philosophy of Science. He has published over 100 articles and book chapters on logic, the philosophy of mathematics, feminist philosophy, and the aesthetics of popular culture. He's actually more of a Marvel guy, truth be told—but he retains a special love for the wilder and weirder corners of Batman's rogues gallery, the Joker included.

**Kody W. Cooper** is UC Foundation Associate Professor of political science at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and 2023–2024 Visiting Fellow at the Civitas Institute at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of two books and several popular and scholarly articles. He is also known in his household as Dadman, and for his pinpoint accuracy with a Batarang, which strikes enough fear into the hearts of his nine children to keep them on the straight and narrow.

**Alba Curry** is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Leeds, UK. She earned her PhD at the Department of Comparative Literature and Languages, University of California, Riverside, specializing in the comparative study of early China and Greece. Her previous studies include an MA in Chinese philosophy from Fudan University, Shanghai, and a BA in philosophy from the University of Glasgow. Currently her work defends the positive value of anger in ancient Chinese and Greek ethics, individually and comparatively, and its value to contemporary philosophies of emotions, feminism, and artificial intelligence. She loves the idea that often smiles hide dark origins.

**George A. Dunn** is a Community Associate Faculty Member at Indiana University-Indianapolis and a Special Research Fellow with the Institute for the Marxist Study of Religion in New Era at Hangzhou City University in Hangzhou, China. He has published extensively on philosophy and popular culture. His most recent books are *A New Politics for Philosophy: Perspectives on Plato, Nietzsche, and Strauss* (co-edited with Mango Telli) and *René Girard and the Western Philosophical Tradition* (co-edited with Andreas Wilmes). If you know what's good for you, you won't ask him how he got his scars.

**Jason T. Eberl** is the Hubert Mäder Chair in Health Care Ethics, Professor of Health Care Ethics and Philosophy, and Director of the Albert Gnaegi Center for Health Care Ethics at Saint Louis University. He teaches and publishes on bioethics, medieval philosophy, and metaphysics. He's the editor of *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy* (Wiley Blackwell, 2008), co-editor (with Kevin S. Decker) of *The Ultimate Star Trek and Philosophy* (Wiley Blackwell, 2016), *The Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy* (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), and *Star Wars and Philosophy Strikes Back* (Wiley Blackwell, 2023), as well as the original *Star Trek and Philosophy* (Open Court, 2008) and *Star Wars and Philosophy* (Open Court, 2005). He's also co-editor (with George A. Dunn) of *Sons of Anarchy and Philosophy* (Wiley Blackwell, 2013) and *The Philosophy of Christopher Nolan* (Lexington, 2017). He has a scar on his forehead that is either from falling down stairs as a toddler, being chased by a girl and running into a cement tunnel in 6th grade, or getting involved in a knife fight on the mean streets of St. Louis.

**Marco Favaro** is Program Manager at the University of Europe for Applied Sciences in Berlin, where he teaches cultural studies. He obtained his PhD in cultural studies and human sciences at the Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg in cooperation with the Università degli Studi di Verona. He worked as a lecturer at Bamberg University, presenting a seminar on the "anti-hero." Since September 2022 he has collaborated with the online magazine "Lo Spazio Bianco." Marco shares with Joker a morbid passion for Batman, as shown by many of his publications. He's the author of *La Maschera dell'Antieroe* (The mask of the anti-hero, 2022), which defines the structures of the contemporary superhero genre and its implicit philosophical concepts, and he co-edited *Batman's Villains and Villainesses*, a multidisciplinary anthology on Arkham Asylum's most famous guests (2023). He's also the author of numerous articles, such as "Dylan Dog's Nightmares" (in *Critical Approaches to Horror Comic Books*, 2022), "The Horror vs. L'Indagatore dell'Incubo" (*Horror and Philosophy*, 2023), and "Antiheroes in the Rubble" (*International Journal for the Fantastic in Contemporary Media*, 2022). Like the Joker, he's aware that it's all a joke, a monstrous demented gag, and it he finds it . . . hilarious! After all, any other response would be crazy!

**Jan Forsman** is a postdoctoral researcher and adjunct assistant professor at the University of Iowa. His philosophical interests lie in early modern philosophy, especially early modern women philosophers, questions of free will, and skeptical history. But because he is a giant nerd, he writes also on topics such as dinosaurs and comic book characters. He has published some short stories in the horror genre and enjoys a good dance with the devil in the pale moon light.

**Ryan Harte** is Assistant Professor in Philosophy at Utah Valley University. He earned a PhD in comparative literature and philosophy at the University of California, Riverside, and specializes in early Chinese and Greek thought. His current work centers around a critique of the modern, post-Enlightenment capitalist world by turning to ancient and non-Western traditions. He shares the Joker's genuine puzzlement at what passes for "normal" in our society.

**Thomas D. Harter** is Director of the Department of Bioethics and Humanities with Gundersen Health System. After being trained in philosophy at the University of Tennessee, he went rogue and was drawn to the world of clinical ethics. Like Gothamites dressed as vigilante heroes who fight crime in the dark of night, Harter maintains a dual identity as an academician while battling evil forces as a hero's sidekick in the order of dark knights. To maintain his secret identity, Harter writes about issues at the intersection of medical ethics, business ethics, medical professionalism, and philosophy, and teaches bioethics courses and lectures on bioethics topics with other health professionals. He is co-editor of *Medical Professionalism: Theory, Education, and Practice* (2024). In his spare time, Harter thinks about whether Joker just pays for all his weapons in cash and whether he pays medical, dental, and other benefits to his henchmen?

According to an infamous conspiracy theory, Finland is an imaginary country, plotted by the Soviet Union and Japan. **Jarno Hietalahti** is precisely from this imaginary wonderland, which happens to be the happiest country in the universe. In his fictional academic life, Hietalahti is a diligently publishing and well-respected author who plays a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Jyväskylä. He has devoted his waking life to defending people's right to spread outrageous jokes, as well as their right to forbid offensive humor, and various other kinds of contradictory clauses. In his own deranged mind, Hietalahti is a Jokerisque superhero-villain who makes the world a better place through his academic work for all and none. To top it all, he considers himself the leading philosopher of humor in his fictional country. Well, whatever makes you stranger, creates merrier surroundings.

**Luke Howie** is a researcher in the School of Education at Deakin University and the Young People's Sustainable Futures Lab (YPSFL). He is the author of five books and numerous articles, many of which engage in analysis of a variety of film and television pop culture. His mother used to laugh at him when he would tell her that he was going to make a career out of watching TV shows and movies. Well, she's not laughing now!

**Matt Hummel** has been studying the Joker from the time he was a kid learning to laugh like the Ace of Knaves in the 1990s animated series all

the way to receiving his first Philosophy and Pop Culture book on the Dark Knight of the Soul in college! He's since contributed to similar books on *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Star Wars*, and *Rick and Morty*. By day, Matt works as a paralegal for the Public Defender's Office in Evansville, Indiana, ensuring no vigilante justice keeps a good clown down. By night, he puts a smile on students' faces teaching sociology and criminal justice as an adjunct for the University of Evansville.

If **Caleb McGee Husmann** were a Gotham City villain, he'd clearly be Tom Hardy's Bain, although his wife says he'd be Danny DeVito's Penguin. Outside of the DC Universe, he lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he is an associate professor of political science at William Peace University. In addition to his academic writing he has had three novels published under the name C. McGee.

**Clint Jones** teaches philosophy at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. His scholarly work focuses on environmental problems, utopianism, pop culture, Marxist philosophy, and issues in critical social theory. He has contributed to several pop culture and philosophy volumes but this is his favorite one so far. His most recent book, *Contemporary Cowboys* (2023), is an edited volume that examines the changing role of the cowboy in contemporary cultural mythologies. When he is not working he enjoys participating in shenanigans and hijinks aimed at breaking down systemic social issues while (hopefully) avoiding being sent to Arkham.

**Nathan Kellen** is a visiting assistant professor of philosophy at Kansas State University. Like the Joker's past, his research interests are multiple choice, ranging from metaphysics to logic to ethics and political philosophy. In addition to the chapter in this volume, he and Roy T. Cook have co-written a chapter on the metaphysics of character identity for *Star Wars and Philosophy Strikes Back*, a chapter on the metaphysics of canon for *The Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy*, and an exploration of the paradoxes possible with "Wonder Woman's Lasso of Truth" for *Wonder Woman and Philosophy*. As sole author, he has also written chapters on definitions of lying for *Avatar: The Last Airbender and Philosophy* and the metaphysics of gender in *More Doctor Who and Philosophy*. Unlike the Joker, he is one of nature's most rare and tragic mistakes: an average man, contractually tied down to rationality.

When she was six years old, **Elizabeth Kusko** dreamt that Jack Nicholson's Joker lived in her closet. To this day, she does not sleep with the closet doors open. In her waking life, she's an associate professor of political science at William Peace University, researches everything from the narrative policy framework to Shirley Jackson, and believes that we're living in a true golden age of television. Because she watches too much television,

she is grateful to have put that consumption to good use in writing for the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series about such fantastic characters as Camina Drummer, Ted Lasso, and now Harley Quinn.

Currently working on his magnum opus, *What Is It Like to Be a Batman?*, **James Lawler** teaches the history of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo, from Plato to Sartre and Baudrillard. The beginning reader who chooses the upward path and light humor should read his book on pop culture and philosophy, *The God Tube: Uncovering the Hidden Spiritual Message in Pop Culture* (2010). For those adapted to more rarified philosophical levels, there is *Matter and Spirit: The Battle of Metaphysics in Modern Western Philosophy before Kant* (2006), followed by *The Intelligible World: Metaphysical Revolution in the Genesis of Kant's Theory of Morality* (2013). His chapter in this volume continues the argument begun in "Passionate Love, Platonic Love, and Force Love," in *Star Wars and Philosophy Strikes Back* (Wiley Blackwell, 2023).

What do you get if you cross **Greg Littmann** with a duck? You get a duck who is an associate professor of philosophy at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) and who publishes on a variety of subjects, including evolutionary epistemology, the philosophy of logic, the philosophy of professional philosophy, and the philosophy of horror art. The duck would also have contributed chapters to numerous books relating philosophy to popular culture for a general audience, including volumes devoted to *Big Bang Theory*, *Black Mirror*, *Black Panther*, *Doctor Who*, *Game of Thrones*, *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars*. SIUE has many beautiful ponds, which the duck would no doubt make use of.

**Alberto Morán Roa** is a postdoc researcher and lecturer at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM, Spain). His work focuses on epistemology, metaphysics, and the way our conceptualizations shape the way we inhabit the world. These interests have led him to publish a variety of papers whose thread of Ariadne is made of Kantian and Heideggerian fibers. His greatest passion is teaching, and he does so at UCM and Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, where he rambles on the importance of the constitutive space in between opposing concepts and the perennial elegance of a well-fitted purple suit.

**Damien K. Picariello** is Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of Faculty, Curricula, and Courses for Dual Enrollment Programs at the University of South Carolina Sumter. He teaches courses on American politics, film and politics, and political theory. His written work focuses on literature, film, and politics, as well as ancient, modern, and American political thought. It is his considered opinion that *The Dark Knight Rises* is the best of the trilogy.



**Shaun Respass** teaches for the departments of Philosophy and Political Science at Virginia Tech. His research explores the intersections between care theories and human flourishing, with a focus on contemporary topics in mental health. Past publications unpack the timelessness of interdependency in *Exploring the Orville* (ed. David Kyle Johnson and Michael R. Berry, 2021) critique our future of “Going Telemental” (2021), seek reconciliation for those experiencing resentment and “Suffering in Science” (2020), and promote solidarity in “Caring Affinity Networks” (2023). He finds himself in a daily (professional and personal) confrontation with madness and enjoys sitting in the trouble that might result from his observations. His interdisciplinary background allows him to occasionally parody and irritate others with unforeseen twists while questioning the so-called “point” of the normative concepts we take for granted.

**Corry Shores** teaches philosophy at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey. He works primarily on Gilles Deleuze and phenomenology, at times in relation to film and painting. He recently authored *The Logic of Gilles Deleuze: Basic Principles*. Although he is disturbed by both Joker and Batman, he still finds Joker to be far less insane.

Like many, **Emily Vega** loves to laugh. The structure of jokes, their formulation and transmission between cultures, have been of interest to her since she was a child. As such, she is now a folklorist, and dedicates her time to studying and writing on how people share things between cultures—stories and fairytales, legends and myths, and, of course, jokes. She received her bachelor’s of English at Sam Houston State University in 2014, her master’s of English in literature, linguistics, and folklore, from the University of Houston in 2017, and her doctorate in folklore from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 2023. Her favorite joke comes from her dearly departed and deeply religious (and former country boy) grandfather; she will not scandalize his memory or her reputation by repeating it here.

**Andrea Zanin** has an honors degree in English Literature (*cum laude*) plus a random law degree (don’t ask), and has contributed a bunch of chapters to previous Pop Culture and Philosophy titles. As a South African living in London, she’s been surrounded by jokers for most of her life, from Jacob Zuma to Trevor Noah, and Boris Johnson to Harry (prince, not Styles). Consequently, Andrea’s developed quite a fondness for two-faced lunatics. As they say: it takes one to know one.

**Slavoj Žižek** is a Slovenian-born political philosopher and cultural critic. He holds appointments at the Institute for Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, and the European Graduate School, and he’s a regular contributor to

newspapers such as the *Guardian*, *Die Zeit*, and the *New York Times*. Žižek's critical work lies at the intersection of German Idealism, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, and Marxism. His early breakthrough, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), brought the Ljubljana School's ideas to an English-speaking audience, establishing his international reputation. He's since published over 50 books and countless articles, focusing on many figures in the history of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and political theory. He's widely read in film and media criticism and his style is famous for combining provocative humor, references to pop culture, and rigorous scholarship. Like the Joker, he challenges the assumptions often taken to be philosophical common sense.

# Introduction: “There Were These Two Guys in a Lunatic Asylum ...”

Superman and Lex Luthor, Kirk and Khan, Harry Potter and Voldemort—epic rivalries are the lifeblood of sci-fi, fantasy, and comic book franchises. None rise to the level of Batman and Joker, two enemies who seem determined *not* to kill each other because each gains too much from what the other brings to their destructive dyad. Yet, the Joker is more than simply a foil for Batman; he has his own goals that would exist regardless of whether the Caped Crusader was in the picture. Truly, the Joker’s foil is Gotham, a city that represents Western capitalist modernity at its most extreme, a city whose fate is as much determined by the machinations of the criminal underground as it is by the power games of billionaires like Thomas Wayne. Into this world is born the Joker—not any of his alter-egos like Arthur Fleck or Jack Napier—but the Joker *himself*. Joker could only be a product of an environment that valorizes wealth and power to an extreme undreamt of by the likes of Machiavelli, Nietzsche, or *Billions*’s Bobby Axelrod. Joker is a crucial mirror to a world in which futile aspirations toward *law and order* are revealed as the fantasies they are.

In Gotham, the Joker confronts *normativity*—the societal requirement to conform to established behavioral expectations. As a violent counterresponse, the Joker avows to be “an agent of chaos.” And, if he’s right that we’re all always just “one bad day” away from insanity, then we see clearly that his inability to conform to societal expectations is less the active decision of a moral agent and more an immediate effect of the social conventions and established norms to which he’s had to conform. Hence, the Joker’s greatest enemy is not, as one would think, Batman, but the *hypocrisy* of societal conventions and norms. One reason why the Joker finds affinity with Batman is that he’s *authentic*—not as Bruce Wayne, which is just his mask (as aptly pointed out by Rachel Dawes in *Batman Begins*), but as *Batman*. To a certain

extent, Batman has embraced the Joker's unforgiving attitude. Instead of trying to understand and rehabilitate those who do evil, Batman seeks to *control* Gotham's criminal element by frightening them with primal imagery—the same imagery that scared him as a young boy. Gotham's criminals are to be mastered as the children Batman perceives them to be. Joker has the same infantilizing view of Gotham's citizens—criminal or otherwise—and thus sets up various tests—such as the one involving ferries and explosives—to prove the claim that, when pushed to their limits, so-called “civilized people” will “eat each other.”

Joker is not only a social outlier demanding assistance, an orphan needing fatherly recognition, or a criminal monstrosity to be exorcized: he's also a philosophical puzzle demanding to be solved. Every philosophically engaged person seems to have, or seems willing to develop, an original view about Joker and his mysterious motivations. In the chapters of this book, a team of philosophers “dance with the devil in the pale moonlight” by taking on the Joker's challenge, trying to show that human beings can be good and decent even in an indecent time—and that a “bad day” isn't necessarily enough to transform a rational human into a cynical maniac.

## **Part I**

**“IS IT JUST ME OR IS IT  
GETTING CRAZIER  
OUT THERE?” – LIVING  
WITH THE ABSURD**



# It's All Just a Sick Joke: Joker, Batman, and the Absurd

*Erich Christiansen*

What if it was all just one big joke? What if, one day, you somehow found out that nothing meant anything? What would you do? Would you try to make it mean something, by doing things you believed in and thought were right? Or would you double down on meaninglessness, and embrace chaos?

This question is one way to look at the choices and actions of Batman and the Joker. Each character embodies a different response to absurdity, one of the key ideas associated with the philosophical tradition of existentialism. Batman and the Joker give us two starkly different examples of how human beings can live—and existentialism can help us see some of what is at stake here. This philosophy includes the assertion that the world has no inherent meaning. There is no pre-given reason for any of us or anything to be here.

That becomes a problem when we confront pain and injustice. We ask: “What’s it all for?” We want justice to be part of the universe, the way that the sun and moon and stars are: what Martin Luther King Jr. referred to as the “moral arc of the universe.” But this becomes difficult, if not impossible to see.

Then what do you do? Do you deny that there can be any meaning at all, and become a nihilist, like the Joker? Or do you try to do things that will create a meaning for yourself and the world, like Batman?

## Absurdity, Existentialism, and Nihilism

The best-known form of existentialism was given voice by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). In *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1945), Sartre argued that existentialism was the logical conclusion of atheism.<sup>1</sup> If God doesn’t exist, then humans are free.

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If God created the world, then he also created me. Thus he had to have already had in mind the kind of thing that I was. But if God didn't create me—then I'm free. If there's no creator, there are no preconceived notions of what kind of thing I am, what I'm supposed to do, or what my purpose is. I can go my own way in life, with my own goals and my own values.<sup>2</sup>

And if there is no God to give meaning, then nothing in the universe has any *inherent* meaning. The planets and everything on them and anything between them don't come with a pre-decided meaning—they just exist. Values don't come with nature; they have to be created by humans.

These two ideas—that humans can choose to be whatever they want, and that there is no inherent meaning—terrify many people who assume that no meaning is therefore possible. They see existentialism as nihilism—the belief in nothing. And if you don't believe in anything, what stops you from doing anything you feel like in the moment? What stops you from robbing and killing and torturing? What stops you from being—the Joker?

But Sartre emphasizes that the claim is only that there are no *inherent* meanings or values—not that meanings and values are impossible. It just means that we have to create them. We have to bring value into the world by our actions—or it won't be there. We do this through what Sartre calls our “project”—the thing to which I decide to dedicate my life, which gives meaning to both my life and to the world. And it's the only thing that does.<sup>3</sup>

Whether we realize it or not, all projects are universal. Sartre says that we have a responsibility because, if the world will have the value and the meaning that we choose it to have, then we are responsible for creating it. If there is no god-created blueprint for what humans are, then what humans are is the total of all of our actions. Every time I act, I am choosing the world that I and everybody else will live in, because my actions are creating the world that I and everybody else will live in. “When we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men. In fact, in creating the man each of us wills ourselves to be, there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be.... Our responsibility is thus much greater than we might have supposed, because it concerns all mankind.”<sup>4</sup>

Existentialist philosophers see both why this might be freeing and why it might be a problem. In the novel *The Stranger* by French-Algerian novelist and philosopher Albert Camus (1913–1960), the protagonist Meursault speaks of “the benign indifference of the universe” and of feeling “washed clean” by this revelation.<sup>5</sup> This sounds—and feels—like freedom. But in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus points out



the complexity of living in the kind of universe characterized by what he calls “the Absurd”—which is the state of being without meaning. He sees absurdity as both liberation and as trauma.

When we look at the universe, there is a part of us that badly wants to see meaning already there.<sup>6</sup> But everywhere we look we see irrationality, instead. “This world in itself is not reasonable.... But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.”<sup>7</sup> We want meaning, but we don’t get it. One of the main ways that we realize we’re not getting it is when we see that the universe isn’t fair.

A fundamental frustration is often born out of seeing death, particularly if it is the result of senseless violence. The realization that we’re going to die can make everything else we do seem useless. But how much more so when it’s an unjust death? Mortality is hard to deal with anyway, but it’s that much worse when death is the result of malice—because things didn’t have to be that way.

For Sartre, death is what gets in the way of your project. Thus it’s what makes life absurd.<sup>8</sup> “We have, in fact, every chance of dying before we have accomplished our task, or, on the other hand, of outliving it ... this perpetual appearance of chance at the heart of my project” is “the nihilation of all my possibilities ...”<sup>9</sup> We have a life goal we’re out to achieve, and suddenly, dumb luck intervenes, and we’re gone, and it was all for nothing.

A common expression for this absurdity is to say “It’s all a big joke.” Bruce Wayne and, in some versions, the Joker are both shaken out of the illusion of a stable, meaningful world by the force of violence. Considering the path that each one took in response to this can help us answer a big question: How do you live with the absurd?

## Death and Injustice on the Streets of Gotham

Both Batman and (according to *The Killing Joke*) the Joker were born out of the pain of the absurd. As a result, it is what keeps both of them busy: the Joker by trying to cause unjust deaths, and Batman by trying to stop them. Their respective origin stories can help us see how they both came face to face with absurdity, and the life path each one took to deal with that reality.

Eight-year-old Bruce Wayne’s parents were robbed and killed in Crime Alley by a mugger named Joe Chill. Bruce swore revenge against criminals for the horror he had witnessed, and dedicated his life to fighting crime—eventually becoming the Batman. In *The Killing Joke*, an engineer at a chemical plant quit his job to pursue his dream of doing standup comedy. He failed at it. To support his pregnant wife, he took an offer to guide a gang through the plant so they could rob the