

Man of Steel invokes Platonic ideas in brilliant way

In the *Man of Steel* movie, Kal-El is never called “Superman.” The name is only spoken once, as a report of what others have started calling Kal. Before that, when Lois Lane is about to suggest the “S” symbol on Kal’s chest could stand for “Superman,” she is interrupted before she can even finish speaking that name.

In other words, this is the first Superman movie in which Superman is not Superman. Instead, the filmmakers have deliberately titled it *Man of Steel*. They make unmistakably clear they do not want us to tag Kal with the old, familiar name, “Superman.”

Kal should therefore not be confused with the idea of a superman who is “beyond good and evil.” That notion, articulated by the philosopher Nietzsche, is deliberately contrasted in the film with the development of moral virtue in Kal. The theme of the movie is thus not a celebration of a superman who is beyond conventional morality. Instead, its



focus is on the moral fibre required to make a boy grow up to be a man of steel.

It is disappointing that Fr. Robert Barron didn’t pick up on this theme, which is announced in the film’s title and in its deliberate repudiation of the name familiar from previous versions of the story: “Superman.” But by his own admission, Fr. Barron confesses in his movie review that all “the CGI whiz-bang stuff” caused him to “just check out,” so we know he didn’t pay close enough attention to the movie. That’s fine, and it’s certainly to his credit that he admits it.

Unfortunately, I feel like I keep reading the same movie review year after year. A pretentious movie critic looks down on a special effects-laden summer blockbuster and laments it as a crass spectacle. The reigning assumption of such

snobbishness is that any Hollywood product with state-of-the-art movie magic inevitably demands us to sacrifice our intelligence.

Well, that has to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. It just won’t do to slap the label “dumb summer blockbuster” onto every single one of these movies and then be done with them. What a lazy way to review movies! See how easy it is: “The special effects were great. Everything else was terrible, especially the ridiculous story.”

In the case of *Man of Steel*, it is also manifestly unjust. The filmmakers alert us in the very title of the movie that they have grander ambitions and are deliberately trying to subvert expectations. Moreover, guys like Zack Snyder and Christopher Nolan are no dummies, so it is worth meditating on the rich philosophical dimensions they deliberately build into the infrastructure of their stories. In *Man of Steel*, the philosopher Plato is invoked in so many intelligent ways



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Chris Morrissey thinks Kal-El’s character in *Man of Steel* is emphasized instead of the traditional Superman character. The film does not celebrate “a superman who is beyond conventional morality.”

that it would take multiple review essays and a university semester of seminar study to elucidate them all.

Thankfully, Fr. Barron is no lazy movie reviewer. He always has something intelligent to say, even when he

candidly admits that he is debilitated by the onset of special effects fatigue. In fact, his thoughts on *Man of Steel* provide a useful preliminary analysis of the movie’s philosophical content, even if he confuses the filmmaker’s morally virtuous man of steel with the Nietzschean superman who is “beyond good and evil.”

Because he missed the filmmaker’s deliberate repudiation of the “superman” label, Fr. Barron took the film’s theme to be “the tension between individual autonomy and a state-controlled society.” If we take the movie as illustrating this tension, then: “We might read the battle between General Zod and Superman, therefore, as a symbol of the struggle between two falsely deified realities, the nation-state and the ego.”

Fr. Barron rightly sees that these two extremes form a false dichotomy: “The Bible recommends neither the heteronomy of the oppressive state nor the autonomy of the individual will, but rather, if I can bor-

row a term from Paul Tillich, ‘theonomy,’ which means allowing God to become the inner law of one’s life.”

A careful reading of the film’s symbolism shows that it is Kal who represents this virtuous third way. The man of steel is the golden mean avoiding the two extremes of the false dichotomy. Kal’s story is about a hopeful growth in the virtue that imitates Christ’s mission of bringing light into a darkened world.

To use the language of Fr. Barron’s useful preliminary analysis: It is Krypton that represents the heteronomous (Platonic) totalitarian state, whereas General Zod represents the autonomous (Nietzschean) individual who claims to be beyond the state and beyond its ordinary moral conventions. Kal, by contrast, represents Biblical theonomy in the life of the grace-filled Christian.

Admittedly, it is easy to confuse Kal with Zod, because their rivalry within the story appears as a “whiz-bang” clash between two super-men. The Catholic thinker Rene Girard would recognize this as the mythological trope of “mimetic doubling,” in which we find it hard to tell one warring super-man from another.

But the *Man of Steel* movie resolves the titanic clash this way: Zod is the superman who sees himself beyond good and evil, with no scruples about annihilating those who oppose him. Kal, however, learns that he must only unleash his super power if it is to protect innocent life.

In the end, Kal’s cry of anguish when he defeats Zod shows us the difference between the superman and the man of steel.

C.S. Morrissey is an associate professor of philosophy at Redeemer Pacific College. □