

# Iron Man vs. Captain America and Philosophy: Give Me Liberty or Keep Me Safe



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Nicholas Michaud and Jessica Watkins, editors. *Iron Man vs. Captain America and Philosophy: Give Me Liberty or Keep Me Safe*. Open Court, 2018. Paperback. 288 pp. \$13.56. ISBN 9780812699760.

IN May 2019, the release of *Avengers: Endgame* served as the culmination of the Marvel Cinematic Universe thus far, a franchise of twenty-two films released over eleven years. This essay collection, *Iron Man vs. Captain America and Philosophy: Give Me Liberty or Keep Me Safe*, edited by Nicholas Michaud and Jessica Watkins, focuses on a key installment in that franchise, *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). In the film, Avengers Iron Man (aka Tony Stark) and Captain America (aka Steve Rogers) have a falling out over ceding the Avengers' authority to a governing body and the fate of Bucky Barnes, Cap's brainwashed former best friend. Each of the twenty-four chapters in the collection considers the characters' respective cases, resulting in a book that uses philosophy to evaluate the superhero genre, and vice versa.

The first section of the book features six essays that favor Iron Man's perspective, that superheroes need to be regulated for the greater good, and more generally, Iron Man is the better hero. Three particularly stand out. Daniel Malloy argues that Tony is ultimately a better hero because he is more flawed but struggles against those flaws. This argument reflects a popular framing of the difference between Marvel and DC superheroes, that DC's are more iconic, but Marvel's, through their flaws and insecurities, are more relatable. Heidi Samuelson maintains that despite Captain America's overt patriotism, it is billionaire entrepreneur Tony Stark who better represents the values of the United States. The argument is perhaps pessimistic, but it does very well in tracing the ideas of Locke and Smith into contemporary neoliberalism. Finally, Cole Bowman closes the section with an examination of friendship from Aristotle to Derrida, arguing that while Cap shows great loyalty to a single friend, Bucky Barnes, he endangers his other friends, whereas Iron Man acts for the greatest benefit of all.

The second section takes the opposite approach, with nine essays in favor of Captain America and his insistence on remaining free from regulatory power. Many of these arguments focus on Captain America's relation to universality: for example, Rob Luzzey and Charlene Elsby argue that Cap recognizes Camus' paradox of humanity, striving

for a universal good while remaining rooted in the particular: he neither surrenders to circumstances nor, as Tony does, maintains an idealized principle over the people around him. Nathan Bosma and Adam Barkman use Kant to argue that Cap's ideals make for a better universal principle than Iron Man's, explaining Kant's categorical imperatives in an accessible manner. Last, Maxwell Henderson argues in a dialogue with an imaginary idealized comics fan that, via analogy to Bertrand Russell's set theory paradox, Iron Man's entire premise is flawed—choosing regulation endangers those close to them, but defying it, according to Iron Man, places people in danger. Thus, even framing the question places superheroes in an unsolvable paradox.

The third and fourth sections are framed around the notion of a tie between the two and a focus on the war itself, respectively; in practice, that means illustrating that Tony's and Cap's arguments are equal or equally flawed, and questioning the entire premise of superheroes. For example, Christophe Porot argues that both heroes concentrate on extending their capacities: Tony extends himself through technology and Steve through people, convincing others to join his cause. However, Cap then takes responsibility for the actions performed by people acting as his extension, which sounds noble, but Porot makes the case that in doing so, he dismisses their emotional response to those actions, thus moving against the personal autonomy he seems to champion. In one of the most interesting essays of the collection, Jeffrey A. Ewing argues that the *Civil War* event, in both its comic book and film forms, draws out the challenge superheroes pose to nation-states. As forces that operate within a nation-state's border but outside of its monopoly of force within those borders, superheroes, through their existence as independent agents, challenge the nation-state's claim to sovereignty; like Henderson, Ewing draws out how *Civil War* speaks to the tensions at the core of the genre.

This collection seems intended primarily for an audience of interested lay people already interested in superheroes and curious about philosophy. But with some guidance from the instructor, it is also well-suited for use in the classroom, as I can attest; while I was reading it, I somewhat serendipitously had a student who chose to write their final paper on *Captain America: Civil War*, and reference to the ideas in this book made it much easier for the student and myself to clarify what ideas from the film they wanted to address. This instance demonstrates the book's value: that its topic is one students are already willing to engage. However, as the 115<sup>th</sup> book in the Popular Culture and Philosophy series, *Iron Man vs. Captain America* faces a challenge its compatriots do not: by centering itself on this particular conflict between heroes, the collection limits its potential scope. It does so more gracefully than a similar, earlier book in the series (*Batman, Superman, and Philosophy*) but there is still a sense of repetition, as the reader is told yet again the events of *Civil War*. I

greatly appreciate that many authors do go a bit beyond the film's boundaries to incorporate the comics, though it's a shame the comics are omitted from the references list.

In the aftermath of *End Game*, it is tempting to read that film as erasing the consequences of *Civil War*, that Tony and Steve set aside their differences figuratively and literally, each explicitly adopting advice given by the other. However, to do so would also be to erase the questions the film raises about the superhero genre, questions of having authority to act and responsibilities toward others. The most common superhero question always seems to be who would win in a fight; by transitioning that question into a fight of ideas, *Iron Man vs. Captain America* illustrates how the questions of fans and the questions of philosophers are already in conversation.