

Superman's Superego Toward a More Grounded Morality

By
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The comic book character, Superman is not only the original and archetypal superhero; he is widely regarded as the greatest figure of the superhero genre. He made his debut in 1938 in the first edition of *Actions Comics*, later to become *DC Comics*, and has since not only leaped over tall buildings, but also from the funny book pages onto television and the big screen. Superman has become an iconic and beloved figure, especially, in America, where he was born—created by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster while they were both living in Cleveland, Ohio. The 1950's TV series, starring George Reeves as Superman, actually began each episode by calling him a “strange visitor from another planet ... who fights a never ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way.”

Of course, we must wonder why an alien with the powers of a God would come all this way to fight for the American way, as opposed to the Swedish way, or the Canadian way, or the Kyrgystan way, or the Norway way, or any other way you can think of. One simply expects an alien to have a more global perspective. Needless to say, however, Superman is the ultimate hero, virtually invincible with many godlike qualities, and, like all our gods, we have created him in our own image.

This is really what I want to focus on this morning—the idea of Superman as an inflation of our own projections; that is, as the image of our ideal self. What does our collective and continuing fascination with Superman say about ourselves, and our expectations of others? And, more importantly, when scrutinized more closely, are these inflated projections really worthy of our pursuit? Should we, as Friedrich Nietzsche famously suggested, strive to become a race of supermen?

Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, most often translated into English as “superman,” was first written of in 1883, 55-years before Siegel and Shuster actually depicted such a figure in the comics. In Nietzsche's words, “Man is something to be surpassed,” and Superman, “with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men,” as the narrator of the 1950's serial proclaimed, certainly surpasses our understanding of what it means to be human.

Perhaps this, then, is the best place to begin, with this notion that we are not good enough as we are, that there's something innately wrong with being human that we must eventually surpass. Nietzsche wrote, “What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the superman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment...” Although I agree that someday, as the natural course of evolution, humans will evolve into another species with advanced abilities, but this is not to say that our species is now flawed or incomplete, anymore than I would consider the various organisms from which we

sprang, “ a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment.” Our single celled ancestors who dominated the Earth for a billion years were necessary before we could become multi-celled beings. And the brainless, headless blobs of cells they became were necessary before our bodies could slowly become more structured, eventually taking on bones, and heads, and limbs. Likewise, whatever shape life takes in the future, its human form will have been a necessary part of its evolution.

Yet our spirituality often rejects evolution and teaches us, instead, that we are a fallen species, an embarrassment to our God, and that our only hope at redemption is to become more than human, to become Christ-like—only not like the soft and tender Jesus who taught us about love and compassion, but more like the immortal Christ who has conquered death and ascended to heaven to become a god himself, and who shall return someday, not humbly on the back of a borrowed burrow, but, like Superman, flying triumphantly through the clouds with his army of angles. Early on in the history of Christianity, the historical Jesus became “a painful embarrassment” to the powers-that-be, who ended up replacing him with a caricature called Christ who much more resembles our Kryptonian superhero than the human Jesus.

Along with this collective feeling that there's something innately wrong with being human, and with us as individuals, is the sense that we are also too ordinary, too common. Just as Nietzsche's *Übermensch* stands out as one freed from the herd mentality and its antiquated morality, our ideal self, that is, the idea of what we think we should be, stands out from everyone else as something special. In our culture, to be ordinary is practically a crime, and to live a mediocre life without notice from others, or accomplishing anything extraordinary, is often considered failure.

To avoid this, we must find a way to stand out, to soar above our own ordinariness, to become *supermen*. Notice that I don't say we feel we must become “supermen and superwomen,” in order to be more inclusive. Although this might be more politically correct these days, it does not genuinely reflect our ideal. The truth is, in our culture, it is still ideal to be male. Our God is a Father, and his child a son, and it was “woman,” a word meaning “of man,” that we say was originally removed from a man's body to make a woman, not the other way around. In the American Way, women have had to fight for the right to vote, have been considered less intelligent and capable than men, must fight for equal pay and positions in the workforce, are taught to be subservient to men, are treated, in many ways, as second class citizens, and, ultimately, have been blamed for the existence of evil in the world. Our ideal self is, no doubt, a *Super-man*!

He is also a *Super-white*-man, I might add. This fact could only be more blatant had his creators given him blond hair and blue eyes. It cannot be denied that Adolph Hitler's desire to “purify his race” through “ethnic cleansing” was influenced, in part, by Nietzsche's idea of the *superman*. Likewise, much of the racism that has happened and continues to happen in our country stems from the cultural

idealization of white skin. So our ideal self, as demonstrated by this archetypal superhero, happens to be a white male, which shouldn't be a surprise to anyone.

It is interesting, in light of this, that the feminine is usually associated with the Earth, and that Superman is a particularly ungrounded character who is not bound to the Earth. God, we say, is our Father, but the Earth is thought of as our Mother, as is Mother Nature. And just as we have treated women despicably over the centuries, and continue to do to this day, in some places worse than others, we treat the Earth and our environment with great disregard and disdain. Just as it is impossible for a mama's boy to become a superman, our ideal self, Superman, cannot be bound to the Earth, to the Great Mother. You will notice that Superman's only weakness is kryptonite, pieces of ground from his home world. Remember, that the word *human* means "Earth." To be human is to be grounded, to be *humus*. But because we see ourselves as fundamentally flawed, inadequate, and ordinary, we try to disconnect from reality in favor of our ideal self, an ungrounded self that has no mother and no earth, a self that cannot be pulled by gravity into the grave, to the devouring maws of the black soil and womb from which we sprang.

As one who ordinarily stands out from others, and must disguise himself in order to appear human, Superman is also a loner. This too is part of our ideal self, though it is also one of the things we dread the most, being isolated and alone. But to be considered worthy of recognition in this world, we must learn to do without others. We must become independent. But, again, we can only see ourselves as independent if we are willing to wholly ignore reality in favor of our delusional ideals. For *independence* is as fictional as is Superman himself. In reality everything in the Universe is interdependent. All life on Earth, in particular, is dependent upon everything else for its very existence. We often prefer to imagine we are islands unto ourselves, because dependence upon others is considered a weakness. But we are all codependent creatures, punctuations in time and space in which trillions of unseen relationships briefly coalesce. There is nothing independent about us. Once the relationships dissipate, so do we. We are nothing without our relationships.

Still, I suppose it is natural that we should want to avoid reality to some extent. For in reality we are all vulnerable to the uncertainty of life, to the cruelties of others, and to the hostility of our own planet and environment. Superman represents our defense mechanism against chaos. If we can become like Superman, invulnerable so long as he does not come in contact with even a fragment of reality, we have nothing to fear. In this sense, Superman is really a graphic depiction of the Superego. The superego, according to Freud, is that part of our psyche that enables us to avoid reality by favoring our ideals. This is the reason the Superego so despises and ridicules the ego, that which Freud considered our "interface with reality," and why religion, which is often the institutionalization of our ideals, teaches us to avoid and mistrust this world by considering it sinful in the West, and an illusion in the East. As a manifestation of superego, the one thing religion needs us to avoid most of all, is reality, and it helps us to do so by calling it evil and illusionary.

And like religion, Superman, as a superego, is also incapable of seeing his own shadow. Superman cannot see that he is not wholly good. Unlike other comic book figures with a heroic alter-ego, like Batman, or the Incredible Hulk, or Spiderman, representing, perhaps, the tendency all of us have to overinflate our need to feel good about ourselves to the point that we occasionally become self-righteous and narcissistic, Superman's only disguise is as a human. He sees himself as a god pretending to be human, rather than as a human pretending to be a god. The difference is subtle, but important. All of us occasionally avoid reality by succumbing to our ideals. This is the nature of our species. But Superman, being ungrounded, is pure superego, meaning he is completely unconscious. He's not in touch with reality in the least. All of us have met people like this in real life who are so religious they are no earthly good.

When religion manifests itself as superego, it's really an inflation of our own selfishness and narcissism, that which Freud called the *Id*. The *id*, as you know, is the infantile part of the psyche that demands the immediate fulfillment of all its desires and needs. Unfortunately, the *ego*, our interface with reality, reminds us that circumstances don't always permit this. When in touch with reality, we realize we must take the needs of others into account, that taking whatever we want whenever we want it isn't always the best thing to do. So the childish part of us doesn't like reality, or its messenger the ego. But, because it wants to consider itself good, and justify its desires as being good, the *Id* inflates its desire to be right into righteousness itself. In the end, the superego is really just the inflated *Id*. It is our sense of goodness blown way out of proportion.

Then, especially through religion, the most childish part of us considers itself superior to the ego and its reality, and can use its religion to justify doing whatever it wants, because it's no longer merely what the individual wants, but what God wants. No wonder religion, both in the East and the West, calls for the destruction of the ego and rejection of the world. Reality to the superego is like kryptonite to Superman.

And so, as an expression of superego, Superman is purely good. He is even sometimes cynically referred to as, "the big blue boy scout." But you'll notice in the comic book stories he does have a shadow, but it only comes out through some sort of complete schizophrenic split during which his dark side is separated from his good side by being exposed to black kryptonite. Again, it is his connection with the Earth, that separates, "the beast from the man," and Superman becomes evil. When this happens he not only acts like two different people, he actually becomes two different people. This is often also true of religious extremists, who simply cannot recognize the harm they cause others. Their harmful behavior, whether through terrorism or discrimination, is justified as the will of God.

In fact, it is a little known fact that when Superman was originally conceived of, in 1932, before he came to life in the 1938 comic, he was a bald-headed villain

who used the power of his mind for evil. Isn't it interesting that years later his archenemy has become Lex Luthor, a bald-headed villain who uses his genius for evil? It seems even Superman cannot escape his shadow.

This leads then, to the final point about Superman, that he is a brute. Superman is not himself admired so much for being terribly intelligent. Although he seems to be of average intelligence, his strength is entirely physical. Superman uses brute force to fight his enemies and bend the world to his liking. Nietzsche said, "the strongest and highest Will to Life does not find expression in a miserable struggle for existence, but in a Will to War. A Will to Power, a Will to Overpower!" "This world," he said, "is the Will to Power—and nothing else." So, part of our ideal self, is this desire to overpower and control others without giving any of it much thought.

To recap, then, I'm suggesting Superman represents the idealization of self into superego, in which we imagine that we are at our best when we are independent white male ideologues who hate the Earth and despise humanity, can't admit when we are wrong, do lots of terrible things in the name of God, and seek to dominate and control others. Sound familiar to anyone?

But, having exposed Superman as Superego, perhaps we can now begin to redefine what it means to be at our best, by fostering a morality that is grounded, not in inflated infantile desires, but in reality. I'm talking about a morality that includes all genders and races, honors the Earth and appreciates our place in the world, remains deeply connected to and aware of our responsibilities to others, never seeks to oppress any person or creature, and uses religion not to escape reality, but to make us more present and aware of the world we're in. That would really be super!