Ambiguous Heroism:
Anti-Heroes and the *Pharmakon* of Justice

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Abstract

This paper identifies several key anti-heroes and their capacity for questioning how complicated, ambiguous forms of heroism are represented and negotiated in contemporary popular culture. Specifically, the paper uses as case studies three characters at different positions on the anti-hero spectrum – *Doctor Who*'s eponymous protagonist, the DC Comics superhero Batman, and *24*'s anti-terrorist agent Jack Bauer. The paper questions ways in which these texts and their protagonists articulate complex notions of contemporary justice, morality and ethics, achieved partly through their fictional enactments and interrogations of justice and how justice is constituted. The paper attests that these characters complicate audience notions of law and justice, and how the conceptual challenge of the 'good'/'evil' binary results in a more nuanced understanding of this particular form of heroism.

Keywords

Batman, 24, Doctor Who, justice, pharmakon, anti-heroes, heroism, ethics, morality

Link to Article in *Interactive Media E-Journal*

http://imjournal.murdoch.edu.au/im-issue-11-2016/

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That's the point of Batman. He can be the outcast. He can make the choice that no-one else can make, the right choice … He's not being a hero. He's being something more.

Alfred Pennyworth, *The Dark Knight*

In recent years, the character of the anti-hero has been proliferated as the protagonist of multiple popular culture texts, particularly in film, television, video games and comic books. These characters are cultivated from a variety of sources; some have been revived or culturally repurposed from decades-old properties (in the case of superheroes like Batman), whilst others have been generated as direct responses to contemporary political and social issues (such as *Homeland*'s anti-terrorism coordinator Carrie Matheson or *True Detective*'s societal nihilist Rustin Cohle). The anti-hero is styled as a figure of ambiguous heroism, a character adept at delivering effective justice who is willing to bend or break the rules – usually by adopting villainous tactics – which prevent effective justice from safeguarding the contemporary world.

In addition to providing entertainment, these figures trigger audiences' questioning of the process and formation of justice and its relationship to law, situating both as elements related to heroism. Anti-heroes who disrupt the neat binaries of 'good' and 'evil,' or 'hero' and 'villain,' are able to traverse liminal thresholds of law and legality in the pursuit of justice. When discussing the representation of law in modern popular culture texts, Bainbridge (2006, 171) asserts that these texts "[promote] debate about the relationship between law and justice and the balance involved in preserving human rights while protecting security interests." In transgressing these binaries, anti-heroes pose difficult questions regarding how audiences are invited to negotiate ideals of law and justice in a world that increasingly eschews traditional, legal forms of heroism (Sharp 2012).

This paper begins the process of identifying several key anti-heroes and their capacity for questioning how complicated, ambiguous forms of heroism are represented and negotiated. Though there is a wealth of scholarship regarding our contemporary understanding of heroism, including Goethals and Allison's (2012) extensive taxonomy of heroism, this paper seeks to further develop how anti-heroism is understood. In particular, the paper uses as case studies three characters at different positions on an anti-hero spectrum: *Doctor Who*'s eponymous protagonist, the DC Comics superhero Batman, and *24*'s anti-terrorist agent Jack Bauer. While it is beyond the scope of the paper to categorically identify every method through which the texts engage in discourses of law and justice, it identifies the characters' moral and ethical complexities, as well as how their enactments and interrogations of justice are constituted.

It is important to note that this paper is not arguing that anti-heroes are necessarily *more* popular than traditionally heroic protagonists, nor that these three specific characters are the most popular of the many anti-heroes proliferated in contemporary popular fiction. Rather, the paper is interested in identifying how these characters complicate audience notions of law and justice, and how challenging the 'good'/'evil' binary results in a more nuanced understanding of heroism.

Disrupting Binaries: The Ambiguity of the Anti-Hero

First, it is important to note that there is no rigid definition of what constitutes an anti-hero. A key dilemma in heroism scholarship is the difficulty in reaching a determination of what an anti-hero is; for example, Janicke and Raney (2015, 485) suggest that anti-heroes are "protagonists whose conduct is at best morally ambiguous, questionable and at times unjustifiable," whilst Allison and Smith (2015) discuss the notion of anti-heroes being protagonists who begin the narrative as ambiguously residing between good and evil, yet end up on the latter side by the story's conclusion. Similarly, Jonason and others (2012, 192, 193) draw connections between the anti-hero – a figure who is "a protagonist whose character is conspicuously contrary to an archetypal hero" – and the manifestation of psychopathy and the clinical psychology notion of the Dark Triad. This difficulty of definition is also in keeping with Goethals and Allison's (2012) notion that the term 'hero' is itself contextual in nature; as the notion of who is considered a hero differs depending on the person ascribing the term and why they are doing so, Goethals and Allison (2012, 230) state that "heroism exists in the eye of the beholder." Though this paper works towards identifying traits and characteristics of the anti-hero as used in select forms of contemporary popular culture, it is crucial to note that there is no universal consensus in critical heroism literature on how an anti-hero can be absolutely defined.

The anti-hero is particularly distinguished from what this paper terms the *classical* hero; that is, the heroic character who may face issues that threaten to compromise their ethics, morality and decency, but who is ultimately aligned with the side of 'good.' Narrative figures such as Superman and Luke Skywalker, who are largely ethically and morally uncomplicated, can be considered classical heroes. These are the kinds of characters who predominantly follow the archetypal *hero's journey*, as outlined by Joseph Campbell (1949) in his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Though it cannot be claimed that classical heroes are not as nuanced or well-rounded as their anti-heroic counterparts, one of the key differences between both types of heroes is their respective willingness to engage with such compromising issues.

Whereas the classical hero is almost unambiguously aligned with the concept of 'good' in opposition to that of 'evil,' the anti-hero exists on a spectrum between these two points. The identification of where an anti-hero resides on the spectrum is relegated to a number of factors, primarily concerned with issues of morality, ethics, motivation, and the means used to achieve the character's goals. For example, an anti-hero such as Batman can be fighting for the side of good, protecting the citizenry of Gotham from crime, but does so by engaging in morally and ethically questionable tactics, using physical violence and intimidation in methods similar to those of his antagonists. Batman is thus an example of how anti-heroic figures are subject to a range of interpretations within the spectrum; DiPaolo (2011) demonstrates this through a compelling analysis of Batman's varied interpretations.

The anti-hero's challenge of the 'good'/'evil' binary also questions whether such a binary can even be established. Approaching the topic from a clinical, psychoanalytic methodology, popular culture scholar Travis Langley alludes to the difficulties of establishing this binary, inferring that any self-styled 'good' character is more than capable of resorting to 'evil' tactics in the pursuit of heroism. Though he situates his analysis within a specific study and identification of good and evil characters in the *Star Wars* franchise, Langley (2015, 16) cites the possibility that the tactics of good and evil may merely come down to "[o]rder and chaos," two concepts Langley argues "are separate issues from right and wrong"; the binary between good and evil may even be considered a "false dichotomy" (Langley 2015, 15).

Anti-heroes are also subject to the idea of *liminal heroism*, a term utilised in Gaine's (2010) analysis of Batman. Gaine (2010) cites Batman as an example of the liminal hero; that is, one who is able to operate within the middle ground between good and evil. In Gaine's (2010, 1) words, the liminal hero "crosses social thresholds such as those between legality and criminality, justice and oppression." Expanding upon this notion further through an analysis of predominantly anti-heroic cowboy characters such as *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*'s Tom Doniphon and *Star Wars*' Han Solo, Poulos (2012, 487) succinctly summarises some of the traits inherent to the liminal hero:

> He is the outsider, the loner who rides in from somewhere else, or who shows up out of the blue, or who lives out beyond the edge of town. He is the antihero. He embodies *some* heroic qualities (like courage under fire) while still carrying qualities that are antithetical to the presumed purity of mission embodied by the classic hero figure. He is often a rogue, a rascal, a rebel … He does not take orders from anyone – even a qualified leader … He is both hero and villain.

The liminality of anti-heroism is inherently morally and ethically nebulous in both its intent and execution, and aids in deconstructing naturalised and assumed binaries that are conceptualised; Beech (2011, 286) argues that "[l]iminal practices occur at the intersection of structure and agency." Throughout his paper Gaine (2010) conducts an analysis of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, the 2008 Batman film which uses Batman's agency as the anti-hero protagonist to primarily debate issues of post-9/11 morality, the validity of torture and the notion of the American state of exception. Gaine (2010, 7) comes to the conclusion that the film and its representation of Batman, as an example of liminal heroism, "questions the 'natural, unquestionable justice' favoured by superhero narratives." Liminality is itself a somewhat unstable formation, utilised in a plethora of fashions by a variety of scholars – Beech (2011, 287-288) lists a number of them in his work on liminality and identity construction – but is predominantly understood as "a position of ambiguity and uncertainty" (Beech 2011, 287), a notion that will be vital in outlining the ambiguously heroic aspects of this paper's three case studies in the next section.

The contemporary anti-hero also derives part of its narrative power from historical examples of texts challenging real world discourses. Simmons' (2008) informative study analyses texts from the 1960s in regards to their anti-heroic characters. Simmons (2008, 147) contends that these characters and narratives were formed as responses to then-contemporary sociocultural and political discourses, forming what he terms "an integral part of the rebellion of the 1960s counterculture." The anti-hero of the 1960s is linked to societal upheaval and a challenge of cultural status quos; the writers of the time used the "potent symbolic power" of anti-hero characters "in order to attack many of the societal values they [perceived] to be negative" (Simmons 2008, 18). Simmons (2008, 19) metaphorically encapsulates the revolutionary notion of anti-heroism as an aggressive response to "established national heroic ideas" in the United States, drawing particular attention to the representation of President John F. Kennedy's administration as an Arthurian simulacrum, in reference to the myth of King Arthur and the heroic Knights of the Round Table. Many contemporary anti-heroes confront similar modern discourses, their challenge of established ideas grounded within disrupting the 'good'/'evil' binary.

Anti-heroism is acutely concerned with the disruption of neatly organised binaries. In performing this disruption, audiences are able to negotiate more nuanced forms of justice as opposed to simplistic regimes of good and evil. DiPaolo (2011) notes this quality in superhero texts, particularly in relation to their ability to articulate contemporary social and political ideas; although DiPaolo (2011, 10) speaks specifically to superhero texts, his assertion just as easily applies to a broader array of anti-hero texts in general:

> These stories are unsettling, and don't provide easy answers for the audience member. Instead, the [texts] inspire use to meditate on the tense and controversial issues of our day and inspire us to think in unconventional terms … As we … go to see a supposedly disposable form of entertainment … we need to consider whether we will use the action-packed story as a means of escape from the real world, and from responsibility in it, or allow the politics underlying the spectacle to make us directly wrestle with difficult issues, and inspire us to react with similar thoughtfulness and sensitivity to the pressing questions of our time.

This does not presuppose that traditionally heroic texts are unable to engage in complex discourses of law and justice, but rather that anti-heroism's more layered perception of heroism as being on a spectrum, rather than a binary, invites a multifaceted and more open approach that cannot reduce questions of such discourses into easy answers. If we consider fictional characters as being able to interpret and negotiate complex real world paradigms, acting as a lens through which to view the discourses these paradigms intersect with, then anti-heroic protagonists implicitly debate the layers, interpretations and ramifications of contemporary law and justice issues which themselves do not bear simple resolutions (Comerford 2015).

Bainbridge (2006, 172) asserts a similar notion when considering how popular culture interprets law and justice:

> The signifier of law, from lawyer to policeman to government agent, has slid further and further away from the modern rule of law towards an increasingly transcendent interventionist pursuit of justice. In so doing, these signifiers continue to interrogate the law and push the boundaries of what law can be, well beyond the relatively limited and circumscribed space of the courtroom towards increasingly problematic pre-modern notions of 'justice' in the wider society … not only moving the law closer to justice but also promoting debate about how law and justice work together in the wider culture.

In relation to the notion of disruption is Derrida's examination of the *pharmakon*. Derived from the original Greek word meaning either 'remedy' or 'poison,' the *pharmakon* is the central object of analysis in Derrida's (1981, 63-171) influential essay "Plato's Pharmacy." The essay focuses on a tale related by Plato, regarding the god Theuth attempting to offer the gift of writing to the people of Thamus, King of Egypt; the King regards Theuth's supposed gift as a poison for his people. Throughout the essay, Derrida debates and challenges the binary notion of the *pharmakon*, determining it as an object simultaneously of both/either cure and/or poison, interrogating Plato's binary as an effort of imposing specific value on one or other element of a binary – in this case, Thamus values speech over writing, hence in part his rejection of Theuth's 'gift.' Rather than simply inverting or reversing the binary to place more value on

writing, Derrida's understanding of *pharmakon* disrupts the binary and seeks to "[give] way to a process where opposites merge in a constant undecidable exchange of attributes" (Norris 1987, 35). Derrida's challenge of Plato's binary thus encourages a more nuanced understanding of the *pharmakon*, demonstrating that neither quality of the term is mutually exclusive to the other.

In analysing Derrida's challenge, Brooker (2012) asserts that the *pharmakon* stands for a combination of the positive and negative into a more fluid and ambiguous relay of language. Inviting Derrida's essay into his analysis of post-9/11 Batman texts, Brooker (2012, 188) convincingly claims that the *pharmakon* is vital to understanding how contemporary textual politics rely on a meaning derived from ambiguity, from a spectrum, rather than existing purely within binaries:

> [A]ny attempt to impose a clear-cut, binary opposition on a complex relay inevitably results in slippage and struggle. The relationship between cultural and textual energies is a process, not a neat division; black will always seep into white and colour will show through darkness.

The interpretation of certain forms of justice as being composed of a *pharmakon* is vital to understanding the anti-hero. The character is a disruption between the binary points of good and evil; Poulos (2012, 487) highlights this by stating that the liminal hero is "both/and, neither/nor, betwixt/between … [h]e is, as they say, an unresolved character." As such, anti-heroes interpret their own forms of justice somewhat separately to how the classical hero conceives it. The anti-heroes' actions are undertaken as self-claimed campaigns designed to bring justice – effective, natural, interstitial, vigilante or otherwise – and are self-validated by the anti-heroes themselves, whether through avenues of necessity, pragmatism, effectiveness or self-perceived moral obligation.

Embodying Ambiguity: The Anti-Heroes of *Doctor Who*, Batman and *24*

To demonstrate the good/evil heroic binary disruption, this paper covers three relevant textual protagonists whose varied degrees of anti-heroism are at once correlative to and distinct from each other. These characters have been selected from visual texts, in part, because they embody Bainbridge's (2006) assertions regarding the power of televisual forms in semiotically conveying complex ideas; Bainbridge (2006, 155) cites Barthes' (1972, 143) notion that "iconic images … distil complex details … into blissful clarity," allowing them to be more easily negotiated.

We can consider each character as positioned at a separate location on the anti-heroic spectrum. *Doctor Who*'s Doctor operates towards the more morally positive, rational and (somewhat) lawful end, given the character's determination to safeguard Earth whilst resorting to ethically unsound means as infrequently as possible. Comparatively, Batman exists within the moral and ethical centre, firmly believing his campaign against crime in Gotham warrants the use of brutal violence and morally questionable practices. Jack Bauer's use of lethal tactics and abuse of legal power situates the character towards the more irrational, illegal and exceptional end of the spectrum, despite his connections to legality through his counter-terrorist organisation and his employ by multiple fictional United States Presidents. Each character demonstrates different views and representations of anti-heroism, and in so doing provokes questions regarding contemporaneous ideas of law, justice and security, and how these can be negotiated by audiences.

For over fifty-three years' worth of stories, the Doctor has been largely known for saving planet Earth from cataclysmic intergalactic threats. A significant number of *Doctor Who*'s television episodes have depicted the time-traveling Doctor as a heroic individual in the eyes of those he saves; for example, the 2008 episode *The Fires of Pompeii* explicitly denotes this with a Roman family, whom the Doctor rescues from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the year 79 AD, creating an altar in their home in honour of his heroic action, and adopting the Doctor as their household god. The character's earlier adventures peripherally flirted with anti-heroism, though not to the extent of more contemporary fare. Though there are multiple examples of anti-heroism throughout the first twenty-six years of the series – most notably when the Doctor, as played by Tom Baker in 1974's *Genesis of the Daleks*, considers committing genocide against the Daleks in order to save billions of lives – pre-2000 *Doctor Who* has largely represented the Doctor as a straightforward, if somewhat eccentric hero, with human conceptualisations of justice despite his alien nature. The central conceit of the character is that he is able to periodically regenerate his body whenever he is mortally injured, taking on a new physical appearance and persona each time; an example of the Doctor's overt heroism can be found in 1984's *The Caves of Androzani*, when the Doctor sacrifices one of his regenerations – essentially, a life in and of itself – in order to save his fatally poisoned companion. In this manner, the Doctor demonstrates what Goethals and Allison (2012) identify as a key tenet of heroism, being the act of sacrificing personal needs for the greater good. Though each regenerated incarnation differs from those who came before, there are uniting threads and characteristics germane to each version of the Doctor, particularly the character's desire to protect Earth and, more importantly, the lives of the companions who travel with him.

Though the Doctor is still often perceived as a hero by other characters – as in the example from *The Fires of Pompeii* – the contemporary portrayal of the character has become more noticeably ambiguous when demonstrating certain forms of heroism. Beginning in 2005 with the ninth incarnation, played by Christopher Eccleston, the Doctor of recent narratives has demonstrated more anti-heroic qualities. As a veteran of the cataclysmic, universe-spanning Time War, the Doctor is irrevocably affected by what he considers to be the necessary actions he took in order to end the War; among these decisions, the one which plagues the Doctor for hundreds of years of his life is the genocide he committed against both the Daleks and his own race, the Time Lords. Necessity thus forms much of the justification of the Doctor's subsequent actions, a trait common not only in Eccelston's incarnation but also his subsequent three lives; Peter Capaldi's twelfth Doctor, being the most recent in 2016, still excoriates himself over his actions. The moral ambiguity of the Doctor is also more evident and problematized in these recent narratives; the key reason the Doctor saves the Roman family in 2008's *The Fires of Pompeii* is that he is emphatically convinced to do so by his companion, despite the fact that the Doctor would rather leave all of Pompeii's inhabitants to their predestined fate in order to preserve the established timeline. This contrasts any of the pre-2005 Doctors, who would most likely have saved the family without a second thought.

From the outset, the Doctor establishes his form of justice not only as necessary (from his perspective), but also quite pragmatic. The character can be interpreted as altruistic, yet somewhat ruthless, in his pursuit of justice. His self-given mandate of protecting Earth from interstellar threats is encapsulated in several instances; one example sees the Doctor, shortly after regenerating into his tenth form as played by David Tennant, offering mercy to the leader of the Sycorax, a warmongering alien race, whom he has just prevented from killing millions on Earth. When the Sycorax leader reneges on his agreement to depart Earth following a (by

the standards of the series) legal trial by combat, the Doctor mercilessly kills him by dropping him off the side of the Sycorax's airborne spaceship. "No second chances," the Doctor declares, "I'm that sort of a man." Upon standing before the rest of the Sycorax crew who have just witnessed the death of their leader, the Doctor implores them to consider the consequences of any race attacking Earth: "When you go back to the stars and tell others of this planet … then you make sure you tell them this – it is defended!" Though the Doctor attempts a diplomatic course of action before fighting the Sycorax leader, he resorts to more aggressive tactics when the lawful option bears no fruit.

As an anti-hero, the Doctor is positioned towards the more positive, morally upright end of the anti-hero spectrum. Following the Doctor's encounter with the Sycorax, the British Prime Minister orders the destruction of the retreating Sycorax vessel as a preventive measure towards attacks in future. The Doctor is disgusted with the Prime Minister's actions, illustrating that his concept of justice only extends so far. Though the Sycorax exhibited malicious intent for Earth, this instance is one of many where the Doctor demonstrates the self-perceived need for invasive tactics in safeguarding Earth, yet only endorses those tactics to a point.

The Doctor exhibits liminal heroic tendencies with positive moral intent. During the episode *The Waters of Mars*, the Doctor breaks the laws of time travel, threatening universal instability by altering history in order to save Captain Adelaide Brooke, an important historical figure, from death. Though Adelaide herself denounces his flagrant disregard of the laws as selfish and wrong, the Doctor determines it a just action; as the last of his kind, and therefore the only person capable of upholding the laws, the Doctor declares that "the laws of time are [his], and they will obey [him]." The Doctor's anti-heroism is motivated by a strong moral centre, but it stands somewhat apart from legality because there are few authorities in the universe that the Doctor could be answerable to. Despite his occasional friction with Earth-bound law enforcement, the Doctor is largely a free agent; he bends or breaks rules to save people with little to no accountability. In terms of the *pharmakon*, the Doctor literally sees himself as a cure, though the damage he nonetheless causes – usually in relation to how his continued presence on Earth invites other threats to attempt its destruction – is evidenced on multiple occasions.

Contrasting the Doctor's separation from law is Batman, and his entanglements with it. In addition to Brooker's (2001, 2012) comprehensive scholarly work on the character's origins and greater cultural value, extensive analyses have also been undertaken regarding Batman's interactions with law and justice, particularly in regards to the character's recent depiction in Christopher Nolan's film trilogy (see Ip 2011; McGowan 2009; Phillips 2010). Though the character has, as Gaine (2010, 2) notes, "remained largely apolitical" for most of his seventy-seven years of publication, Batman has been more recently used as a means of engaging with multiple political and cultural discourses, predominantly those concerned with post-9/11 justice, torture and security. The character now showcases a more morally and ethically ambiguous characterisation galvanised by post-9/11 uncertainty and fear; in focusing on Batman and his arch-nemesis, the Joker, Gaine (2010, 5) states that both can be considered extremists, "Batman in terms of law enforcement, The Joker in terms of chaos." In his analysis of Derrida's notions regarding *pharmakon*, Brooker (2012) notes a similar viewpoint.

The validity of Batman's justice, delivered through physical violence and a near-complete disregard for the legal structures of Gotham City, is an ongoing issue of study. Predominantly the character eschews law to pursue more effective justice against criminality, resulting in

violence that is legally bereft but, from Batman's perspective, considered a moral and ethical necessity. Batman perceives Gotham as being unable to govern itself satisfactorily, believing his presence is warranted to protect the citizenry from crime, even if he must do so outside legal boundaries. Giddens (2014, 767-768) offers a nuanced view on Batman's relationship with law, asserting the character "can be understood as a symbol for an idealised justice that cuts through the limitations and bureaucracy of the practical legal process." Through being able to pursue such justice outside the bounds of law, Giddens (2014, 768) argues that Batman "signifies the source of 'true' justice that law must aspire to and be measured against," justice demonstrated through the apparent success of his anti-heroism in Gotham.

Though both Batman and the Doctor are anti-heroic, the former is placed more in the centre of the spectrum given his willingness to resort to more morally ambiguous tactics to succeed. The Doctor laments his anti-heroic actions, condemning himself for his actions in the Time War; Batman rarely displays such self-reflexivity, unapologetically emphasising the necessity of his presence in order for a semblance of order to be maintained in Gotham. The range of oppositional and additional readings of the character of Batman emphasise his anti-hero status, outlining a character whose actions invite multiple interpretations (see DiPaolo 2011, 49-69). The character also articulates ambiguity on a more global scale; Höglund (2014, 116) offers two simultaneous readings of Christopher Nolan's Batman film series as highlighting both post-9/11 pro- and anti-war sentiments, describing a figure "who regularly transgresses the boundaries of national and international law" but who "can also be usefully read as a critique of US imperial violence in the Middle East." This ambiguous perception of the character aligns with Poulos' (2012, 487) notions regarding the liminal hero, one who "lives on the border … between civilized and uncivilized, between compassionate and ruthless, between good and evil," a figure who can be identified by either and both elements of the binary.

In addition to embodying the *pharmakon*, as explored in detail by Brooker (2012), Batman can also be considered a *pharmakos*: a term that denotes both 'magician' and 'wizard,' but also a 'poisoner' or 'scapegoat.' Brooker (2012, 192) terms a *pharmakos* as "a figure in Greek culture who was sacrificed for the sake of the city in times of emergency." The reading of Batman as an anti-heroic scapegoat is apropos to Nolan's film trilogy; during its second film, *The Dark Knight*, Batman offers to take the blame for the deaths caused by insane District Attorney Harvey Dent in order to uphold justice in Gotham. Ironically, Dent unintentionally invokes the idea of a *pharmakos* during an earlier discussion in the film about the Roman Republic electing a figure to stand as their defender in a time of crisis. This scapegoating is a necessary act according to Batman, claiming he will be "whatever Gotham needs [him] to be" in order to keep the peace. In this manner, Batman demonstrates Beech's (2011, 286) assertion that liminal practices take place "at the intersection of structure and agency." Batman does not see himself as a hero, but his actions in brutally beating thugs and taking the blame for others' injustices to safeguard Gotham demonstrate a complicated form of heroism.

24's protagonist Jack Bauer demonstrates a similar kind of heroism, at least at first. Bauer begins the series legally employed by the Los Angeles Counter-Terrorist Unit (CTU), working to protect fictional Senator David Palmer during the 2001 California Presidential Primary. Though Bauer utilises lethal tactics in ensuring Palmer's security, he is safeguarded by the aegis of CTU and its status as a legal law enforcement agency in the United States (US). The series depicts Bauer as a patriot, fervently devoted to protecting the US and its citizens; on multiple occasions Bauer defuses hostage situations, rescues kidnapped political leaders and

prevents terrorists from using weapons of mass destruction against civilians. As *24* progresses, however, both of Bauer's statuses as legal counter-terrorist and officially state-sanctioned figure of security are compromised. Progressive seasons of terrorist attacks, each subsequent attack building in intensity and scope, cause Bauer to eschew lawful pursuit of those responsible for them; by the time *24*'s ninth season begins, thirteen years after the first, Bauer is a wanted fugitive with no legal legitimacy in his pursuit of terrorists. While he displays many of the vigilante traits that Batman is also known for, the key difference between both characters is their understanding and adoption of morality in relation to violence as a method of effective justice. Batman uses violent tactics, but obeys a strict code of ethics and morality that prohibits lethal practice. Bauer does not have the same constraint, want only torturing and killing those who are in his way.

The gradual moral and ethical shift in Bauer's characterisation over the course of *24* demonstrates liminal heroism to a degree, yet this heroism is threatened by Bauer's use of extreme tactics. On multiple occasions, Bauer takes courses of action which do not bear a limited heroic quality, if any; among other examples, Bauer withholds medical treatment from a suspect dying from a gunshot wound to coerce him into surrendering information, shoots another suspect in the leg for similar reasons, kills a legally-sanctioned counter-terrorism agent in order to safeguard a terrorist leader who is needed for interrogation, murders the staff and corrupt ambassador of the Russian embassy in New York, and kills another terrorist leader in cold blood after her being wounded and successfully captured. Bauer's anti-hero distinction, as opposed to being a villain, comes chiefly from his desire to protect the US, a rationalisation Bauer frequently uses to justify his extreme methods. It must also be said that the threats Bauer faces – predominantly involving terrorists possessing nuclear and biological weapons – can be regarded as much worse than Bauer himself.

Considering the *pharmakon*, Bauer's role as both remedy and poison shifts its onus more to the latter term throughout the later seasons of *24*. In particular, the eighth season concludes with Bauer conducting a one-man campaign of violence against the corrupt Russian President, a campaign which includes the aforementioned embassy murders. The narrative presents the Russian President and his conspirators as antagonists to the US, but Bauer himself is categorised as reckless, dangerous and potentially more threatening to the US than those he pursues. He is no longer sanctioned by the US government, instead being actively sought for capture by their legally-appointed agents. Though he desires to protect the US in pursuing the Russians, in truth his quest is also motivated by personal revenge; one of the Russian conspirators murders his partner, sparking the beginning of his bloody rampage. Bauer almost becomes what Goethals and Allison (2012, 226) term a "transposed hero," one who has wilfully converted from a hero to a villain.

Bauer as any kind of hero is problematic from the outset. *24*'s characters celebrate Bauer as a national hero on multiple occasions, despite his morally and ethically questionable tactics; during *24*'s fourth season, a former US President defends Bauer breaching international law and raiding a Chinese consulate in Los Angeles for information on an impending terrorist attack, arguing that Bauer is working for the greater good. Bainbridge (2006, 169) uses this example to interrogate Bauer's supposed heroism; through achieving what the narrative considers "the 'correct' result," Bauer demonstrates that "[j]ustice and preventing terrorism are conflated into one and the same thing." Bauer's counter-terrorism methods, Bainbridge (2006) asserts, are less concerned with the moral and ethical implications and more with a ruthless, pragmatic approach to enacting effective justice.

Where Bauer can be interpreted more heroically is in the character's belief that such justice also means his own sacrifice, particularly if the result is security for the US. The consulate incident resolves with Bauer becoming a literal *pharmakos* (as scapegoat) for the US by accepting the blame for the raid, becoming a target for the Chinese authorities and going into hiding in order to protect US state secrets. This act represents the kind of self-sacrifice which Goethals and Allison (2012) cite as a central tenet of a hero. Bauer repeats this act at the conclusion of *24*'s ninth season, offering himself as a prisoner to Russian militants in exchange for their releasing his close friend; the narrative implies that this act will eventually result in Bauer's death in captivity. Though he resorts to extreme and morally-questionable methods in his pursuit of justice, it can nonetheless be said Bauer is heroic in being willing to make the ultimate sacrifice a hero is capable of making.

Conclusion

The anti-hero, and his/her embodiment of the *pharmakon*, provokes important questions about the constitution of heroism. The neat binary of heroism and villainy is disrupted by characters that are willing to be a little 'evil' in order to do 'good.' All three characters explored in this paper pursue heroic agendas in protecting their respective domains. Each of these characters demonstrates key traits that are outlined in Goethals and Allison's (2012) examination of heroism; they are competent, morally guided and self-sacrificial for the greater good. What constitutes the characters' anti-heroism is their ability to venture outside of the rules set by classical heroes in pursuit of this greater good. Existing in the liminal zone between good and evil, using tactics from both and combining them into binary-disrupting enactments of effective justice, the Doctor, Batman and Jack Bauer represent three key points on the spectrum of anti-heroism. In doing so, the characters question the "false dichotomy" of good and evil suggested by Langley (2015, 15), emphasising the relationship – one which is not mutually exclusive – between the binary points of 'hero' and 'villain,' and illustrating that the demarcation between the two may be liminal rather than rigid.

Understanding the complexity of anti-heroism allows audiences to better negotiate contemporary issues of law and justice. The characters' respective nuances articulate how notions of heroism, morality, ethics and legality can be perceived and negotiated. In discussing the contemporary role of the superhero, Bainbridge (2007) cites these types of characters as ready embodiments of justice who also demonstrate the law's separation from justice; specifically, Bainbridge (2007, 460) posits that justice may itself be "something that can exist quite apart from the legal system." Anti-heroes inhabit a realm of ambiguous morals and ethics, existing in an age where contemporary discourses of security, terrorism and civil liberty cannot simply be resolved in terms of 'good' or 'evil' responses. Through complicating both the relationship between law and justice and the questions such a relationship provokes, the anti-hero in contemporary popular culture allows audiences to directly engage with these discourses.

Importantly, anti-heroes depict a nuanced portrayal of heroism which establishes it as a somewhat relatable, flawed and ultimately human practice. Poulos (2012) opines that the liminal hero is essentially a representation of humanity which eschews binaries by accepting both of their qualities, rather than one or the other. By understanding and embracing the concept of the liminal hero, Poulos (2012, 490) claims, we can see ourselves as "fully integrated humans, with all those both/and qualities needed to survive on this earth … we are all good/bad, courageous/terrified, compassionate/ruthless, hero/villain." Anti-heroes operate through practices which are complex and unable to be neatly resolved, prompting audiences to question how heroism, and their understanding of it, is constituted.

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