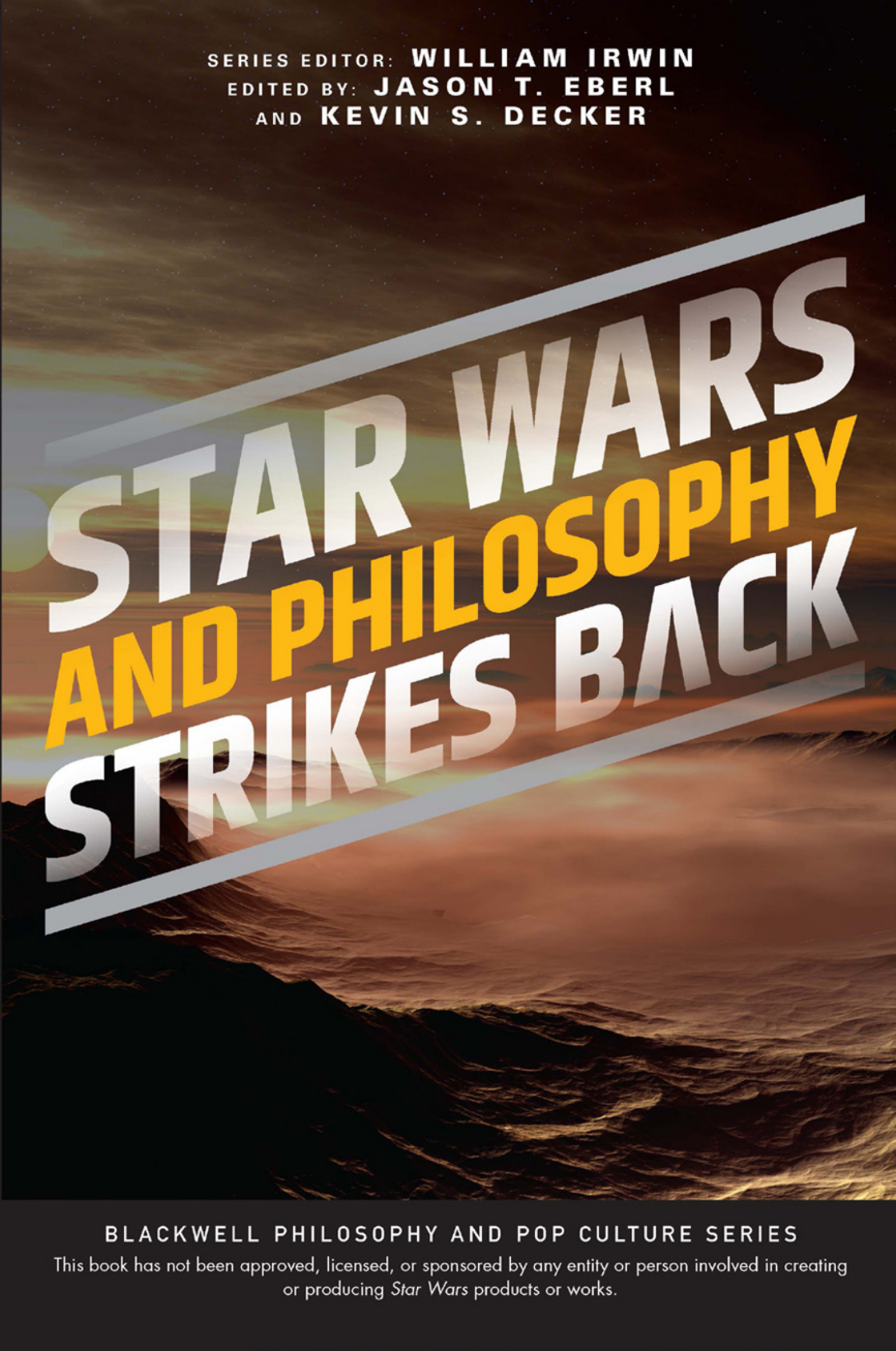


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AND PHILOSOPHY
STRIKES BACK

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AND PHILOSOPHY
STRIKES BACK:
THIS IS THE WAY**

Edited by

Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker

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The Bad Batch

Joel Archer holds a PhD in philosophy from Saint Louis University and is pursuing a PhD in religion at Duke University. His research has appeared in journals such as *Philosophical Studies*, *Religious Studies*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, and *New Testament Studies*. Why two PhDs? Some think he draws inspiration from Ahsoka Tano, who fights evil with two lightsabers instead of one.

Daniel Banning is a Field Service Engineer with Marel. He received a BA in history from Franciscan University of Steubenville. He underwent years of informal training in philosophy as a result of having professional philosophers as best friends and roommates, and he has engaged in many deep discussions of both philosophy and *Star Wars*. He has a special interest in the history of the *Star Wars* universe, particularly the Old Republic era. This book marks his first step into the larger world of academic publishing.

Michael Baur teaches in both the Philosophy Department and the Law School at Fordham University. He holds a PhD from the University of Toronto, and a JD from Harvard Law School. He has served as general editor of the “Cambridge Hegel Translations” series for Cambridge University Press, and is President of the Metaphysical Society of America for 2023/24. He has published on a variety of thinkers (including Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Heidegger, and C.S. Peirce) and on a variety of topics (including metaphysics, ethics, jurisprudence, German Idealism, pragmatism, existentialism, and hermeneutics). They say he has never heard the tragedy of Darth Plagueis the Wise – but perhaps the archives are incomplete.

Steve Bein is wondering, why is he here? Associate Professor of Philosophy he is, at the University of Dayton. Deep is his nerdery in science fiction, and often does he contribute to volumes on pop culture and philosophy. Many chapters has he written, on subjects ranging from Wonder Woman to Mr. Rogers. A novelist is he as well, and several black belts has he earned, but he is not a Jedi yet.

Philipp Berghofer is a postdoc researcher and lecturer at the University of Graz, Austria. His research focus centers around epistemology, phenomenology, and philosophy of physics, aiming at establishing a phenomenological experience-first epistemology. He is the author of *The Justificatory Force of Experiences*, co-editor of *Phenomenological Approaches to Physics*, and president of the Austrian Society for Phenomenology. Ultimately, he is just a simple man trying to make his way in the universe, one pursuing a complicated profession.

Lance Belluomini did his graduate work in philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley; San Francisco State University; and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. He’s recently published essays on *Tenet* and *The Mandalorian* in *The Palgrave Handbook of Popular Culture as Philosophy* (2021). He’s also contributed chapters to *The Philosophy of Christopher Nolan* (2017) and the Wiley-Blackwell volumes on *Inception*, *The Walking Dead*, *Ender’s Game*, *The Ultimate Star Wars*, and *Indiana Jones* (forthcoming). Still swept away by *The Mandalorian*, he currently loves to end his sentences with the inscrutable catchphrase “I have spoken.”

Isabel Bishop is a freelance writer living in St. Louis, Missouri. She has a BA in English from the University of Dallas with an interest in film, art history, and culture. She writes for *The Take* and for *Think Christian*, as well as her own pop culture blog on Medium. Her work explores feminist, political, and Christian thought in relation to film and television. She is a fervent defender of *The Last Jedi*, her favorite of the sequel series, and much of her work explores the Jedi mind-trick of the patriarchy.

Jeffrey P. Bishop is Professor of Philosophy and Professor of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University, where he holds the Tenet Endowed Chair in Bioethics. Bishop is also the founding Director of the Center for Culture, Religion, Ethics, Science, and Technology (CREST) at SLU, which conducts interdisciplinary

research on topics at the intersection of science, technology, and culture. His own scholarship explores the historical, political, and philosophical foundations of medicine, science, and technology. His books include, *The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying* (2011) and *Biopolitics After Neuroscience: Morality and the Economy of Virtue* (2022), co-authored with M. Therese Lysaught and Andrew A. Michel. Bishop is currently working on a three-volume series at the intersection of philosophical anthropology and philosophy of technology. He can often be found ruminating over a fire, smoking Bantha brisket in his native Texan “low and slow” BBQ style, pondering the technological enframing of humanity represented in the trash compactor scene in *A New Hope*, which he considers the most philosophically rich and important scene in the *Star Wars* canon.

Dear *Star Wars* Powers That Be: My Experimental Clone Force 99 Lego set came without an Omega figure. In addition, the Wrecker figure is the same size as the rest of the other clones. As you know, part of Wrecker’s mutation was greater height than the Fett clone standard 1.83 meters. The Omega figure, as a young girl, “little sister” should be smaller than the rest of the figures at one meter. This is obviously a *Clone Wars* animated series era set, not a *Bad Batch* animated series era set, which should have the appropriately sized Wrecker and the *Bad Batch* series new figure Omega, including her laser crossbow. Please rectify this by issuing a new *Bad Batch* set with the correct characters with appropriate dimensions and weaponry.

The Force be With You,

Dr. Patricia L. Brace, Professor of Art and Humanities, Southwest Minnesota State University; co-editor with Robert Arp of *The Philosophy of J.J. Abrams*.

Timothy Challans identifies with the clone troopers in many ways, not the least of which is his white beard and bald head, which helped him pull off his older (*Rebels*) Captain Rex costume last Halloween. Tim retired from the Army as an infantry lieutenant colonel and has spent over a dozen years as a professor teaching over a thousand military students a range of subjects at a number of military colleges, starting with the teaching of philosophy and military ethics at West Point. He has an award-winning (Choice Award Bronze Medal) academic book, *Awakening Warrior: Revolution in the Ethics of Warfare*

(2007). His fascination with clone troopers comes from his empathy for the people transformed into soldiers of an imperial army who could so easily and unwittingly be manipulated by their masters – through discipline, pressure, and propaganda – to cross a “thin red line” into an abyss of immorality, following orders to commit heinous acts of torture, murder, and treason. Given the requisite conditions, any army is capable, unfortunately, of following Order 66.

Roy T. Cook is CLA Scholar of the College, Setterberg Fellow of Philosophy, and Professor at the University of Minnesota. He works on the philosophy of mathematics, logic, and the philosophy of art. He has two R2-D2 tattoos, because he realizes that R2-D2 is actually the main character of the Star Wars fictional universe, and the only character who consistently understands what is really going on.

Kevin S. Decker is Professor of Philosophy at Eastern Washington University. He has edited or co-edited more than a dozen anthology books in philosophy and popular culture, including *Dune and Philosophy*, and is the author of *Who is Who? The Philosophy of Doctor Who*. If you look closely in the scenes from *The Force Awakens* when Maz Kanata’s castle on Takodana is under assault, you can see him cowering under the second table to the left.

Jason T. Eberl is Professor of Health Care Ethics and Philosophy and Director of the Albert Gnaegi Center for Health Care Ethics at Saint Louis University. He teaches and publishes on bioethics, medieval philosophy, and metaphysics. He’s the editor of *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), co-editor (w/ Kevin S. Decker) of *The Ultimate Star Trek and Philosophy* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016) and *The Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), as well as the original *Star Trek and Philosophy* (2008) and *Star Wars and Philosophy* (2005), and co-editor (w/ George A. Dunn) of *Sons of Anarchy and Philosophy* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) and *The Philosophy of Christopher Nolan* (2017). He’s also contributed to similar books on Stanley Kubrick, J.J. Abrams, Metallica, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Harry Potter*, *Terminator*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Big Lebowski*, *Hamilton*, *Westworld*, and *Avatar*. As a bibliophile, the most disturbing moment for him in the entire *Star Wars* saga isn’t when Luke gets his hand cut off or makes out with his sister, but when he nearly destroyed the sacred Jedi texts on Ahch-To.

Noam Ebner was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Naturally, he became a lawyer. Reprogrammed as successfully as IG-11, he's now a professor of negotiation and conflict resolution at Creighton University, teaching that wars not make one great. Noam lives in a swamp with his wife and four younglings. He is co-editor of *Star Wars and Conflict Resolution* (forthcoming), and swears by the Maker that everything in this bio is literally true.

Umut Eldem is an assistant professor at Doğuş University Sociology Department. He teaches history of philosophy, ethics, philosophy of science, and occasionally the ways of the Force. He has published articles on Kant, Heidegger, Rick & Morty, and now, Yoda. In his spare time he likes to visit swamps to look for buried X-wings.

Thomas D. Harter is the director of the Department of Bioethics with Gundersen Health System. After his Jedi-esque training in philosophy at the University of Tennessee he was seduced to the "dark side" of clinical ethics, realizing the great power that comes with helping ill patients and their families overcome challenging ethics questions at the bedside. However, Harter has attempted to remain in balance with the Force, continuing with academic pursuits while battling forces of evil as a knight of the Order of Clinical Ethics. When not in frontline clinical battles, Harter writes about issues at the intersection of medical ethics, business ethics, medical professionalism, and philosophy, and teaches bioethics courses and lectures on bioethics topics with other health professions rebels and teachers of the Jedi-esque health professions.

A.G. Holdier is a scruffy-looking nerf-herder doing graduate work in philosophy and public policy at the University of Arkansas (which is probably why he has a bad feeling about this). When he's not researching social and political epistemology or philosophy of language in his local Dex's Diner, you can find him still trying to "do the magic hand thing."

David Kyle Johnson is a professor of philosophy at King's College, in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, who also produces lecture series for The Teaching Company's *The Great Courses*. His specializations include metaphysics, logic, and philosophy of religion and his "Great Courses" include *Sci-Phi: Science Fiction as Philosophy*, *The Big Questions of Philosophy*, and *Exploring Metaphysics*. Kyle is Executive Officer of

GCRR (The Global Center for Religion Research), the editor-in-chief of *The Palgrave Handbook of Popular Culture as Philosophy* (forthcoming), and has also edited other volumes for Blackwell-Wiley, including *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections* and *Inception and Philosophy: Because It's Never Just a Dream*. Kyle generally likes his *Star Wars* like the Sheev likes his Empire: Jedi free.

Russell P. Johnson is a professor in the Religious Studies program at the University of Chicago, where he teaches “Villains: Evil in Philosophy, Religion, and Film” and “*Star Wars* and Religion.” If you haven’t visited it, the University of Chicago combines the pleasant weather of Hoth with the wild nightlife of the Jedi Archives. Dr. Johnson’s research focuses on the philosophy of communication and nonviolent conflict resolution, so naturally he writes about movies where people solve their problems with laser swords. In addition to his monthly columns for *Sightings*, he wrote a chapter titled “Lifting Rocks: Camus, Sainthood, and the Anti-heroic in *The Last Jedi*” for the upcoming book *Theology and the Star Wars Universe*.

Joshua Jowitt is from a small coal-mining town in the North of England and holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in law and the philosophy of law from the Universities of Cambridge, Warwick, and Durham in the United Kingdom. He is currently a lecturer at Newcastle Law School, where he works mainly in legal theory, but has recently gotten obsessed with the idea of what it means to be a “person” in both philosophy and law. His strong accent means that, when he was younger and had more hair, he was frequently mistaken for Chewbacca. The illusion was quickly shattered, since whenever he was asked to make practical repairs to literally anything, he was about as dexterous as a Bantha.

Nathan Kellen is Instructor of Philosophy at Owensboro Community & Technical College. In the time since the publication of the previous *Star Wars and Philosophy* volume, he has passed his trials to become a Jedi Knight, started training his own Padawans, and for some unknown reason finally gotten around to watching the *Star Wars Holiday Special*.

Aikaterini-Maria Lakka is currently finishing her PhD in comparative literature at the Sorbonne. Her interest in all kinds of stories began from an early age, so she studied classics in Greece (DUTH)

and France (Bordeaux Montaigne), and did graduate studies in French literature at the Sorbonne. One of her main research interests revolves around Foucauldian heterotopias, spaces caught up in between reality and imagination, hence her love for the Star Wars universe. She is also a novelist herself; her debut novel, *Someone Named Galatea*, was published in Modern Greek in 2021. When she was young, she decided to become fluent in over 6 million forms of communication to rival C-3PO, but only managed to become fluent in French, and is currently struggling to speak better Spanish, German, Russian, and Italian. Watching Princess Leia being a badass turned her into a feminist. She dreamed of showing up at the *Star Wars* auditions for Episode VII in London, but ended up losing track of time inside an antique bookshop.

Sheepishly confessing that, unlike Socrates, he has never heard from the Oracle of Delphi, **James Lawler** recently revealed, nevertheless, that his roommate in college used to call him “Soc.” Perhaps the roommate was an oracle in disguise? Possibly. The reader who wishes to climb the ladder of the love of philosophy can do no better than to begin with Jim’s book, *The God Tube: Uncovering the Hidden Spiritual Message in Pop Culture* (2010). For advanced lovers adapted to more rarified levels, there is *Matter and Spirit: The Battle of Metaphysics in Modern Western Philosophy before Kant* (2006). The next rung is, of course, *The Intelligible World: Metaphysical Revolution in the Genesis of Kant’s Theory of Morality* (2013).

Terrance MacMullan is an award-winning educator and author who has loved teaching at Eastern Washington University since 2002. He is the author of *Habits of Whiteness: A Pragmatist Reconstruction* as well as numerous publications on American philosophy and pop culture and philosophy. He has served as the EWU Faculty President, earned the President’s Award for Academic Excellence, and was voted the Faculty of the Year by the Associated Students of EWU. Most importantly, he came in second place at the 2014 Lilac City Comicon Costume Contest as Qui-Gon Jinn, though every day he looks more and more like Episode IV Obi Wan!

Daniel P. Malloy teaches philosophy at Aims Community College in Greeley, Colorado. He has published numerous chapters on the intersections of philosophy and popular culture, including chapters on *Terminator*, *Inception*, *The Walking Dead*, *Orphan Black*, and *The*

X-Files. He was fired by Figrin D'an and the Modal Nodes for being a bit too scummy and villainous.

Nick Munn did his PhD in philosophy at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne, and currently works as a Bounty Hunter Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Waikato University in New Zealand. His philosophical interests are many and varied: democracy, enfranchisement, emerging technologies, virtual worlds, moral evaluation, friendship ... Sometimes he thinks it would be a lot easier to pursue them all if, like the IG-88 series of assassin droids, his consciousness was distributed over multiple bodies.

James M. Okapal is Professor of Philosophy at Missouri Western State University, Area Chair for Philosophy and Culture at the Pop Culture Association/American Culture Association National Conference, and the Ethics and Culture Series Editor for McFarland. His research focuses on issues of friendship and moral status in literature and philosophy and he hopes that someday he will be able to count a Wookiee as a close friend. Well, a Wookiee not named Krrsantan.

Edwardo Pérez was one of a handful of Padawans who managed to escape the Jedi Temple and survive Order 66. Giving up his Jedi ways (but not his green lightsaber) and settling down with a purple Twi'lek, Edwardo eventually began instructing English students in the ways of the rhetorical force, raising two broom-wielding, force-sensitive children in the Outer Rim, and practicing the Chindinkalu flute in case Max Rebo decides to get the band back together.

James Rocha, unable to locate a kyber crystal, gave up his dream of becoming a Sith Lord and instead turned to philosophy, which he teaches at Fresno State. For the past few years, he has practiced being a Mandalorian by never letting anyone see him without a mask, and he has also published three books: *The Ethics of Hooking Up* (2019), *Joss Whedon, Anarchist?* (co-written with Mona Rocha; 2019), and *Philosophical Reflections on Black Mirror* (co-edited with Dan Shaw and Kingsley Marshall; 2022).

Mona Rocha, unable to locate a kyber crystal, gave up her dream of becoming a Jedi, and instead turned to history and classics, which she teaches at Fresno State. In between putting together a protocol droid

from scrap parts, Mona spends her time writing on history, classics, and popular culture. Her latest books are *The Weatherwomen* (2020) and *Joss Whedon, Anarchist?* (co-written with James Rocha; 2019). She has also written book chapters and articles on TV shows, such as *Psych*, *Veronica Mars*, *Buffy*, *Angel*, *Grimm*, and *Supernatural*.

Mohammed Shakibnia is currently a graduate student in public policy at Oregon State University. He studied philosophy and political science in his undergraduate studies, growing to be an admirer of philosophical work aimed at creating a more socially just world. His interests include political and social philosophy, contemporary politics, and popular culture. When he isn't rewatching his favorite *Clone Wars* episodes in Jedi robes and with a purple lightsaber in hand, he's probably reading, playing soccer on the streets of Coruscant, or rearranging his *Star Wars* action figure collection.

Matthew Shea is an assistant professor of philosophy at Franciscan University of Steubenville. His research focuses on human flourishing, natural law and virtue ethics, and biomedical ethics. When teaching philosophy to young padawans, he uses as many *Star Wars* references as possible. One of the highlights of his life is meeting John Williams and being conducted by him while singing in the University Chorale at Boston College.

Corry Shores teaches philosophy at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey. He works primarily on Gilles Deleuze and phenomenology, at times in relation to film and painting. He recently authored the book *The Logic of Gilles Deleuze: Basic Principles*. Though he claims to be completely insensitive to the Force, his college poker buddies often accused him of winning by using Jedi mind tricks.

Patrick Tiernan is a doctoral candidate in education at Gwynedd Mercy University. While Bounty Hunter is not listed on his resume, he has been known to act like an outlaw while serving as Principal of St. Mary Magdalen School in Wilmington, Delaware. His two boys often require more supervision than watching Grogu scarf down rare frog eggs, and his wife is always there to remind him about "the Way" to do things around the house.

Dan Weijers researches well-being and the ethics of new technologies in his role as a senior lecturer in the Philosophy Programme at the University of Waikato in New Zealand. The Philosophy Programme at Waikato is a tight-knit team, an alliance if you will. Dan's role in the team is mainly comic relief, but unfortunately for Dan, and much like the infamous Jar Jar Binks, most of the comedy is about him rather than by him. Despite much bumbling, and again like Jar Jar, Dan has managed to achieve some successes as a philosopher, including authoring chapters in this volume and *Inception and Philosophy* from the same series (he argued that reality didn't matter!). The best example of his fortuitous bumbling must be accidentally putting "International" in the name of the journal he co-created, the *International Journal of Wellbeing*, which has attracted over one million article reads.

Eric Yang trains Padawans for a living, trying to remember that "we are what they grow beyond." Since the probability of getting something published is low, his approach to writing is the same as Han Solo's piloting: "Never tell me the odds!"

Introduction

“Boba Fett Riding a Rancor”

In 2005, when we published *Star Wars and Philosophy: More Powerful Than You Can Possibly Imagine*, the release of the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy was about to be concluded with *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*. Fan response as well as critics’ reviews were generally tepid. The best we could’ve hoped for was that George Lucas might redeem himself by completing the last three films in a planned nine-film arc that would come to be known as the “Skywalker Saga.”

At that time, we couldn’t have predicted that Disney would purchase the franchise from Lucasfilm in 2012 for \$4.05 billion in cash and stock. The next year, Disney announced an ambitious slate of stand-alone *Star Wars* films as well as hinting at a sequel trilogy. It also announced that the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe would be rebranded “Legends” and no longer be canon; only Lucas’s episodic films and television series *The Clone Wars* would be considered canon in addition to new works. For fans of Mara Jade, the Yuuzhan Vong, and Borsk Fey’lya, it was tantamount to literary genocide. Would Disney/Lucasfilm recreate the post-*Return of the Jedi* galaxy in an equally entertaining and philosophically interesting way?

Although *Star Wars* had become an integral part of American culture, we also couldn’t have predicted the extent to which it would become a touchpoint for controversy in the American culture wars of the early twenty-first century. Plenty of fans didn’t care for *The Force Awakens*, *The Last Jedi*, or *The Rise of Skywalker* for aesthetic, canonical, or personal reasons. Yet, sequel trilogy directors Rian Johnson and J. J. Abrams made precisely the right move in writing characters and casting actors and so declaring that women and people who hail from marginalized groups are part of grand narratives too. Using codes such as “keep politics out of entertainment” and projecting their own toxicity onto Lucasfilm and Disney, the reprehensibly anti-feminist, anti-diversity-casting “Fandom Menace” movement politicized the

films in a way surprising and distressing to OG fans like ourselves. Yet, the very fact that such a distasteful response occurred shows that, like other great sci-fi/fantasy narratives, *Star Wars* can hold a mirror up to our current culture and offer a poignant critique.

Finally, we wouldn't have guessed in 2005 that *Star Wars* could have been revived through its television presence. After all, prior to Gennady Tartakovsky's 2003 *Clone Wars* miniseries, *Star Wars* on TV existed as little more than formulaic children's programming, from the "intentionally lost canon" of *The Star Wars Holiday Special* in 1978 to the 1980s *Droids* and *Ewoks* animated series and live-action Ewok specials. The seven seasons of *The Clone Wars* that premiered on Cartoon Network in 2008, however, offered a serious and multi-layered set of story arcs for Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin Skywalker, Padmé Amidala, and their opponents. Further miniseries airing on the Disney+ streaming network, created and guided by Dave Filoni and Jon Favreau, have shown that it's still possible to "get *Star Wars* right" – that magical mix of humor, action, empathy, characterization, exciting quests, and fan service. On the premiere of *The Mandalorian*, one of us told his classes that it was the best *Star Wars* film to be released since *Return of the Jedi*. And yes, we finally got to see what must be the fantasy of so many franchise enthusiasts: Boba Fett riding a rancor!

This volume is a little different from our previous ones. We want to thank Marisa Koors, formerly an editor at Wiley-Blackwell, for her insistence that this book follow a chronological structure, beginning with topics from *Episode I* like "what does the ethics of the Force share with natural law theories of morality?" and moving forward in time through the original trilogy to a critical assessment of the value of friendship between Rey, Finn, and Poe in the sequel films. Because of this chronological structure, we've been able to include chapters that focus on philosophical topics in the animated series *Rebels* and *The Bad Batch*, stand-alone films *Rogue One* and *Solo*, and *The Mandalorian*. We've also been able to encourage our authors to reflect on how their topic fits into the history of the greater *Star Wars* universe. Sometimes, they delve into Legends material to make their claims, a move licensed by the argument of Roy T. Cook and Nathan Kellen in *The Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy: You Must Unlearn What You Have Learned*:

The conventions and practices that were shaped and encouraged by Lucasfilm themselves with regard to the canon/non-canon divide – in particular, the dynamic, negotiable, and participatory nature of this

distinction – throw some doubt onto whether or not Lucasfilm truly has the authority to unilaterally dictate which *Star Wars* stories, or versions of stories, fans should take to be “genuine” parts of the central story.

“*Star Wars* is, after all, about rebellion,” they add.¹

If you’re interested in the ways in which newer *Star Wars* narratives demonstrate the importance of ethnicity on alien worlds or how love and sex with a droid like L3-37 would work (“It works”), you’ll find answers within. If you’ve ever wondered if Count Dooku’s Separatist Freedom Movement has anything to say about the struggle for social justice in the USA in the twenty-first century, we’ve got you covered. The metaphysics of time and why we ought to maintain hope in dark times are both addressed in the coming pages. Our contributors even explore defenses of director Rian Johnson’s take on a defeatist Luke Skywalker and pose the question, “Should you eat Baby Yoda?”

As *Star Wars*’ “galaxy far, far away” continues to expand, so do the philosophical questions that inspired some of the brightest minds in our own galaxy. We invite you to join our Clan of Thirty-Seven. Sometimes the dark side makes it hard to see what other philosophical lessons *Star Wars* has yet to teach us, and yet here we are: This is the Way.

Note

- 1 Roy T. Cook and Nathan Kellen, “Gospel, Gossip, and Ghent: How Should We Understand the New *Star Wars*?” in Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker, eds., *The Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy: You Must Unlearn What You Have Learned*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 305–306.

Part I
EPISODES I-III

“Another Solution Will Present Itself”: *The Phantom Menace*, Daoism, and Doing without Trying

Russell P. Johnson

The Phantom Menace (TPM) is one of the most polarizing films in the *Star Wars* franchise. When it was first released in 1999, some fans claimed that it ruined their childhood. But for many fans since then, it's *been* their childhood. Ironically, Daoism – the philosophical religion that rejects controversy and division – has a lot to do with this controversial and divisive movie. If we watch this film with some classical Chinese philosophy in mind, the different narratives, themes, and characters start to make more sense. In short, the philosophy in TPM is to Daoism what Taco Bell is to Mexican food: TPM may not be most authentic example of Daoist philosophy, but it's got some of the same flavors.¹

“This Is the Way”

Classical Daoist thinking, found in texts like the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, says that everything we experience is always changing, often into its apparent opposite.² Day is always turning into night, and night is always turning into day. Cold weather becomes warm in the springtime, and warm weather turns cold in the fall (at least, this is how it works in China. On Hoth, the weather just tends to stay cold). There's a rhythm in the natural world – the sky produces water, which nourishes trees, which are then burned in fires, which send

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smoke back into the sky, and so on forever. When living things die, they become food for other living things, and so on forever. This constant flow from one state of being to another is the nature of all things. Nothing is permanent ... except for change.

This is true not just of the natural world, but also of the political one. Totalitarian, rigid empires tend to become overbearing, which causes rebellions and anarchy. Anarchy creates a power vacuum, which leads to new rulers (like the First Order) who become increasingly rigid in their use of power, and so on forever. In our own lives, too, we see this fluid, changing process. If you are calm and permissive, you let things happen that'll ultimately make you angry, yet expressing your anger ultimately calms you down. Everything flows into its apparent opposite; nothing is static and fixed for all time.

Apparent opposites also *depend* on one another. "Warm" means nothing without "cold." There's no such thing as being cold unless warmth also exists. If it were not for darkness, there could be no light. We would not be able to label anyone "tall" unless we are comparing them with other people who are "short." We could not recognize Chewbacca as "strong" unless we contrast him with someone who's "weak," like C-3PO. The distinctions we use to separate things into "good" and "bad," "hard" and "soft," "calm" and "angry," can make us forget that these apparent opposites depend on one another and are always turning into one another.

According to Daoism, there's a fundamental unity to all of reality that we forget when we try to separate what's valuable from what's worthless. We have the tendency to make sense of the world by privileging one side of a dichotomy over the other. Happy is better than sad, young is better than old, moral is better than immoral, smart is better than dumb, sharp is better than dull, fast is better than slow. After making these distinctions, we tend to find value only in one side and not the other: "I'm wealthy and not poor. I worked very hard to be wealthy and not poor. I'm proud of myself for being wealthy and not poor." By doing so, we forget that any one side in a dichotomy depends upon its apparent opposite, flows into its apparent opposite, and is part of a more fundamental unity. Wealth depends upon poverty and is always coming from and returning to poverty. To think otherwise is to be deluded.

A classic example is dirt and flowers. Flowers grow out of the dirt, and then they die and decompose and become dirt. In *The Last Jedi*, Rey gets a glimpse of this when she's meditating on Ahch-To: "Life. Death and decay, that feeds new life." For Daoists, the human

problem is basically that we want there to be flowers without dirt. We want to hold on to one thing at the expense of its apparent opposite, but that's impossible. Symbols like the well-known Taiji diagram (the "Yin/Yang" symbol that's emulated in the Jedi temple on Ahch-To) can help us remember the fundamental unity of all things and free us from our tendency to think in terms of stark opposites. Everything contains within itself the seed of its opposite, so apparent opposition is always misleading. In addition to those symbols, Daoist writings also feature many stories where someone who may seem useless ("another pathetic life-form") turns out to be successful, or something that seems to be worthless turns out to be invaluable. One classic example is a tree so gnarly and curved that it cannot be turned into planks for building. The tree grows to a great height and provides shade for the emperor, and it's able to do that precisely because of its worthlessness. As the *Daodejing* says, "The soft, the weak, prevail over the hard, the strong"³ – just as we see the tiny, primitive Ewoks help topple the technologically sophisticated and powerful Empire.

"A Symbiont Circle"

In *TPM*, there's similar emphasis on the inevitability of change and the tendency for opposites to depend on each other. In one scene, young Anakin Skywalker has just been freed and is saying goodbye to his mother, Shmi. He complains, "I don't want things to change," and Shmi responds, "But you cannot stop the change any more than you can stop the suns from setting." This sounds a lot like the *Zhuangzi*. Just as we cannot keep the sun (or suns) from setting, so all of our efforts to hold on to happiness, wealth, or reputation are ultimately going to fail. But since the sun has to set in order for there to be a new morning the next day, we too can let ourselves change without really suffering any loss.

TPM also features many examples of those who are apparently useless and worthless triumphing over those who have better training, technology, or skills. The "local boy" Anakin implausibly defeats Sebulba, who "always wins." The "young and naive" queen of Naboo drives out the powerful Trade Federation. The "little droid" R2-D2 restores power to the shield generator. The "primitive" Gungan militia holds their own against the vastly superior droid army. *TPM* emphasizes that we should not rely too much on our judgments of who is capable and who is not. The seemingly insignificant slave boy is in the

process of becoming a Jedi Knight, and the seemingly indestructible Droid Control Ship is in the process of becoming space dust.

Symbiosis is also a theme that runs through *TPM*. Two civilizations on the same planet – the Naboo and the Gungans – depend upon one another. As Obi-Wan Kenobi explains to Boss Nass, “You and the Naboo form a symbiont circle. What happens to one of you will affect the other.” Flowers depend on dirt which depends on flowers, light depends on dark which depends on light, cold depends on warm which depends on cold. The opposition between the Naboo and the Gungans only conceals their fundamental unity. Qui-Gon Jinn echoes this idea when teaching Anakin about midi-chlorians. He says that living beings and midi-chlorians are “symbionts ... life-forms living together for mutual advantage.” Mutual dependence, not opposition, is the natural order of the world.

Doing without Trying

If we agree with the Daoist picture of the natural order, what should we do about it? Do we just do nothing? Well, yes and no. Instead of striving to be rich, virtuous, or famous, the better way to live is to recognize the fluid nature of reality and act accordingly. This is the idea of “non-action,” or *wu wei* in Chinese.

If, when we act, we are striving to grasp one side of a dichotomy but not the other – to have flowers without dirt – we’ll constantly fail and be frustrated. The more we try to make things turn out the way we want them to, the more we’ll mess them up – just as Anakin’s turn to the dark side in order to save Padmé tragically results in her death. Striving to achieve one side of a dichotomy ironically drives one further into its opposite. The more a nation clings to security and pursues it at all costs, the more insecure and ultimately susceptible to fear and war it becomes. The more a parent tries to control a child, the more rebellious the child will become. The harder you concentrate and try to accomplish something, the more you’ll psych yourself out and become unable to do it. Daoists read history this way, too: one dynasty overreaches and tries to control too much or govern too strictly, and then that dynasty collapses, making room for the next dynasty – the Old Republic, out of fear and war, becomes the Empire, which later collapses and the New Republic is born, which then falls to the First Order until the last is defeated, not by a navy, but “just people.”⁴

If our actions align with the natural flow of reality, however, we'll be able to succeed without really having to do anything: the person who moves fastest down the river is not who swims the hardest but who positions themselves so they are carried along by the current. Daoist sages (*zhenren*) give up anxiously trying to make things turn out how they want them to be; instead they let their actions be governed by the same fundamental unity that governs the constant flow of change in the natural world, the social world, and the emotional world.

The *Daodejing* says, "Act on things, and you will ruin them. Grasp for things, and you'll lose them. Therefore the sage acts with non-action and has no ruin. Lets go of grasping and has no loss."⁵ The way to gain power and long life and peace is paradoxically by *not* trying to achieve them. Acting organically instead of intentionally, you can live in the moment rather than using all of your energy to try fruitlessly to bring about a specific future. So, if you had to give a one-sentence summary of Daoism, you could do a lot worse than, "Do or do not. There is no try."

"Concentrate on the Moment"

TPM is filled with characters who are not living in the moment but are focused on the future. More specifically, it's filled with people making predictions that turn out to be wrong.

The Jedi assume the trade negotiations will go smoothly. They are right, but not in the way they expect. The Trade Federation leaders assume the Jedi will be no match for their destroyer droids. They are wrong. Jar Jar predicts that the bosses will do terrible things to him. That does not happen. Amidala thinks the Senate will side with her. They will not. Nute Gunray thinks Amidala will be easy to control. Wrong. Palpatine says that the Jedi will be no match for Darth Maul. Half-true. Watto says he knows Sebulba's going to win. He does not. Captain Panaka thinks this is a battle they cannot win. They do. I could go on, but you get the idea. Every story involves characters not knowing what's going to happen – this creates dramatic tension and is art being true to life. But more than most movies, *TPM*'s characters keep thinking they know what's going to happen, keep trying to make things happen, and keep misjudging the future. One theme in *TPM* is that predictions and assumptions are, in general, best avoided, which connects with the

Daoist emphasis on existing in the moment rather than trying to discern the future and make it turn out the way you want it to. To be empty and open to what happens is wiser than being fixated on your expectations, assumptions, and plans.

Daoism emphasizes that success comes most often through a complex set of factors too multifarious to comprehend or even take into consideration. It's not that you should not want good things to happen, but rather that the act of *trying* to bring about your understanding of a good future is as likely to bring misery as to bring happiness. Good outcomes are often unplanned and spontaneous, and we should be open to what happens rather than focusing our energy on trying to make something happen. Daoist stories depict apparent chance bringing about good fortune – people finding something exactly when they were not looking for it or folks saving the day exactly when they stopped trying to play the hero. These stories remind readers that human beings aren't great at making events turn out how they want them to, but this is no reason to despair.

One Daoist parable is about a drunk man who falls from a horse and is not injured. He does not tense his body up to brace himself for the impact, he just literally rolls with it, and his relaxed muscles and joints do not get injured (a trick pro wrestlers use). The implied lesson is that if you stay flexible and roll with things as they happen, you'll be better able to live in the world than if you always think about what you are doing and whether it's working or not. (The story, by the way, is not endorsing drunken horse-riding. Or at least, I'm not endorsing drunken horse-riding. You should always have a designated driver, or at the very least, a sober horse.)

Qui-Gon exemplifies this tendency to stay in the moment and trust in the flow of reality. In some ways, Qui-Gon's actions and non-actions resemble those of a Daoist sage. In fact, the name "Qui-Gon" is likely derived from *qigong*, a set of Chinese practices for aligning the energies of one's mind and body with the natural order. Qui-Gon tells Anakin, "Remember, concentrate on the moment. Feel, do not think. Use your instincts." As the prequel trilogy goes on, we see to what degree Anakin fails to follow this advice.

Everyone else in *TPM* is stressed and worried about things, but not Qui-Gon. So you are being eaten by a fish? Do nothing: "There's always a bigger fish." Jar Jar asks, "Where weesa goin'?" Qui-Gon responds, "Do not worry. The Force will guide us." Their bongo starts to lose power, and Jar Jar exclaims, "Wesa dyin' here!" Another wrong prediction. Qui-Gon calmly replies, "Just relax. We're not in trouble yet."