

COMICS, CRIME, AND THE MORAL SELF

An Interdisciplinary Study of Criminal Identity

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to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Law

September 2011

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Abstract

An ethical understanding of responsibility should entail a richly qualitative comprehension of the links between embodied, unique individuals and their lived realities of behaviour. Criminal responsibility theory broadly adheres to 'rational choice' models of the moral self which subsume individuals' emotionally embodied dimensions under the general direction of their rational will and abstracts their behaviour from corporeal reality. Linking individuals with their behaviour based only on such understandings of 'rational choice' and abstract descriptions of behaviour overlooks the phenomenological dimensions of that behaviour and thus its moral significance as a lived experience. To overcome this ethical shortcoming, engagement with the aesthetic as an alternative discourse can help articulate the 'excessive' nature of lived reality and its relationship with 'orthodox' knowledge; fittingly, the comics form involves interaction of rational, non-rational, linguistic, and non-linguistic dimensions, modelling the limits of conceptual thought in relation to complex reality. Rational choice is predicated upon a split between a contextually embedded self and an abstractly autonomous self. Analysis of the graphic novel *Watchmen* contends that prioritisation of rational autonomy over sensual experience is symptomatic of a 'rational surface' that turns away from the indeterminate 'chaos' of complex reality (the unstructured universe), instead maintaining the power of rational and linguistic concepts to order the world. This 'rational surface' is maintained by masking that which threatens its stability: the chaos of the infinite difference of living individuals. These epistemological foundations are reconfigured, via *Watchmen*, enabling engagement beyond the 'rational surface' by accepting the generative potential of this living chaos and calling for models of criminal identity that are 'restless', acknowledging the unique, shifting nature of individuals, and not tending towards 'complete' or stable concepts of the self-as-responsible. As part of the aesthetic methodology of this reconfiguration, a radical extension of legal theory's analytical canon is developed.

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