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August 11, 2008: The Dark Knight and Hallowed Secularism

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Title: The Dark Knight and Hallowed Secularism

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8/11/2008--I saw the Dark Knight Batman movie last night and it was not what I expected. The movie's theme I had heard about concerned the limits of vigilantism. That was present in the movie, but what the movie seemed most like was a law school exam. The movie is built around four ethical dilemmas. We can call them, 1) the DA or the girl; 2) the ship of fools or the ship of cons; 3) the informer or the hospital; and 4) Sophie's Choice (one or another of the family members). In all four instances, a choice must be made between saving one person or another. In one instance the chooser is at risk and in the others, the chooser is simply choosing. The law student recognizes all these instances as further examples of Professor Lon Fuller's Case of the Speluncean Explorers in the 1949 Harvard Law Review. As described recently by Professor Stuart Green, the case involves a group of spelunkers in the Commonwealth of Newgarth, who are trapped in a cave by a landslide. As they approach the point of starvation, they make radio contact with a rescue team. They are told that the rescue will take another ten days and that, unless they obtain nourishment, they will surely die. With no one at the rescue camp willing to advise them as to what they should do, the men turn off the radio, hold a lottery, kill the loser (one Whetmore), eat his body, and survive. When they are rescued, they are prosecuted for murder, which in Newgarth carries a mandatory death penalty. The question is whether they should have a defense. The disappointment with all this in the movie is that the answers to these dilemmas are presented without any explanation. The passengers should choose to die rather than sacrifice anybody. The informant should not be sacrificed to save the hospital. The detective should refuse to choose among family members. And I never did figure out how Batman should have chosen between the DA and the girl. Well, it's just a movie. But this movie should remind us that not that much changes in a secular world. You still have to make choices, even without organized religion or God. The question is, what is the moral framework of such a secular world? Batman is a secular movie and it is not clear at all what the moral starting point is or should be for resolving these, and other, moral issues. Part of the point of Hallowed Secularism is that the secularist would do well to turn to religious sources to help decide how to live. Our religions have a great deal of experience with the question of how to live and, specifically, with these sorts of ethical choices. We must learn to look.