**Reading Plato with the Man of Steel**

by [Peter Lawler](http://bigthink.com/users/peterlawler)

June 24, 2013, 11:10 PM



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.)

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.



by [Peter Lawler](http://bigthink.com/users/peterlawler)



Top of Form

Leave a message...

Bottom of Form

* [Newest](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel)
* [Community](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel)
* [Share](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel)
* [](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel)

[donna](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel) • [11 hours ago](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel#comment-944371373)

I NEVER READ B SH .. BUT I JUST DO

* + •
  + [Reply](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel)
  + •
  + Share ›
  + [](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel)
* [](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel)

[Karmicquickdraw](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel) • [a day ago](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel#comment-943767269)

I am just re-reading Alan Watts' THE BOOK: On the taboo of knowing who you are. Chapter 2 was my project today. I was blown away by it, again. Then I sat down to check my email. Opened this article and was astounded at how synchronistic my reading has been today. I heartily recommend Watts' take on the very topic explored here -- keeping in mind his viewpoint was pre-internet. Then I would have you read BATTLE FOR THE LIFE AND BEAUTY OF THE EARTH by Christopher Alexander.

* [](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel)

[1voluntaryist](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel) • [a day ago](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel#comment-943492529)

I agree with Peter about being "hardwired" for choice. Chance is the word we use to describe the unexplained. It is our nature to spend our life tying to explain, thereby eliminating chance. Curiousness, i.e., a desire to know, is hardwired. I define "natural" as acting in accordance with our nature. It is natural for us to be inquisitive, to question, to use our superior brain (from animals) to survive. A brain damaged person or someone with a small child's intellect would not survive alone in nature because that person would be without his primary survival tool, the superior intellect only humans manifest.

It follows I don't consider genetic manipulation "unnatural" evolution. Or any "conscious and volitional" action unnatural. We are thinkers. It is natural for us to control our environment by use of our minds. We can't survive otherwise; we can't survive as individuals, psychologically, or as a species by failing to recognize the necessity for individual sovereignty. Thinking is the act of a consciousness best exercised freely. There is no collective consciousness. The closest we have to that is group brain storming, bouncing ideas off one another, and feeding on the emotional energy of social interaction. We are social, by nature also. In fact we only progress as a species by building on the thinking done by many others, past and present. Even geniuses do this. A genius can learn from a dull normal. That is the beauty of human interaction. It has been proven clinically and mathematically that two minds are better than one, and the more minds the better. This is what population control advocates and authoritarian social engineers fail to understand: People are the best resource, if their freedom is honored. Otherwise, we have repression, resentment, conflict, mental illness, and mixed progress, with periods of social devolution.

* [](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel)

[Thomas Walsh](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel) • [a day ago](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel#comment-943430803)

My understanding is that Plato's Republic is the great allegory of the mind - body relationship common to us all. The authoritarian elements are about reason balancing, directing and making creative use of passion. It has very little to do with politics in the public sense. The allegory of the cave is about life beyond the accumulation of power, sex and money. It is also not at all about sacrifice.Don't you think so?

* + [](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel)

[1voluntaryist](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel) [Thomas Walsh](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel#comment-943430803) • [a day ago](http://bigthink.com/rightly-understood/reading-plato-with-the-man-of-steel#comment-943557666)

The cave allegory was a metaphysical/epistemological theory which leads to an intellectual dead end. Plato's claim that we can never know reality directly is popular today even though Aristotle and Rand pointed out the contradictions. Plato was probably frustrated by the continual questions that newly appeared as he acquired knowledge. The more knowledge, the more questions. He reasoned since we can never know everything, we can't know anything. Of course, it's not either/or. We can know a fact, within the context of our total knowledge. Our understanding changes as our context expands, but it is not contradicted, unless we make a mistake when integrating. Contradictions tell us we have made a mental error. They must be corrected or we short circuit our thinking process.

The Republic was written to justify sacrifice. Obviously the question needs to be addressed today as then, in light of the continual authoritarian actions justified as necessary sacrifices. Plato, as all totalitarian minds, did not value the individual except as a sacrifice to the group. This is a fundamental axiom of all authoritarian societies and always expresses itself with violence against non-conformist behavior or thought. This makes authoritarianism unstable and explains why it always results in societal collapse. Freedom is not a luxury, it is necessary for our progress.

**Superman Has Two Dads! (More on Plato and the Man of Steel)**

by [Peter Lawler](http://bigthink.com/users/peterlawler)

June 27, 2013, 11:16 AM



We’re hardwired to be free, but we’re also hardwired to be relational beings. *Man of Steel* is nothing if not a celebration of fathers. Maybe the most repulsive feature of the *Republic*’s “city in speech,” for us, is the absence of parenthood. Devices are invented so mothers won’t recognize their biological children. Marriage is reduced to coupling—a quickie—arranged scientifically to improve the quality of the citizenry. And fatherhood disappears altogether; men don’t know and aren’t attached to their biological kids in particular.

You don’t have to be a feminist to notice that the discussion of the communism of women and children in the *Republic* is so destructive of human love and human “relationships” as they actually exist because all the interlocutors are *men*. A woman’s voice would have introduced some realism about a mother’s love and the need for fathers. And we can assume that a woman would have let those men have it for not thinking of themselves as having paternal duties. Men, on their own, are tyrannical and ridiculous in privileging public life over the pleasures and responsibilities of the intimate life of the family. A subtext of the *Republic* is that men diss intimate life because of their erotic inferiority by nature. They can’t actually *have* babies, and their sexual lives are more limited by time.

Krypton’s eugenics scheme perfects the deconstruction of the family and diminishing erotic or relational life. Women no longer have kids, and so they no longer have to be educated not to care for their own. There’s no need for marriage at all, although it seems to still exist.

Advertising

The single most moving moment in the film is the relational transformation that occurs when Jor-El and his wife are bonded by their shared love of their own child. That’s nothing less than the rediscovery of the natural foundation of the love that properly distinguishes self-conscious persons. Love of “the city” is nothing compared to love of one’s own child. And contrary to what philosophers sometimes think, and what the *Republic* seems to suggest, Aristotle reminds us that the most relational human bond is between husband and wife sharing responsibility for the goods—mainly the kids—they share in common.

The *Republic* shows that men more than women need this lesson about being a parent. And who can deny that today men find it harder than women to think of themselves as responsible parents?  That explains, of course, both why we have so many single moms and why men are faring so badly.

It’s deeply instructive that the *Man of Steel* displays for us wonderfully admirable fathers, even as it was released on *Father’s Day*. Superman has two dads! And he’s darn lucky that he does. He has his biological father Jor-El, and his foster-father Jonathan Kent—an ordinary rural guy from Kansas. The dads are played—maybe somewhat overplayed—by the two most expressively talented actors in the film—Russell Crowe and Kevin Costner.

Two of the three heroic “role models” in the film act mainly as dads, and the third—Superman himself—is who he is largely because of what he was given by those two dads. We’re reminded that fatherhood is less directly biological than motherhood, but that makes being a father a freer and arguably more sacrificial choice. The foster father, in fact, is more of a father than the biological one.

Superman, ironically, only knows his biological father as disembodied or displaced consciousness—or not as a father in full. From the philosopher Jor-El, he gets his wisdom, both his huge I.Q. and his intellectual orientation toward the world. It’s because of this father, after all, that he can understand Plato and apply what he’s read to saving us from what seems to be those monstrously amoral products of Kryptonian eugenics. He actually gets from Jor-El  all that is *natural* about who he is.

According to Aristotle (who was refining Plato just a bit), by nature we’re incomplete. We become who we are by acquiring moral virtue—the habits and opinions that are the foundation of the character that allows each of us to act freely and responsibly. Moral virtue is neither natural nor contrary to nature; we’re hardwired to need to be completed by it.

The Kryptonians, having had their natures altered with “prosocial” behavior in mind, need that completion less or are more oriented to a certain kind of completion. But Kal-El/Clark Kent, free of eugenic enhancement or direction, could have been completed in a wide variety of ways. He was completed, in fact, by being raised by a trustworthy, steadfast, loving American man (and his wife) from Kansas.  Jonathan didn’t raise Clark to be just like him; he raised him, without really understanding him, with all those natural superpowers in mind. He knew his son had to remain, in part, an alien, and that his was to be a singularly mission-drive life.

Still, there’s no denying that the main source of Superman’s moral virtue is his foster father. Given those superpowers, Superman would have made his own life and our lives hell without the character—developed in him by his Kansas dad—that allows him to control his desires with his singular mission in mind, one version among many of the singular destiny that constitutes every personal life. It’s because Superman is really from Kansas that we can trust he’s not our enemy.

We can't forget, of course, that not only does Superman have two dads, he has two moms.  We're shown a biological father and a foster-father, but not a single father.  Both marriages are good, and both wives and moms are tough and loving.  Fatherhood is highlighted, to repeat, maybe only because fatherhood is slighted today, but it's not presented outside of its proper relational context.  Dads can't be moms.  That's a natural fact.  But the film stays true to the *Republic* by making a good deal out of another natural fact.  It's a male prejudice to believe that women can't be fine warriors.  Maybe the toughest character from our planet is the gutsy Lois Lane, and no Kryptonian matches the courageous impetuosity of Zod's fierce subcommander Farora-Ul