

Theory of Superpowers

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So what defines a superpower? What makes the power super? How do we determine what qualifies as a superpower? What are different attributes that powers can have? How would we organize superpowers? What all does certain powers entail? What can we do with a single power? Are there powers that can be achieved by other powers? What makes a power interesting?

We all come across superpowers in fiction. Through books, manga, comics, t.v. shows, movies, manhwa, etc. superpowers and abilities like that are commonplace. What differentiates magic from superpowers? Is there any actual difference?

First question we have to answer is what do we mean by someone having a superpower. Are superpowers even limited to just people? The answer is of course superpowers aren't limited to just people. If that was the case then Krypto Superman's dog wouldn't have the superpower of flight. With that question answered that any species can have a superpower, what do we actually mean with the term superpower?

The term superpower usually refers to an ability someone doesn't already possess. For example we as humans, we have the ability to breathe in the air around us. But this doesn't mean we have the ability to breathe in every chemical that is in the air without harm. All because you can breathe something doesn't mean it is safe to do so.

So if we suddenly gained the ability to breathe hydrogen sulfide with no negative effects then it would be considered a superpower. So with this as an example we will say that the definition of superpower is having an ability that isn't naturally occurring within the species. But this still leaves a big hole into what is considered a superpower.

That is because we are ignoring magic or what if in the setting everyone has that ability? So the second part of this question is easier to answer. As we can amend our definition to include if it is also abnormal within the setting the ability is in. Like say everyone can heal superfast that would be a normal ability in that setting. But if someone there could stop others ability to heal fast then that would be a superpower.

But what about magic? What is magic? Is magic just superpowers? Well magic is hard to define. How we define magic changes from fantasy to fantasy. But lets try to define magic. Magic tends to be like reality manipulation at its highest but at its weakest may only simulate a handful of superpowers. So wouldn't that make magic in of itself a collection of abilities?

Is that correct though? In some settings the only thing magic can do is enhance objects with different attributes. Giving that object special abilities. But what exactly are special abilities? This is easier to define for inanimate objects. These are abilities that are typically possessed by such objects. This definition overlaps with the definition of superpower that we came up with.

The definition of superpowers can apply to even inanimate objects. It's just that we give them their own term. So magic is perhaps a conduit to allow one to channel special abilities or superpowers. However, this would be setting dependant. For our purposes magic will not be considered as a superpower.

We are still ignoring one big aspect. We have a character like Martian Manhunter who is viewed as a superhero on earth and has the superpower to shapeshift among many others. But all of those powers are a part of his species so why would he be considered super? The answer is because of the fact he operates on earth with such abilities.

So not only are superpowers beyond what a species can normally attain, you could be seen to have superpowers if the area you are in doesn't typically have those powers. We will also have to consider the fact that all because a species is capable of reaching a certain level of ability doesn't mean that every person of that species is capable of it.

All because someone is able to achieve a speed of 25 mph doesn't mean everyone is able to. So if someone got the ability to run at a speed of 25 mph who typically can't ever reach that speed, then the person got a superpower.

Which means superpowers augment a person beyond their normal self and beyond the normal capability of their species. But a power even if it's innate to a species could be considered as a superpower if viewed from some other species that doesn't have that ability. So superpowers are based on our perspective of the world around us. Given all this, what makes a power super?

We say someone has the power to lift something heavy but that doesn't make it super. So what do we mean by this? Well there is no definite answer to this. As everyone has their own idea of where the cut off line for when something becomes a superpower or is just a power.

Something to note however is whenever someone thinks of superpower they usually think it greatly enhances something about the creature with it. Or gives the creature an ability they don't normally have. The last thing it lets the creature control some aspect of nature or even a concept. So we have a loose guideline to determine what makes a power super.

But this is very loose. But would you say someone who is one percent stronger than the human physical peak as having a superpower? Is it a power yes. But it doesn't feel like a superpower now does it. At what point does being stronger actually constitute a superpower? Is it ten percent stronger, fifty percent, twice, ten times? What is the point that makes it different?

I have no actual answer to that question. As this is still subjective. So for the question when does a power become a superpower, I have no satisfactory answer as this was a subjective question from the very beginning. We also somewhat answered the question of what qualifies as a superpower.

The problem is a power super if it negatively affects the user? One could argue it isn't super because a superpower should be beneficial. But sometimes powers have drawbacks. If you could be four times as strong as the world's strongest person but you can't move faster than one mile an hour with your own body, isn't that still a superpower? We can all agree it's an abnormal ability for a human. But is it a superpower?

It could be more of a curse. But it is still a power. So at what point does a power actually qualify itself as a superpower and not just a power, a curse, or even a tradeoff? Even this seems to be a bit subjective. How can we properly answer that question? We really can't. This still leaves us wondering what qualifies a power as a superpower.

Well for starters the easiest thing we can do is say if there is no negative downside to a power then it will be a superpower candidate. But as stated before if the degree of the power isn't large enough then it doesn't really feel like it's super. The interesting part is what side effects stop a power from being a superpower.

Side effects that would disqualify any power as being super aren't that subjective. But still can be. But ones many can agree on are if it causes your own death, causes harm to those you care about, destroys the planet, destroys your home, destroys the universe, causes you bad luck. That is a good list to get us started. But then we have things like it slows you down, you burn through more energy, etc. These I would say are more dependent on what power they are paired with. For some powers it isn't as bad as other powers.

Being slow but strong makes the super strength not all that useful. But being slow and a genius doesn't really stop your ability to think. Still making it a decent power. But is it a superpower? That is more subjective. But it is one the fence. Being slow but able to control the force of gravity. That would still be a superpower.

We could go on and try to determine if its still a superpower with certain drawbacks. However we also have to discuss powers that have limitations and powers that have conditions. Now some of you might be saying limitations and conditions are the same thing. Conditions and limitations are not the same thing. A condition to write is the ability to put together your words, but a limitation of that is one's own vocabulary.

A condition is something needed to achieve another state. While a limitation puts a cap as to what is possible with conditions that have been met. Like you can breathe a stream of fire that is three feet long as long as you cross your fingers. The condition is you cross your fingers. The limitation is the fire breath is a stream and doesn't spread out and is three feet long. This could be judged to be a superpower. As there is no negative downside. There is a condition but the condition isn't difficult to meet. The limitation also isn't that bad.

With conditions and limitations we run into the same problem as we did with downsides. Some conditions and limitations are just terrible, others are not. Depending on the power we have, the limitation or condition could change it to be terrible or on the fence.

So then this just leaves us back to square one of it being subjective. But there isn't much that can be done about how subjective a lot of things relating to what is a good power, what makes it super, and anything like that. As we all have our own preconceived notions of what a good or bad power is. The term super does mean very good. But good and bad are subjective to the user, viewer, and person on the receiving end of the power.

By using such subjective terms to describe powers we set ourselves up to be unable to answer questions like what makes a power super, when does a power turn into a superpower. There is no right or wrong answer for these questions. It would be asking if immortality is a curse or a blessing. Depending on the person is what answer you will get. Does that make the other answer wrong? Of course it doesn't. We all have our own views on immortality, some positive and some negative. But that doesn't mean the other person's view on it is incorrect, just different.

But this leaves us with some very unsatisfying answers. As when we talk about powers we want to know when it is a superpower. But powers don't exist in a vacuum. So they will get compared to other powers that already exist. No matter what, these questions can't be answered to an objective level. As opinions in of themselves are not objective.

We can finally move past what makes a power a superpower. Now we have talked a lot about different attributes of powers. But what are all the different attributes powers have? From what we've talked about there are some attributes we can already assign. These are target, effect, and trigger. But what do we mean with these terms?

What is meant with, target is who is actually affected by the power when it is activated. But who could be targeted by a power? Well one obvious person is the user of the said person. Some may be asking how is this an obvious person? How can a power target the user?

Some powers like self teleportation affect yourself, or super strength. These are a couple of examples of powers that target the user. If you say a power that targets the user shouldn't count, then you are saying Hulk, Dash, and Colossus don't have any power. Because their powers affect themselves. So we can't actually rule out powers that target the user.

But the user isn't the only target a power could affect. A power could target someone else like. What is meant by this is the power itself does something to another person. Like healing someone else or telepathy. The targets of these powers aren't yourself but other things. It is hard to argue that these aren't actual powers. We could move on from the target of a power.

However we are missing a big thing that powers can target, the world around them. The biggest example of this is reality manipulation. But there are other powers like weather manipulation, or gravity manipulation that can also target the world around the user.

So when it comes to aspects of powers the aspect of target is far more inclusive. The power could target the user, other creatures, or even the world itself. But this leads some of us to another question. Some of us are familiar with cultivation style stories. Some abilities in these stories don't target the world, or some creature, but an idea or concept. This is where we get conceptual abilities from. So that can be added to the list of potential targets a power can affect.

The true answer of what could be a target for a power is everything. Everything you can think of is a potential target for any ability to be able to affect. But not every power affects everything. But now that we know that the target of a power just means what it affects, we can move on to another aspect of powers, the effect.

What is meant by the effect, is what does the power do when it is activated. Some power effects are increasing physical capabilities. Some of these include super strength, super speed, or even super durability. But some other effects are more metaphysical like pyrotechnics or even telekinetics. Then we have the conceptual ones of death and life.

So effects are just what the power does upon activation, the target is who or what the power affects upon activation. So what do we mean upon the trigger of a power? Well the trigger is what causes the power to activate. This could be as simple as a thought or even saying a word. But some triggers are far more complicated than that.

A complicated trigger could include needing to do a specific action and say a phrase to go along with it. But before we can try and say what other aspects powers have we need to talk about magic in depth now. As at what point does it stop being a power and what point is it magic?

What is the actual difference between a power and magic? Is there any difference? Well again like so many other things we have already spoken about we can't definitely say what the difference is. This is because of the nature of this discussion being so broad about fiction in general, it really just depends on the fictional world you are in.

But in general the difference between magic and powers tends to be how they manifest in the world around them. Magic tends to have a more mystical feel to it then powers do. While powers have a more next step in evolution feel to them. Which both are subjective ways to differentiate them. But let's take an example of something like DC. A character like Constatine uses magic to achieve his goals and always seems mystical with a bunch of different items to achieve his goal. But at the same time he is wherever the universe needs him to be. Which is his power. Or is it? We are not going to dive into that rabbit hole otherwise we will get side tracked.

But we have Dr.Fate who uses magic while Dr.Manhattan uses his reality manipulation power to do what he wants. So the difference is just the way the world is written or the way the power or ability manifests. But we could also say magic is changing the reality of the world around us.

This thought of how to view magic lets us view it as reality having a power. So there isn't really much of a difference between what differentiates a power or magic from one another. They are just different ways to say someone has a special ability.

So we have now gone over effect, target, and trigger. But there are other aspects to powers. Sometimes what a power does isn't permanent. Here we have stumbled across another aspect of powers. This being the duration of their effect. Some like superstrength are always active. But then we have others that their other durations are tied to their triggers. Some are only active as they are thought about or looking in a specific direction.

Which leads us to how the different aspects of a power aren't mutually exclusive but interact with each other. No one aspect of a power exists by itself. All the aspects of a power are tied together to make a power either really powerful, useful, and easy to use, or the complete opposite.

Some powers come at a price for the user. Which is another aspect a power can have. Some prices cause the person to become possessed, or even lose their life. Some prices are just losing some items. But not every power has a price. But this doesn't mean it isn't an aspect a power could potentially have.

Now we could also say powers have magnitudes, ranges, and a whole host of other aspects. But some of these can easily fall under the aspects we have already stated. Magnitude and range are often paired with the effect of the power.

So this would mean under effect, we have subcategories that can be extrapolated on. Magnitude is how much a power is able to do, while the range is how far it is able to affect things around the user. But while talking about triggers powers could have, I have ignored a massive portion of powers. These are the passive powers. These do not require a trigger and are always activated like hyper speed regeneration or infrared vision.

So for a trigger we should put it under something that asks if the power is passive or active. And the trigger would go under the active. As active would mean you need to do something for the power to trigger and be used. For aspects of powers I say we have; Effect (Magnitude and Range are usually included here but could be separate), Duration, Passive/Active, Trigger (only if the power is active), Price and the Target.

This is a basic way to break down every power we come across in fiction. Not all powers will fit perfectly into this blanket way of explaining them. This however is how anyone could create a

power for their character. Now we can move on to the most exciting thing most of us have been staying around to read about. How do we classify superpowers? Or just powers in general.

There is no good way to categorize powers to make sure we hit every possible power. So instead of trying to come up with a perfect categorization system we will try to be as broad as possible. Broader categories are both easier and harder to put powers into. As some powers will straddle the lines between the categories. Some powers may even fall under multiple categories at the same time.

The first two categories that come to mind are physical and enhancement powers. Physical powers are like super strength or even super agility. Enhancements abilities often overlap with these physical powers but enhancements could also be super intelligence. So these two are separate categories that very often overlap. The main difference between physical powers and enhancement powers are how we view them.

Physical powers tend to augment just a physical component. Things like durability or strength. Usually not the mind, soul or concepts. While enhancement powers can enhance any aspect of something. The difference is subtle but is how we can have someone be more resistant to mental attacks and not have a stronger body.

After this we can say we have the mental and spiritual powers. Mental powers tend to deal with the mind and what it is capable of without the need of a physical body. Whereas spiritual powers deal with the soul. The nuance here is even without a brain or physical body, spiritual powers will still work. Unlike mental powers that need at least a brain.

Then we get into the metaphysical powers. These powers tend to deal not with the human body but aspects of nature. Like the weather, fire, water, light, etc. Which sounds like they should also be dealing with concepts. But unlike conceptual powers, metaphysical powers don't deal with things like the meaning of death, life, or what carnage actually is. That is the job of conceptual powers.

Then we have transformation powers. These powers let one transform themselves or other things into different things. This ranges from changing shape to even changing the material they are made of. These are often also physical powers. But they could overlap with other powers depending on what they transform.

We also have creation and summoning powers. Creation powers let you create things that weren't already there. Creation powers are often paired with other powers to make them actually viable. Summoning powers unlike creation you are just either somehow transporting something to you or grabbing something that already exists. Both creation and summoning powers can make it look like you are creating something out of nothing. But they aren't the same.

We also have the opposite of enhancement with the debuffs. These powers tend to not affect the user but either something else or an area the user wishes for it to target. These tend to slow down or even weaken other things. Beyond that some passive powers are auras.

What exactly is an aura though? An aura is a field around a place, object, creature, or anything really. Auras tend to affect everything within their field of effect. Some auras act as debuffs or as buffs. Some auras are even able to move with the person or object making them even more effective. But an aura at its base most affects some specified area beyond just one object, concept, person, etc. These abilities affect everything within them and not just the user or target.

So after all of that the main categories of powers we have are; Physical, enhancement, mental, spiritual, metaphysical, conceptual, transformation, creation, and summoning powers, debuffs, and auras. This gives us a good place to put all powers to some degree. This is regardless of the detriments to the user a power could have. As these categories look at the effect the power has had on the reality around the user.

We have mentioned reality and reality manipulation quite a bit. But what does having the power to manipulate reality actually intel? Reality manipulation is the ability to influence reality around you. However don't most powers do this? Doesn't magic do this? Then why is it a separate ability? Why do we consider it to be a different ability from flame manipulation or even telekinesis?

Well to get at this flame manipulation is more of metaphysical ability in of itself. As you are manipulating the physical flame. But not what defines a flame. But you can manipulate what attributes that flame has. But with reality manipulation you can change the definition of a flame.

Whereas with flame manipulation you are controlling the flame itself. With reality manipulation you are changing the definition of that flame to include you being able to control it. With this understanding of reality manipulation this practically makes it as good as omnipotent. Then why are these two different powers?

Reality may let you change the definition of the reality around you. But you tend to be limited to the rules that govern reality so that reality doesn't collapse in on itself. You also aren't innately immune to the effects of other powers. Whereas omnipotent you have every single power that can be thought of. Which is contradictory in of itself. But that is the nature of being omnipotent.

Why is it in the nature of being omnipotent to be paradoxical? This is because there are powers that say if you use them you die. But they can't be achieved if you are immortal and invincible. As you are unable to die. But then how are you omnipotent if you can't achieve the use of that power? But you are somehow able to.

Which leads us onto a term many have started using calling nigh omnipotent. But what does this actually mean? To be called nigh omniscient a character has omnipotence but with some caveats. But this makes even less sense then just being omnipotent as what powers wouldn't

such a character have? If they have limits to their omnipotence then they aren't omnipotent. So the term omniscient being used to define nigh omnipotent makes the term nigh omniscient really lose any actual sense of meaning you could give it. The best way to describe nigh omniscience is to say they can utilize most powers out there but have limitations that stop them from doing so all the time.

The main difference between reality manipulation, omnipotence, and nigh omnipotence comes down to what these terms represent. Reality manipulation stays grounded within certain limitations so that the reality doesn't really change the meaning of words, just redefines what an object is in relation to you. Omnipotence you can even change the meaning of words. Nigh omnipotence is somewhere between reality manipulation and omnipotence. But where that line is I'm unsure.

This brings me to my next point that powers based off of the word omni are boring, contradictory, and some of the least interesting powers you can give a character. If a power has no limitations to what it can achieve. Then what challenges can we expect someone with that power to face? If a person has every power then how are they losing to anyone? Because with omnipotence you also have omnipresence and omniscience. As those two things are powers themselves.

Omnipresence is the power to be everywhere at all times and omniscience is the ability to be all knowing. Now if you aren't truly able to be everywhere at all times then you don't have omnipresence. But all because you are everywhere all at once doesn't mean you can notice every detail happening everywhere. Omnipresence is not a good power in of itself. As it doesn't make it so you can keep up with everything that is in existence.

But also if you can't keep up with it at all times how can you show actual omnipresence. This is the contradictory part of the power of omnipresence. As you are everywhere yet unable to act in all places at the same time with this power by itself.

Omniscience is the least problematic of the omni powers. This is because omniscience is only the ability to know everything. You know every possible past that could have happened. You know every possible present that could be happening. You know every possible future that could happen. You know the thoughts of everything around you. You will also know the answers to any question.

But knowledge by itself isn't enough. If you don't have the ability to utilize that knowledge it does no good to just have it. But why is this not interesting as a power? Where is the growth to this power? Where is the limitation? The limitation is boring because it is what is around for this power to utilize.

Reality manipulation by itself is also a boring power. As you are basically able to do anything you need to do. Without any sort of limitation to the power itself or the user, there is really nothing that can stop the power from working or doing anything.

So then what makes a power interesting? Powers can be interesting due to what is capable within the limitations of what they influence or even have. Let's use electrokinesis for examples. This is the power to be able to control electricity. A surface level understanding lets you just influence the electricity in wire and electronics. Even with this level of understanding you can influence how strong the current or voltage is in these things. You could cause short circuits or even misfired electrical signals.

But at the next level of understanding you have static electricity. After that you could manipulate lightning itself. At the next level of understanding you realize you can actually manipulate the electrical signals that happen in animal bodies. Letting you control their movements. There is debate on if this would let you control thoughts. But even if not just being able to control someone else's body through electrical currents is quite far.

We can still go deeper with this power. What is the underlying mechanism of electricity? What we are asking is, what is electricity at its base? The answer to this is the movement of electrons from one atom to another atom. With this you could argue that an electrokinetic person could generate electricity between anything.

With so many layers to just this power. Each layer expands upon what we thought was possible with just the power of electrokinesis. Almost making it seem like we could of had several other powers. Even though we only have one. But we are still limited. We can't just control the air or the sun all because we have electrokinesis.

There are built in limitations to electrokinesis as a power. Due to what it means to have electrokinesis. We could add more limitations and make the power more interesting as to what could be possible with it if it had these limitations. This is where the problem of reality manipulation and omnipowers lies. They don't have built-in limitations. We can't really do a deep dive and explore what all is and isn't possible with these powers in any meaningful way.

Especially with omnipowers. Because with omni powers if they have any limitations then how are they omni? They really aren't. So this makes them not really all that interesting to talk about as a power by themselves. As, the biggest limitation you can place on them is the mental state of the wielder of said power. Which makes the character interesting but not the power itself interesting.

So in conclusion what makes a power a power is something that isn't natural to either the world or the species that has gained the power. What makes a power super is dependent on what it does, what its conditions of usage and activation are, and anything else. Powers are interesting when the power itself has a built in limitation. And all because a power can simulate the effects of another power doesn't mean it is the same as using that power.