**Reading Plato with the Man of Steel**

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One reason to have a liberal education—one that’s usually neglected by all those experts these days who are saying that the value of an education is measured by the money you earn after graduation—is that it's indispensable for understanding the political teachings of the better summer blockbuster movies, such as the very thoughtful new Superman film—*Man of Steel*.

Let’s face it, what grown up doesn't need a deeper teaching to divert him from all that boring action?  In *Man of Steel*, battle scenes sometimes seem to drag on forever, because it just isn’t so clear what it takes to kill someone from Krypton.

*Man of Steel* is all about Plato’s *Republic*, something that would hit you immediately if you had actually read that great book. The filmmakers make it clear enough that they want you to read it to get their message. They show Clark Kent sitting in his car reading Plato, presumably to help him get some clue about who he is and what he’s supposed to do. (Message to all you young men and women: If you want to be as good as Superman, read Plato. It goes without saying that there’s nothing you can do to be as strong as Superman.  Message number 2: You Plato readers better be prepared to endure bullying for your intellectual virtue, as Superman himself did.)

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The film also has all kinds of Christian New-Agey imagery that you can grab onto if you’re not much of a reader. Superman is compared in some ways to Jesus; he begins his mission at age 33 (the year Jesus ended his earthly mission), for example. But that kind of comparison doesn’t really hold up that well. Superman is only here to help us, not redeem us, certainly not to save us from our sins or from death. And he doesn't have any deep insight into the meaning of life or love. His life, like each of ours, is shaped by choice and chance. He has extraordinary power that falls way short of omnipotence. He's a man born to love and die—not a god. Superman's Kryptonian father predicts that the people of our planet would regard his only begotten son as a god, but that we did not do. We've never become so Nietzschean or whatever that we've come to think a merely Superman can replace our need for God himself.

The discovery of intelligent life from Krypton teaches us that we're not alone.  But it also teaches us that "aliens are us."  The residents of Krypton call themselves people, and their personal experiences haven't taught them anything fundamental about who we are and what we're supposed to do that we didn't already know.  So the film gently mocks Carl Sagan's view that the discovery of intelligent and more technologically advanced life elsewhere in the cosmos would produce some deep transformation in our self-understanding, prove there is no God, and peacefully free us from our troubles. We were darn lucky that the Kryptonian discovery of our existence didn't mean the end of us.

The movie uses a kind of Christian “product placement”  to veil its deeper anti-utopian affirmation of the Biblical understanding of who we are as free persons—or not merely parts of some "city" or deterministic nature. The film’s spiritual surface draws upon the superficial spirituality of our time, but there’s a lot more.

We learn that Krypton at one point was an empire—not unlike the Athenian empire or even the American empire. Science flourished—as it had to for the high civilization to develop in such a harsh environment, and all the nearby planets were colonized. Babies were made the old-fashioned way, and the life of the “city” was full of choice and chance, as free countries are.

At some point, for reasons not all that clear, Krypton turned inward, abandoned its imperial outreach, imposed population control, ended natural reproduction, and turned its science to breeding beings for the functions they will perform in their regime—workers, warriors, and leaders. We get the suggestion that they actually bred two kinds of leaders. Those—like General Zod—whose whole purpose in life was the perpetuation of Krypton as a people or regime. And those—like Superman’s enlightened father—who were bred to be something like philosopher-kings (who still cared for their people).

This scheme—the use of scientific wisdom to sustain the political order—is close in all the details mentioned to the one found the “city in speech” Socrates constructs with his interlocutors in the *Republic*. One difference is that the Kryptonians actually had the technology to impose control—or abolish choice and chance—on reproduction by taking people (Kryptonians) out of the picture altogether. One difference between our time and all the preceding ones is a reasonable person could believe today that imposing such control by moving reproduction outside the womb might actually be possible.

The attempt to replace nature completely with technical control, we learn, destabilized the core of Krypton, and the result was decline and eventual destruction. In the *Republic*, the breakdown of the perfect city is caused by scientific miscalculation. On Krypton, any miscalculation, we can think, should have been corrected by the philosopher-kings, but, not  surprisingly, their wisdom turns out to be imperfect and so unreliable.

Superman’s philosopher-leader dad—Jor-El—realizes, too late, that the only hope for Krypton is a return to nature—to choice and chance, beginning with the risky business of having a natural baby.  His wife gives birth in secret, and the parents are immediately filled with love for their own child, as opposed to a child of Krypton. That child is a return to hope; the S that comes to stand for Superman is actually Kyrptonian for hope.

Jor-El now cares for both his people and his particular person, and he plans for both their futures. He sends his son in the direction of a promising planet with the “codex”—or the genetic material of a billion future Kryptonians—embedded in his body with hope for them all.

General Zod leads a rebellion against this “heresy” and on behalf of the eugenics-based people. He’s defeated and sentenced to indefinite rehabilitation. But Krypton is soon destroyed, and Zod manages to escape into the cosmos with his genetic mission of somehow sustaining the Kryptonian people into the future. His hope is first in the colonies, but they all died out in the absence of Kryptonian direction. But he also has hope in the continued existence of the “codex” that left his planet with his son.

Zod's is a purpose-driven life, and his fanaticism flows from the fact of his lack of freedom, of his inability to choose who he is. He can’t help but do whatever is required to defend his people, and he’s probably not wrong to think that their future depends on his conquest of Earth. It goes without saying that nobody in the movie’s audience—which includes no one from Krypton—cares about his people’s future. And so nobody really “gets” the nobility of his mission. The Kryptonians of the future that he aimed to liberate from their encoded slavery in Kal’s body would have, of course, built monuments to his magnanimity.

A fundamental issue raised by the film is whether a being artificially made to be only a part of a political community could be a person in full. We see that Zod really isn’t, despite his fearless and skillful devotion. Arguably Kal’s biological father is, but he was one of the few bred with the freedom required to make a leader’s prudential decisions. We’re not given the comfortable lesson that in each particular case irreducible individuality or personality triumphs over genetic manipulation.

The Greek and Roman efforts to make citizens through education sometimes failed, and it’s the not-so-secret teaching of the *Republic* that it’s contrary to nature—or both undesirable and impossible—to eradicate personal choice through some comprehensive and highly intrusive process of political socialization, one that abolishes privacy and the family and chains even sexual behavior to the requirements of the just city. But the founders of "the city in speech" in the *R*epublic couldn't even imagine an artificial replacement of natural birth.In the case of Krypton, genetic control—not merely educational manipulation—seems to have been successful in producing beings who reliably performed the functions for which they were made. To eradicate chance or unpredictable behavior, sexual behavior had to be detached from reproduction; all sex, in a way, became safe sex.

Although artificial reproduction can produce beings who are merely “parts,” we still learn that regime that aims to make itself that closed or unfree or detached from natural spontaneity is contrary to nature.  Zod's fiercely loyal female subcommander tells Kal-El (Superman) that “evolution always wins” to explain why his dad's last-ditch experiment in personal freedom will fail. But of course the irony is that no regime has ever been more opposed to nature than Krypton.

Krypton’s inevitable decline and fall is a victory of natural evolution over the effort to provide a conscious and volitional replacement for it. It's not true that human liberty is defeated by evolution; the truth is that we are “hardwired” for choice and chance and can’t flourish without them.

I'm just getting wound up here.  More soon.



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