

Moral Ambiguity in a Black-and-White Universe

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The moral universe of *Star Wars* has two colors: black and white. In the opening moments of *A New Hope*, we find Darth Vader, dressed all in black, confronting Princess Leia, dressed in virginal white. Every identifiable character in the six movies works either for the Light Side of the Force or for the Dark Side. It's a world with very few shades of gray, much less of brighter, more interesting moral colors. In this galaxy, unlike our own, there seems, at first glance, to be no room for moral tragedy, for choices where no answer is morally correct, or for plain moral ambiguity.

Nevertheless, moral ambiguity can be found lurking in the *Star Wars* universe, if we look for it. Often, important characters are first presented to us as morally ambiguous. When we meet them, we do not know whose side they are on in the war, but later, their true natures reveal themselves. We can, I think, learn some important moral lessons by looking at the ways characters like Han Solo or Lando Calrissian reason when we first meet them and at the ways in which they turn towards one side or the other. There are also a few cases that are closer to real ambiguity, like Count Dooku and Anakin Skywalker. From both kinds of cases, we can learn how to think about moral problems more deeply and more intelligently.

“What Good’s a Reward if You Ain’t Around to Use It?”

When we first meet Han Solo in *A New Hope*, he’s a smuggler caught in the web of the crime lord Jabba the Hutt. He’s arrogant and cocky, a “scoundrel,” as Leia puts it. His moral philosophy is unmitigated egoism: he only looks after himself. “I take orders from just one person—*me*,” Han proclaims. He accepts the mission to Alderaan only for the exorbitant fee that Obi-Wan offers him, and he helps to find Princess Leia in the Death Star only because Luke promises him a large reward. Indeed, even after he rescues Leia, Han tells her, “I ain’t in this for your revolution, and I’m not in it for you, Princess. I expect to be well paid. I’m in it for the money.” As soon as he delivers the Princess to the Rebel Alliance, Han takes his reward and

departs, leaving Luke to observe bitterly, “Take care of yourself, Han. I guess that’s what you’re best at, isn’t it?” Han sees no reason to accept any authority, moral or otherwise, outside his own self-interest.

In his egoism in *A New Hope*, Han is equaled only by Jango Fett, who is, as he puts it, “just a simple man, trying to make my way in the universe.” But Jango is clearly a mercenary for hire, willing to assassinate a senator for a price and even to sell his own genetic code for profit. His one act of apparent altruism is his obvious love for his son, Boba, the clone of himself that he insisted that the Kaminoans create for him. Although many parents love their children because they see themselves perpetuated in them, Jango’s love for Boba carries this sentiment one step further towards mere narcissism.

Han and Jango’s view is a form of ethical egoism, the view that morally what I should do is what is in my interest to do. As the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes argues, “whatsoever is the object of any mans Appetite or Desire, that is it, which he for his part calleth *Good*: And the object of his Hate, and Aversion, *Evill*.”¹ The only standard we can use for what is good, Hobbes says, is what we ourselves want. The world turns only by appealing to people’s self-interest, and we should expect nothing else. Indeed, egoists argue, we are all better off in a world where everyone acts out their own self-interest than in a world where everyone is constantly interfering with others. While we may be tempted to think otherwise, egoism is not an incoherent view. The interests of the Ewoks may be to enjoy the natural beauty of the forest and to live in harmony with the life there and those of the Empire may be to level the trees to create a base that will better protect the construction of Second Death Star. But the conflict that results isn’t a *logical* contradiction. Each can each still maintain that what they are doing is

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 39. Punctuation and spelling in the original.

Egoism is often mistakenly associated with the views of Adam Smith, who does argue that a healthy dose of self-interest is useful for a capitalist economy, but who also thinks it can lead to gross injustices. See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R.H. Campbell, and A.S. Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), I.ii.2 and V.i.f.50 and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.C. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

morally correct. It is, however, a *practical* contradiction since they can't both do what they want. Dedicated egoists argue we each have an interest in living in an ordered society where conflicts about trees do not lead to either violence or to ongoing hostility, and so we need to think about the interests of others to a some degree if we want to promote our own interests in the long run. Indeed, an enlightened egoism that takes seriously what is needed to make society work will make a place for loyalty, dedication, and even charity. Egoists can also recognize that people's interest are directed not only towards themselves, but also towards their loved ones, their country, and even towards the environment. An enlightened egoism can, then, include much of what is usually considered moral.

Han, unlike Jango, shows the necessary dispositions for this better form of egoism: he shows, for example, genuine loyalty from the very beginning. His affection for Chewbacca is obvious from our first encounter with him, and he quickly develops an older brother's affection for Luke. Even more importantly, Han shows a capacity for something more. When Leia rebukes him, "If money is all that you love, then that's what you'll receive" and then turns to Luke to add, "I wonder if he really cares about anything or anyone," Han is clearly hurt. When Luke chides him for refusing to join the rebel attack on the Death Star, Han looks obviously guilty, and Chewie reproaches him as only he can. So while Han claims that he rescues Luke from Darth Vader in the Death Star trench because "I wasn't going to let you [Luke] get all the credit and take all the reward," we know that he does it for Luke. Han demonstrates that loyalty once again on the ice planet Hoth. When no one is able to find Luke in the base, Han sets off to find him over the objections of the other rebels. By the time he rescues Luke against the odds (725 to 1, Artoo calculates), we have little doubt where his affections lie. Later, he delays his own escape from the planet to ensure that Leia can get off too, and when he's captured by Darth Vader on Bespin, he tells Chewie not to resist the Imperial forces because he needs him to take care of Leia. Unlike the narrowly-egoistic Jango, Han is capable of true and deep friendships. He is willing to risk all for both Luke and Leia.

Yet even on Hoth and Bespin, his own affairs still take precedence: despite the Rebellion's need for his skills and his leadership, he tries to leave the rebels so that he can pay off Jabba. To think a bounty hunter will be able to capture him in the Rebellion's secret hideout surrounded by loyal troops is simply implausible. When Leia argues truthfully (albeit to hide her own feelings, even from herself) that "We need you," Han's only interested in whether *she* needs him. And when they finally escape to Bespin, he's still set on abandoning the Alliance. Despite the overwhelming needs of others, Han still feels that he has to look after his own affairs, no matter what the cost to others. He still has no loyalty to the Rebellion or to the greater good, and he's still quick to look after himself and his own affairs rather than the interests of others.

At this point, then, Han is still an egoist, albeit an enlightened one. He cares for others, and so their welfare count as part of Han's own self-interest. What they need is part of what he considers when he thinks about what he wants, and so he can then sometimes act for the sake of others. Moreover, Han's egoism has its limits; we could never imagine Han taking money to assassinate a political leader. With a broadened self-interest, Han is certainly better morally than he seemed when we first met him, but more is needed before he can acknowledge the moral value of something greater than himself. But his friendships with Leia and Luke allow him to see the importance of the cause that they so easily embrace. His love for them eventually leads him to commit himself to a greater good and to express a moral regard for oppressed people everywhere. Following their moral examples, he becomes a full member of the Rebel Alliance and one of its most important leaders. By committing himself to a genuinely moral cause, he escapes his egoism. Or perhaps, he does not so much escape his egoism as much as his self-interest becomes so broad that it encompasses all of morality. In any case, Han has been transformed from an arrogant and self-centered smuggler into a moral leader.

"This Deal is Getting Worse All the Time"

At first glance, Lando Calrissian seems to be just like Han. Indeed, he and Han ran in the same circles earlier in their lives, and he lost the Millennium Falcon to Han in a card game. Like Han, Lando was a scoundrel. For that reason, we may be tempted to see his decisions as egoistic as

well. Yet, when we meet Lando in *The Empire Strikes Back*, he is the administrator of Bespin, an independent mining colony. He has become, as Han puts it, “a businessman, a responsible leader.” Dealing with supply problems, labor difficulties, and the complexities of running a large enterprise, Lando understands, is “the price you pay for being successful.” Yet even before we actually meet him, he has been confronted with a nasty moral dilemma: he can either betray his old friend Han and turn him over to Darth Vader, or he can allow Bespin to be overrun by Imperial stormtroopers. We might view Lando’s decision as egoistic: he betrays Han to save his own neck. But Lando’s decision is not so self-serving. The lives of everyone on Bespin will be made substantially worse if the Empire controls it, so Lando make a fairly straightforward utilitarian decision.

Utilitarianism is the view that, as the nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill puts it, “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”² While the egoist promotes only her own happiness, the utilitarian promotes the happiness of everyone. The correct moral action is the one that creates the most happiness for the world: “*the greatest happiness of the greatest number*,” to use the Jeremy Bentham’s famous phrase.³ To determine the right act, we look at each of the options that are available to us and calculate the likely consequences of choosing that option. We then add up the happiness that would be created for each person affected if we choose that option and subtract the unhappiness. We then compare this result with those of the other options, and then pick the one with the highest total. Every person’s happiness or unhappiness is weighed equally in the calculation, so from a utilitarian point of view, the increased happiness of a large number of people usually outweighs the pain suffered by one. So when Lando gives up Han to prevent the great harms that his people would suffer if the Empire commands his colony, he is simply weighing the good of the many against the harm to one.

² John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 2nd ed., ed. George Sher (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001), 7.

³ Jeremy Bentham, *A Fragment on Government*, ed. J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 3.

In the context of *The Empire Strikes Back*, this decision looks like moral cowardice. We want Lando to stand up to the Empire, to try to save his friends, no matter what the cost. With E.M. Forster, we think that “if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.”⁴ We empathize so much with Han and Leia that we simply ignore the thousands of other people who are affected by Lando’s decision. But to put it in these terms shows how narrow-minded such a judgment is. In fact, we expect the government to look after the welfare of the whole society rather than the needs of a single individual. Within some limits (which can often be justified on utilitarian grounds⁵), we expect government officials to act as utilitarians, maximizing the good for the whole community. Officials should think of the nation and only incidentally of individuals, even if the individuals in question are personal friends of the leader—indeed, *especially* if the individuals are personal friend. We expect governmental officers to go out of their way to avoid charges that they are acting out of their own interests or those of their friends rather than out of those of the nation as a whole. Imagine how we would judge the President of the United States if he were willing to give in to terrorist demands to save the life of an old hunting buddy from Mexico. Lando’s actions would be exactly the same: he would be turning over the colony to the tyranny of the Empire just to save a gambling buddy who does not even belong to the colony. Seen in this light, Lando’s decision is not only reasonable, it’s also what we would expect from someone in his position.

Moreover, whatever Han thinks, Lando’s choice is not between giving up Han and saving his colony. No matter what Lando does, Han will be captured by Darth Vader: either Lando will surrender Han to Vader or the stormtroopers will capture him in their assault on the planet. So Lando’s real choice is only whether he’s going to try to save the mining colony or not. The

⁴ E.M. Forster, “What I Believe,” in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), 68.

⁵ These restrictions usually take the form of individual rights, which utilitarians think can be grounded in what creates the greatest happiness in the long run. See John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), especially chapter II.

choice he actually faces is much like one discussed by the moral philosopher Bernard Williams⁶: an evil commandant offers to save 19 of his 20 innocent captives slated for execution if you personally will shoot one of them, despite your own pacifist convictions. The captive you kill will die no matter what you do, so the question is whether you should act to save the other 19. Williams argues that a utilitarian morality—indeed, any abstract morality—requires too much if it expects you to give up your own convictions to kill the one. Such a moral demand would violate your personal integrity, he claims. While Williams’s position is appealing, it is ultimately based on a kind of moral selfishness: *I* will never get *my* hands dirty, though the heavens may fall. Undoubtedly, both you and Lando give up something important if you act as morality requires: you each give up a sense of moral purity. But ultimately, that sense is a kind of moral vanity: it is the view that *my* moral sensibilities are worth more than the *lives* of the others. Even if Lando and you don’t entirely trust either Darth Vader or the commandant to keep his word, the decision to try to help the many is not one of moral cowardice. Indeed, valuing the actual lives of others over your own moral scruples is an act of moral courage. Yet even if we think that this reasoning is faulty and that in the final analysis Lando is wrong, we shouldn’t judge him a coward. He’s not acting in a clearly unreasonable or selfish manner. He simply weighs the moral options differently.

In fact, Lando never really has any choice whatsoever. No matter what he does, the Empire is going to take over his colony and Han is going to be captured. So his plaintive refrain, “I had no choice” is really true. But Lando doesn’t act immorally for trying to produce a different outcome. To his credit, when he realizes that his goals are hopeless, he does what he can both to evacuate as much of the colony as possible and to save Leia, Chewie, and Threepio from Vader. After losing his colony, he doesn’t think of himself at all. He immediately joins Luke and Leia’s plans to rescue Han, and we see him at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back* setting off to find Han on Tatooine. He thus immediately tries to make right the harm that was

⁶ Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 98-100.

done to Han through his actions, even if that harm was caused by no fault of his own. And, once he has rescued Han, he doesn't hesitate to join the Rebel forces in what looks like a suicide mission to attack the second Death Star. Far from being a narrow egoist, Lando is in fact one of the most morally courageous figures in the *Star Wars* saga.

“Together . . . We Can Destroy the Sith”

Count Dooku is first introduced in *Attack of the Clones* as a “political idealist, not a murderer.” Dooku is a former Jedi who leads a separatist rebellion against the Republic. The case for rebellion that Dooku presents to Obi-Wan is compelling: “What if I told you that the Republic was now under the control of the Dark Lord of the Sith? . . . Hundreds of senators are now under the influence of a Sith Lord called Darth Sidious.” Dooku's argument is that the Republic is under the control of a senate that has been hopelessly corrupted by an agent of evil. The only chance to destroy the Sith, he argues, is to break with the Republic completely and to undermine the power of the Senate. In other words, the only choice is to join him. Obi-Wan, of course, refuses to believe that the Jedi Council could be so thoroughly deceived about the power that the Sith Lord wields, and so he sees Dooku only as a “traitor.”

Here's an interestingly ambiguous scenario. We have two characters, each of whom is acting on what he thinks is best for everyone. We know Obi-Wan better, so we're more likely to trust his judgment, but we also know that the information provided by Dooku is accurate. Dooku sees a corrupt government, controlled by pure evil; rebellion, he thinks, is the only possibility of keeping the galaxy from falling under the complete sway of those hidden forces. Although Obi-Wan objects to this possibility, we can easily imagine that Dooku would be joined by an independently-minded Jedi like Qui-Gon Jinn, who was only too-eager to ignore the advice of the Jedi Council with respect to Anakin Skywalker. On the other hand, because Obi-Wan completely trusts the capacity of the Jedi Council to detect the Sith, he sees only a rebel, looking after his own interests and those of his cronies. The only evil he sees is that of the separatist rebellion itself. However much Obi-Wan's intentions are good, he fails to see the greater danger. His arrogance in his own knowledge and in that of his leaders leaves unquestioned his misguided

assumptions. Dooku understands that the “Dark Side of the Force has clouded their [the Jedi Council’s] vision,” and he knows that drastic action is needed to avert catastrophe, so he’s willing to take enormous risks for the good of all. We have, then, a conflict between people with different views of what is needed to advance the good, neither of whom is in a position to convince the other of his point of view. The dispute is a conflict of visions, based partially on a conflict in knowledge. Each man acts reasonably given the information he has, relying most on those whom he trusts. Each is thus acting out of good intentions, yet one must have unwittingly become a tool of evil. Without further information, such conflicts can’t be resolved, and so one of them must be horribly mistaken. In such scenarios lie great moral tragedies.

To be a great tragedy, however, each side must be acting out of good will, but one unwittingly aids evil. Unfortunately, such an interestingly ambiguous scenario is not the one we actually find in *Attack of the Clones*. By the time we see him with Obi-Wan, we already know that Dooku is no idealist and does not have any good intentions. The Trade Federation will join the separatists only if Padmé Amidala has been eliminated, and Dooku has assured Nute Gunray that his hired assassin, Jango Fett, will not fail. His participation shortly thereafter in the attempt to execute Obi-Wan, Padmé, and Anakin leaves us no room to think that he was ever acting for good. The later revelation that Dooku is actually the Sith apprentice Darth Tyrannus is thus hardly surprising. It is merely an irony that Dooku exercises his deception by telling an important truth, while Obi-Wan later conveys a deeper truth by lying to Luke about the death of his father.⁷ Dooku, as it turns out, is not morally ambiguous at all: he’s simply a subtle instrument of evil. The movies thus miss the opportunity to teach an important moral lesson: sincere people can honestly disagree about the correct moral course.

⁷ For more on the Sith’s and Jedi’s use of deception and truth, see Shanti Fader’s chapter in this volume.

“I’m a Jedi . . . I Know I’m Better Than This”

On the face of it, the most morally ambiguous character in the *Star Wars* saga must be Anakin Skywalker. He changes from an innocent and good-hearted young boy into a servant of the Emperor, the embodiment of darkness itself. But I think that Anakin is not in fact so ambiguous.

As a child, Anakin is clearly on the side of good. He reaches out to Padmé and Qui-Gon on Tatooine, offering them shelter from a sandstorm. Hearing their troubles, he immediately seeks to help them, risking his own life in the Boonta Eve Podrace to win the prize money that Qui-Gon needs to buy the spare parts for their damaged starship. In *The Phantom Menace*, Anakin is nothing but innocence and goodness. No moral ambiguities here. As a young man, however, Anakin becomes Darth Vader; by *A New Hope*, he is nothing but evil, his mind as twisted as his body. No moral ambiguities there either.

We might then expect to see some signs of ambiguity in the interim. But in *Attack of the Clones*, we never see the kind boy we met on Tatooine. Not once during the entire movie does he show basic compassion. He’s rude, arrogant, and ungrateful. While he talks about the respect he has for Obi-Wan’s wisdom, he never acts like he believes that Obi-Wan has anything to teach him. He ignores Obi-Wan’s explicit instructions at every opportunity, he picks a fight with Obi-Wan in front of Padmé to prove his loyalty to her over his teacher, he refuses to listen to Obi-Wan while chasing Zam Wesell, and he abandons his mission to Naboo to look after his own personal affairs. His smarmy resistance to Obi-Wan’s teachings turns his otherwise patient and kind master into a hectoring nag. His pursuit of his love for Padmé, while understandable, jeopardizes not only their careers, but also their lives—not to mention the lives of those who find themselves in the path of their recklessness. The only step he takes that seems selfless is his attempt to save Obi-Wan on Geonosis, but his actions are ill-conceived and rash, an ill-advised attempt to make up for abandoning his post earlier. His duty was clearly to protect his charge, yet he allows Padmé to convince him to do what he himself wants to do. Once there, he has to be reminded to keep to his mission when Padmé falls out of their gunship, and he rushes into combat with Count Dooku so carelessly that he ends up causing unnecessary injuries both to

Obi-Wan and to himself. Most of these actions are thoughtless rather than intentionally immoral, so we may be inclined to see them as well-intentioned, if mistaken. Even so, their sheer stupidity makes them morally defective.

The problem is not that he acts on his emotions. Emotions play an important role in our moral evaluations. The eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume even argues, “Morality . . . is more properly felt than judg’d of.”⁸ Yet even Hume thinks that reason plays an important role in morality. We need to use our reason to assess the facts properly and to keep our priorities straight. To act coherently, much less morally, we can’t lose our heads; we have to be able to reflect on what we are doing. When people disregard the moral judgments that emerge from reflection, we rightly view them as morally flawed. And when they willfully refuse to engage in reflection at all, when they rush to action without any use of their reason, we should judge them similarly. So when Anakin tells Padmé, “You are asking me to be rational. That is something I know I cannot do,” he is admitting to a great moral failing. If we willfully ignore what reason tells us, we become controlled by every whim of our emotions, and we lose our capacity to make moral decisions. Anakin’s recklessness is, then, a vice.

Yet all Anakin’s reckless actions pale in comparison to what he does to the Sand People who’ve captured his mother. Even from Naboo, Anakin feels his mother’s pain, and he rushes to Tatooine to help her. But when she dies in his arms, he destroys an entire village, the innocent and the guilty alike, out of revenge. It’s an act of unspeakable cruelty.

Oddly, the horror of this act is downplayed in the movie. Padmé only seems to feel sorry for Anakin, reacting little to the depths of the horror. She consoles him and rather lamely insists that “to be angry is to be human.” Anakin himself *seems* to feel sorry for what he has done, but even this apparent regret seems to be more about failing his ideal of a Jedi than about the act itself. Indeed, he seems much more upset that he couldn’t save his mother, and so vows to be “all-powerful” so that he can “learn to stop people from dying.”

⁸ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.1.2.1.

We could try to argue that the killings, though horrendous, are at least somewhat morally ambiguous. We can distinguish between dispositions and character traits that lie behind an action and the consequences of the action itself. As Mill puts it, “the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much to do with the worth of the agent.”⁹ We can then argue that Anakin, by acting out of love for his mother, is acting from a good disposition. A world in which people love their parents and their children so much that they are willing to go to great lengths to save them is a morally better world than one in which people lack such feelings. People are more likely to develop a strong moral character and to have richer lives in general, when they are capable of such great and unconditional love for others. The development of such attachments is thus a great moral good. The hatred Anakin feels towards the Sand People, we could then argue, is a natural outcome of having such a great love. They have slowly and painfully tortured Shmi, and Anakin reacts passionately and violently to their brutality.¹⁰ So, although destroying the Sand People was wrong, we could argue, Anakin’s reaction is a byproduct of a character trait that is generally virtuous. We could then still think of Anakin as a good person.

What Anakin does, however, can bear no such justification. First, to massacre many for the sake of one is egregiously disproportionate. Indeed, to kill *any* innocent person just to save a family member is morally dubious. We should always “act so that we treat humanity . . . always as an end in itself and never as a means only,” as the great Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant puts it.¹¹ By sacrificing innocent people to save our loved one, we are merely using them as tools for our own purposes. We do not respect them as full human beings with their own goals and values, but as something expendable whenever they get in our way. Moreover, to do so when those actions will not even help our loved one treats the Sand People in just the way

⁹ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 18.

¹⁰ For further discussion of the value of love and attachment from a Hegelian philosophical perspective, see James Lawler’s chapter in this volume

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 47, Ak. 429.

Anakin thinks of them: “They’re like animals and I slaughtered them like animals.” Anakin’s capacity to treat people as mere beasts is such a fundamental moral flaw that his capacity for love can’t redeem his character.

Second, and more importantly, for all the good it creates, the love of family is not always a good moral motive. Certainly, love is a powerful motive, and it can be difficult to control. In addition, the capacity to love is itself intrinsically good, and it thereby creates a great good in people’s lives. Besides being good in its own right, it can also help to generate other goods. It teaches us to look at the world from the point of view of others and to take into account the interests of those outside us. Yet despite its great potential, love can also be morally selfish. Han, remember, is a better person because he loves, but his moral perspective is still limited. When we focus our attention exclusively on those we love, we can become blind to the anguish of others. They can cease to exist for us morally. Indeed, too often, we fail to think of outsiders as human at all. The exclusive love of our own families and our own groups is the root cause of the intolerance that leads to too many of the great crimes committed by humanity. So Anakin’s love makes his anger understandable, but what he does with that anger is no less horrible because love lies behind it.

Anakin’s murder of the Sand People is, then, in no way morally ambiguous. It’s simply the first of Anakin’s many future acts of barbarity. We are supposed to see Anakin’s actions as a result of his all-too-human love for his mother and hatred for those who harm her, a flaw that will eventually lead him down the path to the Dark Side of the Force. In fact, however, he is far along that path the second he kills those innocent villagers. Only our (and Padmé’s) sympathy for Anakin as a character prevents us from seeing that he’s already an “agent of evil.”

If Anakin as a young man is not morally ambiguous, we could argue, with some justice, that once he becomes Darth Vader that he’s more ambiguous than we might think. First, Vader’s motivations are not entirely bad. He asks Luke to join him so that they can destroy the Emperor and rule the galaxy together as father and son: “With our combined strength, we can end this destructive conflict and bring order to the galaxy.” Vader seeks peace and order for the galaxy,

ruled by the wise leadership of a single man or perhaps a single family. Here Vader expresses Anakin's earlier sentiment that "we need a system where the politicians sit down and discuss the problems, agree what's in the best interest of all the people, and then do it." And if people don't agree, he continues, "then they should be made to." Even then, it doesn't bother Anakin that such a system sounds like a dictatorship: "Well, if it works" Anakin can be seduced by the Dark Side because although he wants the world to be a better place, he refuses to absorb the lessons of his wiser, if less talented, teacher. As a result, he doesn't appreciate how naïve his view of the world is, and he can't control himself when he confronts the traps—like the one on Tatooine—that Darth Sidious sets for him. His good motives are thus put to evil use.

Second, we could argue that Vader is morally ambiguous, because Luke does, after all, feel the good in him. Faced with the torture and the destruction of his own son, he destroys the Emperor instead. What goodness remains allows him to resist the absolute evil of the Emperor, but only when his own son is involved. His motivations in killing the Emperor are not that different from his earlier motivations in killing the Sand People: he acts out of love for a member of his family. But, as we have already seen, killing others for the sake of a family member is not always—or even usually—morally praiseworthy. So his motivations don't make his action here better. What does make it better is that this time at least, he kills only the guilty, and he does so when it's the only way to save the innocent person who happens to be his son. Of course, the fact that in saving his son, he also kills the Emperor and helps to destroy the Empire that has tyrannized the galaxy is an important added bonus. It is, then, a morally good act—even if the motivations behind it are not entirely praiseworthy. So oddly, at the end of *Return of the Jedi*, Anakin finally does become a morally ambiguous figure. He does great good, even if the motivations are not entirely good and even if they do not begin to atone for the great evils he has done in his life.

“You Know . . . What They're Up Against”

Moral ambiguity can appear in a number of surprising places. It emerges when characters are basically good, but have to learn to get outside their egoistic tendencies, like Han. It can be

found where evil characters pretend to be good to use the goodness of others against them, like Dooku. It appears not when people with whom we empathize, like Anakin, do horrific evil, but when good manages to eke its way out of an evil character, like Vader. Most importantly, it can appear when seemingly easy decisions, like Lando's, are given their full due.

Most moral decisions we make in our lives are relatively easy. We help a friend with a project; we give up a concert to see our daughter's recital; we give directions to a stranger. Few decisions require us to consider anyone outside a small circle of acquaintances or the strangers who present themselves to us. These decisions are so ordinary that we hardly think of them as moral decisions at all. But the ease with which we handle most moral situations can leave us ill-prepared to think about the difficult moral decisions which may confront us and which could prove to be the crucible of our moral characters. A rare few of us may be blessed with a strong moral compass that invariably leads us to the right path, no matter how confusing the signs might be. The rest of us can only prepare ourselves by thinking about our possible reactions to many different situations so that we can know how we should handle ourselves when the time comes. Thinking about it is not enough, of course, but it's a necessary first step to facing any challenge. In thinking about the moral ambiguity of the seemingly black-and-white universe of *Star Wars*, we can see how morally complex a simple world can be, and we can begin to prepare for the moral complexities of our own less-than-simple world.¹²

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