(Super)Heroism as a Response to the Awareness of Death: Existential Lessons from *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*

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This paper explores existential themes as presented in the 2014 film The Amazing Spider-Man 2. An initial argument is presented in support of the claim that contemporary audiences are drawn towards superheroes for the same reasons people have historically been compelled by traditional religious beliefs – a desire to transcend death. By presenting visual confirmation that the laws of the natural world (particularly gravity) can be exceeded, the superhero film in general and the Spider-Man character specifically offers hope that the most frightening of these laws (death) can also be overcome. However, The Amazing Spider-Man 2 also offers a warning about the potential dangers of denying mortality. The film illustrates tensions between the needs for comforting narratives about unwavering cosmic heroism and challenging narratives about the quest for purpose in a turbulent and ephemeral world.

Early sequences in Marc Webb's film *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) depict the death of Peter Parker's parents Richard and Mary in a plane crash. The image of the fiery plane hurdling toward the earth fades into an image of the Spider-Man emblem. As the camera pans out, we see that we are looking at the back of Spider-Man himself, with the fabric of his costume rippling in the wind, as he gleefully web-slings his way across the city skyline. There is a similar contrast between imagery of flying and falling in the climactic battle

toward the end of the film. As Spider-Man fights first Electro and then the Green Goblin, all three characters defy gravity through web-slinging, levitation, and a high-tech-military glider respectively. These images of flight occur immediately before Gwen Stacy falls to her death.

In this paper, I argue that the juxtaposition of these scenes of flying and falling illustrates the psychological appeal of superheroes in general as stemming from a desire to deny mortality. After briefly presenting an initial case for superheroes as figures of death transcendence, I will examine ambivalence and contradiction in the character of Spider-Man as an existential superhero. Visually, Spider-Man offers hope of death transcendence through the depiction of his amazing abilities; while simultaneously the various Spider-Man narratives reveal the necessity of the human struggle with existential problems. After presenting the case for Spider-Man as an existential hero, my aim is to show how *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* presents lessons on the dangers of denying death by seeking selfish and destructive means to literal or symbolic immortality.

Flight and Superheroes as Symbols of Death Transcendence

Cohen, Sullivan, Solomon, Greenberg, and Ogilvie (2011) asserted that waking and dreaming fantasies of flight are pervasive across time and culture and show up in art, poetry, and popular song lyrics. They further posited that the desire for flight also manifests itself in the admiration of gravity-defying heroes from gods and deities, to mythological heroes, to contemporary superheroes. One popular understanding of fantasies of flight is that they represent overcoming obstacles. This conception is tied to an understanding of dreams or imagery of falling as indicative of failure. So to the extent that flying is the opposite of falling it must represent success in response to challenge or adversity.

An example of this conception is seen in Holland's (2012, 297-299) analysis of the meaning of falling in Sam Rami's (2004) *Spider-Man 2*. After suffering a series of personal and professional failures and embarrassments, Spider-Man begins to experience temporary losses of his powers that cause him to fall several times while web-slinging. These episodes cause him to question the validity of his identity as Spider-Man and to temporarily retreat from superhero activity. But in the end he recovers his powers, embraces his responsibility to help others, and again dons his Spider-Man costume. For Holland, this symbolizes national sentiments about the hope for regaining a sense of American exceptionalism after the pervasive feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Cohen et al. (2011) challenged the traditional conception of fantasies of flight as symbolizing overcoming obstacles and argued that this conception is not so much wrong but rather incomplete. Instead, they suggested that the desire for flight is an expression of the human desire to transcend death

because, after all, what greater obstacle is there than death? Imagery of flight is a particularly powerful means of abating anxiety about death because if the natural law of gravity can be overcome then other natural laws including mortality are not immutable. Further, from an embodied metaphor approach, downward movement is associated with the fate of the body being entered in the grave; whereas, upward movement is associated with the fate of the transcendence of the soul. In support of their position that fantasies of flight are related to ameliorating fears of death, Cohen et al. (2011) conducted experiments in which participants were forced to contemplate death or control topics. In these experiments, reminders of death increased the appeal of fantasies about flying. Furthermore, allowing people to fantasize about flying reduced the vulnerability to anxiety and susceptibility to thoughts of death that were otherwise produced by reminders of mortality.

Building on the idea that fantasies of flight are motivated by desires to overcome death anxiety, Koole, Fockenberg, Tops, and Schneider (2013, 140-142) suggested that identifying with superheroes offers one type of vicarious solution to the psychological quest for death transcendence. According to these authors, superheroes symbolize death transcendence in several ways. First, is their ability to avoid death. In violent confrontations with regular criminals and supervillains, they time and again prove exceedingly difficult to kill. Second, is the fact that their superpowers seemingly break or at least bend empirical assumptions about the operations of the laws governing the physical universe. If any of these laws, such as gravity, are not immutable, then perhaps the starkest reality imposed by the natural world (death) is not unavoidable. Third, superheroes offer the same kind of model for symbolic immortality as regular heroes but on a grander scale. Here Koole et al. utilize the model of heroism proposed by cultural anthropologists Ernest Becker. Becker (1962, 76) argued that it was essential for cultures to articulate ideals of heroism and for individuals to strive to achieve these ideals in order to maintain a sense of value and meaning for their lives. From this perspective, heroism serves as a defense against existential anxiety by offering a means of making an enduring contribution to the world that would be remembered and valued after the demise of the physical body, thereby allowing human beings to view their lives as having a sense of purpose and mattering more than the mere existence of other biological entities (Becker 1973, 11). Using Becker's framework, Koole et al. suggested that superheroes are champions of morality and protectors of all that is good and best in society (142). They vanquish evil forces oftentimes those that are bent on the destruction of the entire human project. The heroic actions of the superhero have long-lasting consequences for the aim and scope of history. What better way to feel that one's life has mattered in the cosmic scheme of things than through the superheroes' capacity to impact the trajectory of human events on a grand scale assuring their legacy in the hearts and minds of future generations?

Another death-denying aspect of superheroes is the religious imagery and significance often surrounding them. Richardson (2004, 694) argued that Sam Rami's *Spider Man* (2001) was a Biblical allegory with Spider-Man as a Christ-like savior figure who overcomes the temptations of evil and the allure of selfish pursuits in favor of more altruistic motives. According to Richardson (2004, 696-698), the film illustrates the Christian notions of shame over sexual desires and the need to atone for guilt by doing good deeds. Peter Parker is initially presented as leering at and stalking Mary Jane Watson, the girl next door and the object of his sexual desires. At first, Peter uses the powers conferred from the radioactive spider bite to pursue his own selfish motives of impressing Mary Jane and winning her affections. However, it is this selfish pursuit that leads to the death of Uncle Ben and it is Peter's guilt over Uncle Ben's death that motivates him to use his powers as Spider-Man for the greater good. Here the Christian message is clear, in that sexual desires and selfishness lead to guilt and one must atone for this guilt by rejecting the flesh in favor of the spirit and working for nobler pursuits in the humble self-sacrificing service to others. Spider-Man epitomizes this Christian ethic in his decision to deny himself a romantic/sexual relationship with Mary Jane in order to enhance his ability to be the protector of the city.

Spider-Man as an Existential Superhero

Whereas some observers see Spider-Man as a religious figure (Richardson 2004, 694), others cast doubts on the extent of his divinity. For example, in comparing Spider-Man and Superman, Kozlovic (2006) notes that both characters are sometimes imbued with religious significance and depicted using religious imagery. He writes that both superheroes are "associated with the skies, metaphorically heaven (i.e., the iconic domain of angels, Jesus, God, heaven and the home of the Good), thus, subtly implying that these superheroes resonate with divinity." However, he argues that this is much truer of Superman than Spider-Man and suggests that "Spidey is Superman lite" and that "Spider-Man is an Everyman superhero, not a cosmic superhero." The idea that Spider-Man is too mundane a hero to have cosmic or religious significance is supported by many authors who view him as a symbol for the struggles of adolescence. For example, Kaplan (2011, 295-296) argued that Spider-Man taps into the fantasies of adolescent males who feel picked on or weak because their bodies have not developed like that of their peers. He further noted that Spider-Man's status as a teenager himself makes him especially appealing to the adolescent who feels that he has talents and abilities that are yet to be fully developed and appreciated by those around him. Similarly, Genter (2007) suggested that "Spider-Man's battles with criminals are in many ways secondary to the turmoil of a young man struggling with maturity" (p. 971).

The Amazing Spider-Man 2 gives a knowing wink to this line of analysis. There is a scene where Peter has fallen asleep in his Spider-Man costume. When Aunt May jiggles the locked door to his room, Peter wakes up and frantically tries to get out of his superhero outfit. In his flailing around, he accidentally unlocks the door and has to hide under the covers pretending to be naked to conceal his crime-fighting identity. Here the film offers a seemingly intentional inversion of the scholarly tendency to interpret struggles with superhero changes to body and identity as a metaphor for adolescent turmoil by creating a situation in which Aunt May presumably misinterprets Peter's attempt to conceal his super-hero identity as embarrassment over more pedestrian teenage secrets.

Spider-Man is a symbol of not only adolescent struggles with questions of identity but also of the life-long human struggle with questions about the nature and meaning of existence. Palumbo (1983, 74) acknowledges that Spider-Man is somewhat of a Christ-figure in that he is rejected and persecuted by those he wants to save. However, he asserts that Spider-Man is a poor candidate for a surrogate deity because his all-too-human struggles evoke rather than abate anxieties. Palumbo (1983, 77) defines the existential hero as a character who struggles with the absurdity of the human condition regarding issues of alienation, guilt, freedom, and death but who strives to construct some limited sense of meaning for life in the absence of any inauthentic belief in absolute significance or morality. Spider-Man is a superhero with extraordinary abilities but he is also an existential hero in that he struggles with the question of how to find value and meaning in life without giving in to apathy and nihilism in response to the absurdity of the predicament into which he has been thrown and into which we are all born. Palumbo asserted that "Spider-Man is a 'super'-hero because he possesses unique talents, but he is a hero first – as everyone can be if he wills it – because he doggedly keeps on fighting against overwhelming constraints for values he believes in" (p. 77).

Palumbo (1983, 69-70) highlights the extreme alienation that marks Spider-Man as an existential hero. Prior to becoming Spider-Man, Peter Parker is already an orphan and a social loner but his dual identity alienates him from potential friends and romantic interests and from society at large as he is attacked by public officials, law enforcement, and the media. Spider-Man also struggles with the existential issues of freedom and guilt. His powers give him the freedom to choose how he will use them but this freedom come at a great cost. He suffers over the guilt of Uncle Ben's death based on his initial decision to use his powers for self-serving motives and his failure to help apprehend the criminal who later killed his uncle. Although using his powers for the greater good in his superhero identity will increase his alienation and cost him the opportunity for "normal" life, he struggles to achieve some sense of meaning and value in the absurdity of the situation he did not ask for but was thrown into. Spider-Man is an existential hero because he faces the dilemma we all

face in terms of how to struggle to construct meaning and value in life without denying the reality of the absurdity of our condition.

Existential Lessons in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*

As Spider-Man is fighting the Russian mob through the streets of New York City, he looks over and sees an officer in the police car next to him. He hallucinates that it is Captain Stacey and replays the memory of Captain Stacy's dying request of him. "You're going to make enemies. People are going to get hurt. Leave Gwen out of it. Promise me that." Initially Peter's ambivalence and discomfort in his relationship with Gwen Stacy seems to be an issue of integrity as a guilty conscience bothers him for not living up to his promise. However, later it is revealed that what he really fears is losing Gwen the same way he lost his parents and Uncle Ben. On the eve of their graduation, outside the restaurant where Gwen was eating with her family, Peter tells her "what if something happens to you like it happened to him (Gwen's father) because of me?" … "I can't lose you too." Immediately after this break-up scene outside the restaurant, the very next scene has Spider-Man hurling himself off a building into web-slinging action. Once again, the supernatural power of flight is juxtaposed to the fear of loss/separation, which symbolically equals death. His powerlessness to protect the people he loves from the inevitability of death and to protect himself from the inevitability of loss is contrasted with the boundless and limitless joy of temporarily transcending gravity and thereby symbolically defying the constraints of the human condition.

Yet another form of death imagery occurs in the film's final battle as Spider-Man tries to save Gwen from the Green Goblin. The battle takes place in a clock tower. Gwen is suspended by a web filament dangling from the machinery inside the clock tower. Spider-Man has managed to bind a web around the Green Goblin and every time the gears of the clock move the web tightens around the Goblin's neck. However, each move of the gear also gets closer to cutting Gwen's lifeline. Spider-Man tries to hold the gears still with his foot to keep it from snapping the line that is holding Gwen. Here the symbolism is obvious as his failed attempt to stop the movement of the clock results in Gwen falling to her death. The message is clear that not even Spider-Man can stop the passage of time or keep those he loves from dying. Although Spider-Man's powers are appealing because they suggest he has the power to transcend death, his failure to save Gwen reveals that he is caught in the same existential predicament of all humans.

The tone of the film is set by the memento mori message of Gwen's valedictorian speech. She states:

"I know we all think that we're immortal. We're supposed to feel that way; we're graduating. But, like our brief four years in high school, what makes life

valuable, what makes it precious, is that it ends. I know that now more than ever and I say it today of all days to remind us that time is luck. So don't waste it living someone else's life. Make yours count for something. Fight for what matters to you no matter what. Because even if we fall short, what better way is there to live?"

Gwen's advocacy for accepting and living with the awareness of mortality stands in stark contrast to the desire to conquer death that motivates the film's villains. A frequent criticism by reviewers was that the film was too cramped and too disjointed due in part to an excess of villains (see for example Lane, 2014 or Orr, 2014). However, the presence of both Electro and the Green Goblin are important to the theme of death transcendence that runs throughout the film in that they illustrate different but equally destructive and misguided reactions to trauma and mortality.

Harry Osborn learns that he has retroviral hyperplasia, the same genetic disease that is killing his father Norman. On his deathbed, Norman tells Harry "the greatest inheritance I can give you isn't money; it's this: the sum total of my life's work, everything I did to stay alive, maybe you can succeed where I failed." Norman is explicitly acknowledging that his motivation for all his scientific medical work has been a selfish attempt to try and save his own life. In posthumous footage paying tribute to his legacy, Norman is seen telling reporters that

"I started OSCORP because I looked at the world around us and I thought we can do better, we should do better." Norman's unwillingness to accept the world as it is, is a rejection of the human condition and a longing to create, through scientific hubris, a new world without the inevitabilities of deterioration, impermanence, and death. Following in his father's footsteps, Harry sets off on a desperate quest to find a medical solution through the genomic technologies of OSCORP. This scientific quest to conquer death is reminiscent of the character of Victor Frankenstein. McMahon (2008, 82-85) argued that Frankenstein is a cautionary tale about how living well necessitates an accepting of life's finitude. She describes how Frankenstein's quest for immortality costs him his humanity, his health, and robs him of those he loves. In true Frankenstein fashion, Harry's obsession with avoiding death costs him his relationships with his friend, leaves a trail of innocent victims, and transforms him into a murderous monster.

Frankenstein imagery is also present in the character of Electro. When the ostracized and socially invisible engineer Max Dillon is killed in an accidental fall into a tank of genetically altered electric eels, he finds himself resurrected as Electro. With bluish skin the pallor of death, he rises off the morgue slab and shuffles with awkward gait out into the city streets, only to discover that he has control over but is also drawn to electric current. As he stands in the middle of Time Square in a standoff with police and Spider-Man, he is transfixed by his own image on the giant screens. He marvels that he is visible

to everyone and is the focus of their attention. Not yet understanding or in control of his powers, he initially apologizes for his destructive outbursts telling Spider-Man that "I just wanted everyone to see me." Elector's desperate need to be seen and fascination with his own image can be read as a statement about the current cultural prevalence of attempts to transcend death by achieving fame in digital media.

Electro is literally power hungry as he is drawn to sources of electricity. But metaphorically he desires fame and the power to be seen by others, feared by others, and to influence the lives of others. This is a defensive compensation for his feelings of being powerless and invisible as Max. After Electro is engorged on the power cables in Time Square he starts to levitate. Symbolically, power equals freedom from limits and constraints. The appeal of flight is death transcendence and here Electro is flying to symbolize how the powers of his new resurrection body have liberated him from the invisibility and powerlessness he knew in his existence as mere Max.

Electro symbolizes immortality not only in his ability to levitate but also in being made of energy. In her analysis of ancient Indian religion, Doniger (1999, 65) points out that the shadow was a sign of mortality and how gods cast no shadows because they were made of light. Consistent with this divine symbolism, Electro seems to be striving for deity status. In the final confrontation at the power grid, he taunts "Do you see me now Spider-Man? It's time to meet our destinies … You're too late Spider-Man, I designed this power grid. Now I'm gonna take back what is rightfully mine. I will control everything and I will be like a god to them." It is clear that he does not plan on being a beneficent deity but rather wants to increase his new-found sense of power by making others feel weak and helpless as he did as Max. While being interrogated by Dr. Kafka at Ravencroft, Max says "I'm gonna kill the lights so everyone in this city is going to know what it's like to live in my world, a world without power, a world without mercy, a world without Spider-Man and everyone will be able to see me for who I truly am."

In contrast to the selfishness and megalomania of Electro and the Green Goblin, Spider-Man uses his amazing powers for the greater good. Peter Parker shares with Harry Osborn and Max Dillon a history of intense trauma but it is his reaction to this trauma that keeps him on the path of super-heroism instead of super-villainy. This view of Spider-Man as a self-sacrificing hero is at odds with other analyses that see the comic book character as giving voice to Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy, which promotes pursuit of personal happiness as morally superior to concerns about the needs or wants of others (Pineda & Jimenez-Varea 2013, 1158-1160). Co-creator, illustrator, and story plotter of the Spider-Man comics Steven Ditko was influenced by Ayn Rand's philosophy and this influence shaped the early comic book character to be focused on individualism and nonconformity (Genter 2007, 972; Pineda & Jimenez-Varea 2013, 1162). This individualism can be seen for example in Spider-Man's unwillingness to give up his superhero exploits in favor of more

stable occupational or domestic roles even at the urging of potential romantic interests. Genter (2007, 974) argued that the popularity of Spider-Man was in part a consequence of the way the themes related to individualism and struggles with identity, meaning, and how to define one's place in the world without losing one's sense of self resonated with the post-World War II teenage culture and the countercultural ethos of growing dissatisfaction with conformity and status quo institutions characteristic of the cold war era.

Spider-Man does exemplify individualism and nonconformity; however, it is not these traits but rather his compassion, goodness, and desire to help others that prevent him from being overcome or corrupted by the trials and tribulations of his life. In his analysis of *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), Clyman (2012) draws on the psychological literature related to post-traumatic growth showing that people can be positively transformed by the experience of personal suffering in ways that move them towards more intrinsic motives, an enhanced sense of purpose, and a greater gratitude and zest for living. Clyman argued that the deaths of Peter Parker's parents, Uncle Ben, and Captain Stacey represent a sufficient amount of trauma to potentially debilitate Peter but that because of his nurturing upbringing with Aunt May and his pre-existing compassionate character, he is able to use this trauma as an impetus for growth.

A similar lesson on the possibility of living well in the face of the trauma of the inevitable existential realities of mortality and loss can be seen in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*. Peter Parker is a young adult who has suffered many traumatic experiences. Given the sudden development of his powers under such tumultuous conditions, he could easily have become a self-obsessed tyrant like Electro and Green Goblin but instead became a hero working for the good of the city. The main reason for his different life trajectory lies in his reaction to existential anxiety. Rather than trying to deny his mortality by focusing on exerting power over others or striving for fame and reputation, he chooses to look for solace in the face of finitude by focusing on the positive impact he can have on the lives of others. Psycho-historian Robert Jay Lifton (1976, 32) described the biosocial mode of symbolic immortality as a response to the awareness of mortality that focuses on legacy by living on in the hearts and minds of other people. Similarly, psychotherapists Irving Yalom (2009, 83) argued that the best response to the inevitability of death is to focus on rippling – the extending spheres of influence that radiate outward from our social interactions. Gwen's graduation speech conveys these themes, as she assures her fellow students that the memories of their time together and shared experiences will continue to shape their future lives. These words offer hope and inspiration to Peter as they remind him that Gwen will continue to live on in his memory and the impact she had on him. It is these words that pull him out of his grief and back into action as Spider-Man.

After Gwen's death, when in his grief Peter has neglected his duties as Spider-Man, he listens to a recording of Gwen's graduation speech. This time

the audience hears with Peter a different and presumably fuller version than offered earlier in the film. Gwen says:

"It's easy to feel hopeful on a beautiful day like today, but there will be dark days ahead of us too. There will be days when you feel all alone and that's when hope is needed most. No matter how buried it gets or how lost you feel you must promise me that you will always hold on to hope, keep it alive. We have to be greater than what we suffer. My wish for you is to become hope. People need that, and even if we fail what better way is there to live? As we look around here today at all the people who helped make us who we are, I know it feels like we're saying goodbye, but we will carry a piece of each other into everything that we do next to remind us of who we are and of who we're meant to be. I've had a great four years with you. I'll miss you very much."

It is Peter's belief, as articulated to Harry, that the value of Spider-Man is that he gives people hope that everything is going to be ok. It is listening to Gwen's speech about hope that allows him to bounce back from his grief and guilt over her death to re-emerge as Spider-Man. If Spider-Man is a symbol of hope, then what kind of hope does he symbolize, and is it a realistic hope or a form of denial? I have advanced the argument here that the appeal of Spider-Man, as with most superheroes, lies in his promise of death transcendence. Super-human abilities and the capacity to deny or at least temporarily defy the laws of the natural world (most prominently gravity) suggest that the natural order of existence including the inevitability of death imposed by these natural laws might somehow be overcome. The overt message of the text of the film as expressed in Gwen's speech is the importance of accepting personal mortality. A simultaneous message of the text is that people need the hope provided by superheroes such as Spider-Man. This second message may actually reflect the psychology of the audience. Audiences want to see superheroes on the silver screen because they offer hope of death transcendence. Fictional citizens of the New York occupied by Spider-Man want to have hope that everything will be ok – that there will always be a savior to swoop in and save them from danger. Both of these motives are forms of self-delusion and are in conflict with the message about the need to accept the inevitability of the human condition.

This conflict about whether people need illusory hope is consistent with philosophical debate about the extent to which humans are capable of living with the full awareness of their mortality. Ernest Becker (1973, 55-57) argued that denial of death is essential to human psychological functioning and that in order to avoid overwhelming anxiety, people construct cultural narratives about the meaning of existence and their value or importance within these narratives. These cultural worldviews are consensually validated by others who share them so that they appear to represent reality but are always illusory to the extent that they are socially constructed fictions. From this perspective, fear of death is not pathological but it is a universal aspect of the human

condition and the avoidance of awareness of mortality drives much of human-cultural-activity. Other theorists (Firestone & Catlett 2009, 309) have argued that while it may not be desirable to constantly consciously ruminate on death, it is necessary to at least periodically realize that life is finite in order to prioritize the importance of one's goals and to strive to live an authentic and genuine life. So the seemingly contradictory message in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* may actually reflect a real paradox in human psychology. At one level we need comforting illusions about the possibility of transcendence to keep from being overwhelmed by existential anxiety. On the other hand, if we never recognize the finiteness of our existence we may live safe, boring, conventional lives without ever questioning what is most important to accomplish in the limited amount of time we have.

Conclusion

The character of Spider-Man faces an existential crisis of his own, as the future of his identity and the enduring appeal of his legacy are uncertain. Many were critical of the attempt to reboot the franchise so soon after the success of the Sam Rami trilogy and have suggested that the two Mark Web Amazing Spider-Man movies failed to live up to the standards of critical and box office success set by the Rami films (see for example, Meslow, 2015; Fernandes, 2015). Currently, the character is set to be re-envisioned again as Sony and Marvel Pictures have reached a deal to allow Spider-Man to cross over into the Marvel ciniverse and Sony is attempting yet another of its own reboots. Despite the uncertainties and challenges facing the character, there is reason for optimism.

Urbina (2015), reviewed three important features of Spider-Man that might account for his enduring appeal. First, the fact that he is a teenage character and that his teenage struggles with not being popular and being picked on resonate with adolescent audiences. Not only is he a teenage character but he is a full-fledged hero and not merely a sidekick or ward. So, he is thrust into a role for which he is not developmentally prepared. Adolescent viewers can relate to this in terms of their concerns about transitioning into adult life but viewers of any age can relate to the notion of sometimes feeling overwhelmed by the world. Second, it is his vulnerability that humanizes him. While he may seem invincible when doing his Spidey thing, he is often depicted as struggling to keep things together in his life as Peter Parker. Furthermore, his vulnerability is seen in his sensitivity and suffering as he struggles to deal with the losses of people he loves. Third, what would Spider-Man be without his wise-cracking but fun-loving sense of humor? Sure, many Spider-Man narratives highlight the burdens and sacrifices inherent in the role of superhero, but at the end of the day Spider-Man is a guy who loves his job. Refusing to embrace either nihilism or fundamentalism, Spider-Man responds to the tragedy and dangers of the world with humor.

This analysis of the appeal of Spider-Man is consistent with observations about a more general trend towards the deconstruction of superheroes, in which the invulnerability and unshakeable moral confidence of the traditional superhero have been replaced by increasingly vulnerable, conflicted, and angst-ridden protagonists to align with consumers' increasingly postmodern sensibilities. An example of this kind of analysis is seen in the argument advanced by Koole et al. (2013, 144-146) that increasing scientific rationalism has made it more difficult for many segments of the population to believe in supernatural mythologies in general and the superhero variant of these myths specifically. Efforts to make superheroes potentially credible have involved appeal to scientific causation, more realistic special effects, and more complicated and multifaceted character portrayals. These increasingly complicated character portrayals have been concomitant with another trend – namely the deconstruction of the superhero whose motives and impact are questioned in an increasingly morally relativistic and uncertain world.

This preferences for more complicated depictions of superheroes is concordant with the perspective advanced in the current paper that audiences' psychological reactions to these heroes are somewhat ambivalent. This ambivalence stems from a desire for images of supernatural feats that fuel hopes of transcending human limitations coupled with the simultaneous longing for identification with an all too human existential hero who grapples with issues of finding meaning and purpose in a turbulent and ephemeral world.

Ironically, *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, which some critics have interpreted as evidence of the demise of the Spider-Man character, might offer insights into the possibilities for his successful immortality. I have argued that *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* offers lessons from existential psychology about how living well requires individuals to eschew the quest for fame and power in favor of the pursuit of a more modest form of immortality achieved through the rippling positive impact on the lives of others. Similarly, the future of the Spider-Man franchise might be measured less well by metrics related to commercial success than by the extent to which it offers fans insight into themselves and the world. The quality of such insight could depend on finding the right balance in satisfying the twin psychological motives of transcendence and identification, by providing the appropriate mix of depictions of comforting narratives about unwavering cosmic heroism and challenging narratives about tenuous everyday heroism.

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