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# HEROES AND PHILOSOPHY

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David Kyle Johnson


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# INTRODUCTION

## The Wonder of Heroes

*Heroes* is more reflective than your average television show. Consider the following philosophical quote, which opens the pilot episode as well as the first season finale:

> Where does it come from, this quest? This need to solve life's mysteries, when the simplest of questions can never be answered. Why are we here? What is the soul? Why do we dream? Perhaps we'd be better off not looking at all. Not delving, not yearning. But that's not human nature, not the human heart. That is not why we are here.
>
> —*Mohinder Suresh*, "*Genesis*"

In a way, this quote defines the entire series. Questions of man's purpose, of how to live one's life, are always just beneath the surface of our day-to-day existence. In fact, we are all philosophers in the sense that we all seek answers to these same fundamental questions. More important, opportunities to examine such questions can be found everywhere—even on television—if we know how to look for them.

By looking philosophically at *Heroes*, we have a unique opportunity to examine questions crucial to our existence as thinking, rational beings. Is the Company evil or good? Does Hiro Nakamura really have a destiny? Do we? Could mind reading be a power that we already have? Is time travel actually possible? If it is, could we, like Hiro, use it to save the lives of those we love? What obligations does Peter Petrelli have to his brother, Nathan? Does family really come first? Is it okay to lie in order to hide your powers or save the world? Shouldn't the heroes of *Heroes* get paid for their services?

*Heroes* is especially useful for dealing with philosophical questions, because we usually prefer these questions to be addressed in narrative. From the fables of Aesop to the stories of the Bible, the narrative form provides a powerful way of learning and remembering moral lessons. *Heroes* in particular provides us with a rich world of weird situations, powers, and characters whom we know and love and can use to ask and answer our questions. What role does memory play in personal identity? Could the Haitian erase a person by erasing his or her past? What is the right way to understand Peter's power, and could we already have it? Could the rise of superpowers break down society? How seriously should we take fringe scientific works, like Chandra Suresh's *Activating Evolution*? We'll even ask about the show itself. It shares many elements with stories that came before it; could Tim Kring be guilty of plagiarism—or something worse?

So prepare to dive into the world of *Heroes* and the world of philosophy—and to learn something along the way. And if you like *Heroes*, you can also prepare to enjoy yourself. This book is written by *Heroes* fans for *Heroes* fans—real *Heroes* fans who believe *Heroes* can stand up to its competition, unlike certain Arizona senators when running for president:

> For the next two hours you will be seeing SNL's *Presidential Bash 2008*. . . . Next week *Heroes* will return at its own normal time. . . . Right now, over at the other

> networks you can find such shows like *Dancing with the Stars*, *Boston Legal*, *Two and Half Men*, and *CSI Miami*. And they will probably tell you that they are better shows than *Heroes*. And that may be so. But guess what, my friends—*Heroes* isn't on tonight. If those other networks wanted to go up against *Heroes*, they should have waited a week.
>
> —*John McCain*, Saturday Night Live Presidential Bash '08, *November 3, 2008*

As you open this book, open your mind. A world of adventure and knowledge awaits.[1]

## NOTES

1. A special thanks goes out to Tyler Shores for his contributions to this introduction.

PART ONE

# HEROIC OBLIGATIONS


# ABOVE THE SOCIAL CONTRACT? HOW SUPERHEROES BREAK SOCIETY

*Robert Sharp*

What would happen if you committed a murder? First, law enforcement agencies would attempt to discover your transgression. If you left a weapon behind, it would be found. If you did not, forensics would still know what kind of weapon you used. If it was a gun, the remaining bullet would become evidence. If it was a knife, the hole in the victim's body would indicate the knife's size and your relative strength. In both cases, angles, positioning, and similar features are fairly easily discovered. Even the blood splatter tells a story. (I watch too much *CSI*.) Assuming you are caught, you would be tried in front of a jury of your peers—people who are considered your equals before the law—and the prosecution would use this evidence against you. Once convicted (you left so many clues!), you would go to prison, either to serve your sentence or to

await your execution. From crime to punishment, your case would proceed like any other. You would be treated no better or worse than any other citizen, and you would receive no special treatment or advantage. Equality and due process are part of our legal system—at least in theory. They ensure that justice remains fair and impartial for all members of society.

But now suppose that you are not like other members of society. You have a special gift, and no one around you knows it. Perhaps you can kill a man without actually touching him—as Maya Herrera could with her devastating plague-inducing power—and no current forensics test could trace it to you. Or maybe, like Matt Parkman, you can read and influence thoughts and can sway any judge or jury into finding you innocent. Perhaps you can pass through prison walls, as D.L. Hawkins could. If you were like any of these people, you might wonder whether rule of law should apply to you at all. You are not equal to your fellow citizens; you are superior. They must abide by the rules because they have no choice. The system can destroy them. You, however, are untouchable. You have a power that will allow you to get away with whatever crimes you wish. Could society survive such people? How would the characters of *Heroes*, people with genetic gifts, affect society?

## Hero or Not, Who Needs a Social Contract, Anyway?

What philosophers call a "social contract" is a binding but largely unwritten agreement between the state and its citizens that forms the basis of all political institutions. One of the first written accounts of the concept came from the philosopher Plato, whose character Glaucon says that "men decide that, [since] they can't evade [being harmed by others] and achieve [harming others without consequences], it will pay to make a compact with each other by which they forgo

both."[1] Glaucon is suggesting that laws and the very concept of justice originated from the realization that it's in our best interests not to harm other people and to create a system where they will not harm us.

Plato continued the discussion of politics with an actual supervillain story: the myth of the Ring of Gyges—a ring that makes its wearer invisible.[2] Glaucon asserts that any man, just or unjust, would likely use the ring to break laws—if he could get away with it.[3] In *Heroes*, Glaucon's suspicion is supported. When Peter Petrelli first meets Claude Rains, the invisible man, Claude is engaged in petty theft—stealing things while he's invisible because he can't be caught. It seems Glaucon was right; much of our legal system depends on the fear of getting caught and being punished. Since Claude and Gyges cannot be seen, they are free to do what they want with no repercussions. In a sense, they disregard the social contract because they don't need it. But if they don't need it, they wouldn't agree to it. So is the social contract merely something that we—those of us who can't turn invisible—must agree to in order to get along with one another in society? Are those who have superpowers—who don't need the social contract for protection—not bound by it?

Maybe. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), in his major work *The Leviathan*, presents the civil state as an unspoken agreement between citizens and government that provides rights and security to those who live under it.[4] As Hobbes explained it, prior to such agreements there was "continual fear, and danger of violent death; And the life of man [was] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."[5] This "State of Nature" was a place of constant war, in which "every man is Enemy to every man," because each person has similar desires for the scarce resources that nature provides.[6] In other words, it's a big fight with no rules. (Sylar would love it.) According to Hobbes, we'd all want to escape this State of Nature because no one person or group could ever win the war. According to

Hobbes, people are all basically the same, both in their power and in their desires. Sure, some are a bit stronger or faster or more intelligent or cunning, but not by much:

> [W]hen all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he. For as to the strength of the body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himself.[7]

This means that no one person is so strong that he or she is invulnerable to other people; we are all equal, in that we could all potentially kill one another. This equality forms the starting point for Hobbes's society; it is why we enter into the social contract. Our fear of death forces each of us to concede that we cannot take on the entire world and so we'd better find a compromise. Almost no one formally signs or agrees to a social contract. Rather, we give our tacit consent to the contract by accepting its benefits.

But if "being equal with everyone else" is why we enter into the social contract, it would seem that one who is not equal—one who is superpowered—would have no reason to enter into the social contract. Claire Bennet, for example, is invulnerable. Why should she compromise with the rest of us? If we can't kill her, fear of death seems an unlikely motive for her to abide by the social contract. Likewise, D.L. could use his ability to hide in places we could not reach. Matt might be able to plant permanent suggestions in our minds. Sylar has virtually limitless power. Why should any of them bother to enter into a social contract in the first place? If they don't need the social contract, they can't be presumed to have entered into it. Thus, it would seem that they are not bound by the social contract—they are above the law.

This does not simply mean that they can break the law and get away with it; that is obvious. Rather, if the superpowered are not within the social contract, it means they are not morally bound to obey the law; they would be doing nothing wrong in breaking it. In fact, since for Hobbes the social contract was what created moral and ethical obligations, the heroes literally could never do anything morally wrong—not because they would be super-nice, but because moral laws could not apply to them. Sylar, for instance, could not be morally condemned even for murdering his own adoptive mother. Because he is not bound by the social contract, and only it creates moral obligations, he is not morally bound to not kill her.

## Hobbes Debates Superheroes: Story at 11

Hobbes, however, isn't finished with our heroes yet. Remember, the key to his claims is not that people are literally equal in power, but that they are effectively equal insofar as anyone could potentially be killed by other people. Although at first glance it might seem that most of our heroes have nothing to fear from most other people, this is not the case. The most indestructible of the heroes are vulnerable to even the non-superpowered. Claire actually dies at the end of an early episode when the high school quarterback pushes her down and a piece of wood becomes lodged in her brain ("One Giant Leap"). Adam Monroe himself acknowledges that he can be killed by decapitation by someone without superpowers—something that Victoria Pratt was well able to accomplish: "I knew blowing your head off was the only way to be sure," she tells him ("Truth and Consequences").[8] D.L. Hawkins, despite his ability to pass through solid objects, was constantly injured; for example, he got shot—three times! The third time was just some random guy in L.A.—and it killed him! ("Four Months Ago"). And, of course, all of the heroes must fear the

dreaded power-stealing eclipse. Everyone has something to fear and a reason to enter into the social contract.

But even if death could be avoided, superpowered people have other fears that might lead them to seek a social contract. For example, Claire worries about her family and friends; she worries about the loss of her *normal* life—her ability to control her own destiny. These kinds of concerns seem to be what John Locke (1632–1704) had in mind when he offered his own social contract theory in his *Second Treatise of Government.*[9] Locke's social contract is based on property, especially the rights one has to one's own body and the labor produced by that body—"the *work* of his hands."[10] From Locke's perspective, Claire should still be interested in a social contract, because—although her life may be safe in a technical sense—if she does not have some sort of agreement with her fellow citizens, she is still in danger of losing things that are important to her.

But there is yet another fear that all of the heroes should share: a fear of mass public action. Sylar clearly understands this in the episode "Five Years Gone." Despite being the president of the United States and amassing a large range of abilities, Sylar still does not act openly. Instead, he maintains the illusion of being someone else: Nathan Petrelli. Despite his powers, if Sylar were to openly declare his intentions, he would almost certainly be stopped. As powerful as he may be, he clearly does not like the odds of taking on six billion people at once. Peter understands this; he fears the loss of liberty that would accompany public awareness of his gifts. And based on the vision of a possible future that he sees ("Five Years Gone"), these fears are well founded. In that future, people with powers are labeled terrorists and must be registered and placed into camps. In fact, these fears are realized in Volume 4, when people with powers are tracked down by the government. If society decides they are a threat, it can take those with superpowers down.

This reveals that, as Hobbes defined it, our heroes are "equal" to everyone else—they are vulnerable to harm just like the rest of us. So it seems that our heroes do have good reason to enter into, and be bound by, the social contract.

But they might also have a reason to avoid it—for their own protection. The public disposal of the superpowered might be justified. The goal of social contract theorists like Hobbes and Locke was to create a society of equals.[11] This is relatively easy where wealth or status is concerned. Laws can be used to redistribute both or at least make sure that imbalances aren't abused to the detriment of society. But superpowers can't be redistributed by the state. The only way to maintain equality would be to lock up anyone who is exceptional and kill those you can't lock up.[12] If the disposal of the superpowered was demanded by the social contract, entering into it would not offer the superpowered any protection. Thus, it would seem that superpowered people are not bound by the social contract.

But it's hard to say what social contract theorists like Hobbes and Locke would really say about the superpowered. On the one hand, it would seem to justify action against the superpowered, as in the future of "Five Years Gone" when president Sylar isolates the superpowered for "public protection." Yet we don't have to go to alternate future timelines for such examples; in Volume 4, the government (with encouragement from Nathan) attempts to track down the superpowered for the exact same reason. But who wouldn't be afraid of people who can walk through walls, read minds, or never die? Without some control over those with powers, society might devolve back into the State of Nature that Hobbes envisioned. So it would seem that the social contract would justify protecting the public from the superpowered.

On the other hand, concentration camps for superheroes (much like the Company's) would seem to be the only method for protecting against the superpowered, because powers can't be confiscated. But concentration camps are not the kind of

thing traditionally defended by social contract theory. And even if the state could confiscate powers (for example, by taking them away with the Shanti virus or a well-controlled Arthur Petrelli), this might be seen as a violation of the rights of the individual—and individual rights are something traditionally defended by social contract theory. But again, those rights are themselves dependent on a proper social contract, which seems impossible without protecting equality. It's easy to see how arguments about how to resolve these issues could go round and round.

Even an appeal to the most basic human rights, which we might say are independent of (or prior to) any social contract, does not help us avoid these difficulties. Suppose that (following Hobbes and Locke) we assume that we have a natural right to protect ourselves from undue harm. Surely, being killed or locked up simply because you were born with a gift could be seen as undue harm. But living in a constant state of fear that your neighbor can walk through your walls or read your mind could also be seen as undue harm. Where do we draw the line? Frankly, I don't know, and I'm not sure Hobbes or Locke would either—at least, where superpowers are concerned. Their reliance on basic, innate equality among human beings means that their theories can't easily deal with such issues. So for an alternative let's turn to John Rawls's (1921–2002) more modern version of social contract theory.

## Rawls and the Natural Lottery: How Do I Join the Gene Pool That Makes Me Beautiful *and* Invulnerable?

Rawls still focused on equality, but he acknowledged that many people start with advantages that other members of society don't have. For example, some are born wealthier or more intelligent or stronger. The role of society, according to Rawls, is to correct these imbalances in order to ensure that

everyone has a fair shot at achieving his or her goals. This doesn't mean forcing equality itself, but rather creating a system that provides equality of opportunity. Put differently, Rawls sought to correct unfairness in society by appealing to the idea that we are all part of the same social contract, which should not benefit some people more than others.

Rawls's position rests on two main principles: the liberty principle and the difference principle. The liberty principle says that society should have as much individual liberty within it as possible. To do this, we should give all people the freedom to live their lives any way they want as long as it doesn't interfere with the freedom of others to do the same.[13] The difference principle says that any political institutions that favor some people more than others should be made to favor the least fortunate, and the opportunity to be favored by society should be open to all.[14] This means that society should aim to balance out natural inequalities, to create a more fair system for everyone involved. In fact, Rawls's view is often known as justice as fairness precisely because his goal is to create a system of justice that would not favor any one class of persons more than any other.

Already we can see similar problems for our heroes. Rawls's view may acknowledge natural inequalities, but the goal is still to create equality within society itself. How can we be fair to those without powers? How can we make sure that others have the same opportunities that a person with powers has? If Peter hadn't knocked over the giant batch of formula and Hiro Nakamura hadn't torn up the formula blueprint in "Dual," we could have given everyone powers. But even then, because the formula did not give everyone the same powers (and some powers are lamer than others), this does not achieve equality of opportunity. So how, for example, could we make sure that everyone has the same opportunities that Nathan, the flying man, has? Should we distribute jetpacks to every home?

That last question seems a bit silly, but this becomes a real issue in Claire's case, once we find out that her blood can be used to heal people. This means that she *can* share her gift with society. Still, unless some way can be found to mass-produce her blood, this redistribution will be limited. According to the difference principle, we could not decide who should benefit from her blood by releasing it on the market. That would benefit only the wealthiest members of society. Somehow, everyone must be given an equal opportunity.

Again, I am unsure how Rawls would have resolved this problem, but he did provide us with a thought experiment for deciding such things. It's known as the original position, and it involves a "veil of ignorance."[15] The thought experiment asks us to imagine that we do not know our own place in society. We must then decide which arrangement for distributing the blood would most appeal to our selfish desires, given that we don't know our place in society. By starting at this original position, Rawls supposed that we could reach a fair decision that wouldn't be biased in our own favor (or in the favor of those making the decision, such as Congress members).

A lottery might seem most fair, because it doesn't favor anyone, but that's also a bit impractical. We aren't all hurt or sick. If a healthy person won the lottery, that would be a waste of good blood (an odd thing to say, I realize). So we might create a system similar to the organ transplant system, where people in need are favored by time spent on the waiting list, the probability of success (in this case, the probability seems high in all situations), whether they deserve the second chance (alcoholics are not given new livers ahead of those who did not abuse their original organs, for example), and similar factors.

This might work for Claire's blood, but none of this would make us Claire's equal. She has countless second chances. We could not redistribute that. Nor could we redistribute Matt's mental powers or D.L.'s ability to walk through solid objects.

Those unfair advantages are natural and cannot be transferred directly. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, if we had some secret power-giving formula, we could distribute it throughout society. But, again, since the formula produces different powers in different people, it would not achieve equality. (Besides, doing so might blow up the world.) So, what to do?

According to Rawls, part of the aim of justice as fairness is to correct nature's lottery, the unfair (and undeserved) advantages that some people have simply because they were born to certain families or with certain genetic traits.[16] The superpowers of the heroes fall into both groups. In theory, this means that the gifts these people have should somehow be redirected to benefit society as a whole. So, according to Rawls, since the powers can't be redistributed among the members of society, people having these powers should be required to use them for the benefit of society.

This is not a problem for most of our heroes. Many of them already do this. Hiro recognizes that his powers make him responsible for looking out for society, and D.L. rescues strangers out of car wrecks ("Nothing to Hide"). There are exceptions, however, Sylar being the most obvious. He uses his gift to amass personal power, and he's willing to kill anyone who gets in his way. He has lots of individual liberty, sure, but he uses it to interfere with the liberty of others. People like Sylar are exactly why we need a social contract, but they also represent the biggest threat to maintaining it.

Both the difference principle and the liberty principle cannot abide people like Sylar. There seem to be only three options for dealing with Sylar: neutralization, imprisonment, or death.[17] But even when his abilities are temporarily removed (Volume 2), he continues to kill to get what he wants, as when he kills Candice Wilmer ("Kindred") and Alejandro Herrera ("Truth and Consequences"). And even though he took a slight turn for the better in Volume 3, it didn't take much to turn him bad again by Volume 4. So it seems that neutralizing

his powers would not be enough. He needs to be executed or imprisoned (for life) in order to protect the social contract.

Sylar, however, is not the only threat to a Rawlsian social contract. In fact, all of the people with superpowers would either need to use their abilities to help society or be eliminated in some way. The Rawlsian state is like a joint-stock company. Everyone should be receiving roughly the same benefits and have similar opportunities. Because superpowers cannot be distributed equally, some form of service would be demanded of those who had them. Yet demanding such services would infringe on personal freedom, a direct violation of Rawls's liberty principle. So Rawls's system would seem to conflict with itself in the case of superpowered people.

## Do Superheroes Break Society?

Micah: Dad, how'd you get out of jail?

D.L.: Between you and me, I walked out.

Micah: Out of prison? How'd you do it?

D.L.: Ain't no jail can hold your old man.

Micah: Why not?

D.L.: 'Cause I got a secret.

Micah: Like Superman?

D.L.: Yeah. Just like Superman.

—"Better Halves"

We've seen some examples of how genetically superior humans break the paradigm for various social contract theories, but what about the bigger question? Do superheroes break society completely? I think the answer is yes.

D.L. Hawkins can easily escape from any jail. The Haitian, who can erase memories, could commit many crimes without *ever* being convicted. Claire could survive the electric chair indefinitely and overcome the toxins of lethal injection.

The fact that Adam, who has the same gift, lives for centuries indicates that imprisoning someone like Claire for life would amount to "cruel and unusual punishment." How could the legal system deal with such people?

It probably couldn't. Congress could not keep up with the various abilities that could arise, and any laws that were created would be difficult, if not impossible, to enforce. According to Hobbes, a state must be all-powerful to create and enforce internal peace.[18] This is why it must be like a Leviathan, a giant unstoppable sea creature that can overwhelm anything in its path. But it's unlikely that a state would ever be powerful enough to counter the rise of superpowers in its midst. The "explosion future" that we see in "Five Years Gone" shows the inhumanity caused by attempts to legislate superpowers. In the "exposed future" that we see in "I Am Become Death," where nearly everyone has access to powers, it is virtually impossible to police the public. As the Peter from that future says, "[A]ll the crime, murder—all ability. People can't be trusted. We're weak, jealous, violent. Abilities are the new weapon of choice."

Other factors also preclude our ability to incorporate people with special gifts into a sustainable social contract. Even basic laws would become difficult to apply. Take the concept of a duty to rescue, which some nations (and even some U.S. states) make into a legal obligation in certain cases. The idea is that citizens should help one another in cases where there is no significant risk to the rescuer. These laws, which are often confused with so-called Good Samaritan laws, apply only if the rescuer does not endanger his or her own life.[19] But a person capable of instant regeneration is seldom in any real danger, even in extreme rescues. How would courts deal with such cases? Should Claire be held accountable under rescue laws for not acting, when she clearly was not at risk?[20]

Of course, these legal questions are relatively simple when compared to the chaos that would occur within society as the