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— THE —
ULTIMATE

**STAR
WARS**
AND PHILOSOPHY

YOU MUST UNLEARN
WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

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THE ULTIMATE STAR WARS AND PHILOSOPHY

**YOU MUST UNLEARN WHAT
YOU HAVE LEARNED**

**Edited by
Jason T. Eberl
and
Kevin S. Decker**

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Acknowledgments

Legacy of the Force

The *Star Wars* saga has inspired us to explore questions of metaphysics, morality, politics, and the seven forms of lightsaber combat, from our earliest years as younglings, through our apprenticeship as padawan philosophers, to becoming Socratic Knights and, perhaps one day, Masters of Reason – and hopefully not Dark Lords of any sort! For this tremendous influence on our intellectual formation, we owe an incalculable debt of gratitude to Grand Master George Lucas and all of his creative collaborators, as well as the authors and artists who’ve expanded the saga from the *Dawn of the Jedi* more than 36,000 years before the Battle of Yavin (BBY) through the continuing *Legacy* of the Skywalker family over 130 years after the Battle of Yavin (ABY).

They say it takes an Ewok village to destroy a Death Star, but it takes much more to assemble a book like this. First of all, this book wouldn’t exist without the contributions of the authors, and we recommend that their wisdom should be preserved in a Holocron for future generations. Tackling a Death Star also requires leadership of the likes of Admiral Ackbar or General Crix Madine. In our case, we benefited extensively from the experience of editorial Grand Moff Bill Irwin. It’s also essential to have some Bothan spies who can smuggle out the Death Star plans. For this project, we depended on the “insiders” at John Wiley & Sons, Liam Cooper and Allison Kostka, to guide us to our target.

Our widows to *Star Wars*, Suzanne and Jennifer, have patiently endured years of our debating the taxation of trade routes in the Outer

Rim territories, the romantic wooing skills of future Sith Lords, what sort of crystal powers a purple lightsaber, why AT-ATs don't explode when they're standing but do after they're brought down, and whether the Sarlaac looks better with or without its beak. Finally, passing on the *Star Wars* legacy to our children, Kennedy, Ethan, Jack, and August, has been a source of tremendous joy for us as we engaged in mock lightsaber duels and taught them the crucial importance of remembering that HAN SHOT FIRST!

Introduction

“The Circle Is Now Complete”

Star Wars has always inspired probing questions:

January 31, 1997: Lucasfilm/20th Century Fox releases the “Special Edition” of *Episode IV: A New Hope*, igniting a firestorm of controversy over the question, “Who shot first – Han or Greedo?”

May 19, 1999: Lucasfilm/20th Century Fox releases *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, creating deep public concern centered on the question, “Why is Jar Jar even in this movie?”

May 19, 2005: Lucasfilm/20th Century Fox releases *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* with its implied violent deaths of younglings and Anakin’s gory immolation scene, raising the question in the minds of parents, “Is *Star Wars* still for kids?”

April 25, 2014: StarWars.com announces that the “Expanded Universe” of *Star Wars* outside of the films, radio, and television series is noncanonical, inviting dozens of novel and comic writers to ask the question, “What did I ever do to George?”

November 28, 2014: Lucasfilm releases the trailer for *Episode VII: The Force Awakens*, prompting aspiring Jedi Knights to question, “Does lightsaber design adhere to *any* safety standards?”

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Beyond fan speculation, and sometimes fan angst, *Star Wars* has also inspired philosophical questions. Here are some examples (in the order Lucas intended):

Episode I: Does having a “destiny” foretold by prophecy rob a person of freedom?

Episode II: How does fear motivate the transformation of democracy into tyranny?

Episode III: Is the difference between good and evil merely a “point of view”?

Episode IV: Is wisdom truly a matter of trusting one’s feelings?

Episode V: Do we all have a “dark side” that we must confront within ourselves?

Episode VI: Is it possible to redeem a life spent causing so much evil and suffering?

Episode VII: Is having a beard essential to being a Jedi Master?

Clearly, much of the world has by now got *Star Wars* under its skin. The cultural significance of phrases like “Luke, I am your father,” “I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” and “Do or do not, there is no try” aren’t merely pop culture clichés. They’ve penetrated academia, and there are hundreds of scholarly articles and books examining the deeper meaning of George Lucas’s fantastical creation. One of these, *Star Wars and Philosophy: More Powerful than You Can Possibly Imagine* (Open Court, 2005), was put together by the valiant editors of the volume you’re currently reading and came to Lucas’s attention. This may have inspired him to ask a question of his own: “What other deep cultural connections could be made with *Star Wars*?” In turn, this question led him to commission a series of books relating themes in *Star Wars* with history, political science, and religion. In 2007, The History Channel premiered a documentary, *Star Wars: The Legacy Revealed*, which included interviews with scholars commenting on the saga’s historical and mythological roots and connections. As much as *Star Wars* presents us with thoughtful examples of philosophical Stoicism (with the Jedi’s calm detachment even when being chased by large gooberfish), or raises questions about the mysterious Force (is it an energy field or a bunch of midi-chlorians?) or the power of both hate and forgiveness (as the Emperor and Luke battle for Vader’s soul),

it also urges us to understand our own historical, religious, and political circumstances. *Star Wars* endures because we see ourselves in its myriad facets.

Of course, a lot has happened since the original *Star Wars and Philosophy* was published just before the release of *Episode III*, not the least of which are the excitement and enthusiasm generated by the knowledge that director J.J. Abrams is kicking off a new trilogy of films set some years after *Episode VI*, and that there are likely to be other films (a Boba Fett spinoff?) as well. As philosophers, the contributors of the various essays in the pages that follow can't speculate on the deeper meaning of what's yet to come. Indeed, as the German thinker G.W.F. Hegel claimed, philosophy only captures *its own time* in thought – so maybe this won't be the “ultimate” volume on *Star Wars* and philosophy after the next trilogy is over! Still, the brilliant chapters you're about to read contribute in novel ways to the critical appreciation of the *Star Wars* saga so far for fans and philosophers alike.

We've been able to delve into subjects that the original *Star Wars and Philosophy* missed, subjects prompted by not only the six feature films to date but also the *Clone Wars* television series and stories from the Expanded Universe. This book also includes new takes on familiar topics like the nature of the Force – does it *have* to have a dark side? – and whether the minds of droids are similar to our own. Feminist authors critically look at how women are portrayed (in elaborate headgear or in gold bikinis) and treated (choked by their husband or chained to a giant slug) in the films. There's even a chapter on Boba Fett, our favorite bounty hunter, and his moral code (or lack thereof). Ties of family and friendship are important in the *Star Wars* galaxy, so several philosophers examine the moral psychology behind the relationships between characters from slaves to princesses. One chapter even answers the age-old question, “Can Chewie speak?”

We also examine the philosophical significance behind the impact of *Star Wars* on the real world as an important artifact of pop culture. Kevin Smith's charge – voiced by slacker Randal in the film *Clerks* – that the Rebellion is actually a terrorist organization comes up for debate. Other chapters engage with the legacy of Joseph Campbell to examine the dark side of the saga's mythological foundation, or offer a framework for understanding what's “canonical” in *Star Wars* – giving fans good reason to assert once and for all that Han shot first.

It turns out that the philosophical questions that inspired us to collect some of the brightest minds in the galaxy in *Star Wars and Philosophy* were only the beginning. With the volume you hold in your hands, the circle is now complete, and those who were once learners may start on the path toward becoming philosophical masters. May the Force be with you!

Episode I
THE PHILOSOPHICAL
MENACE

The Platonic Paradox of Darth Plagueis: How Could a Sith Lord Be Wise?

Terrance MacMullan

“Did you ever hear the tragedy of Darth Plagueis the Wise?” When Anakin’s friend and mentor Chancellor Palpatine casually asks him this question as they enjoy a Mon Calamari ballet on Coruscant, you can almost hear Anakin wonder to himself, “How could a *Sith* be *wise*?” Believed extinct for a thousand years, the Sith had a terrifying reputation as malicious agents of irrepressible evil. From a certain point of view, particularly that of a Jedi, the idea of a *wise Sith* is quite odd, if not outright impossible.

Another sage who would’ve been confounded by the idea of a wise Sith was Plato of Athens (429–347 BCE). As a Sith, Plagueis was a devotee of the Dark Side of the Force, which grants enormous powers to those brave enough to become living conduits for passions like hatred and anger. Such a person would be the exact opposite of what Plato would call “wise.” For Plato, wisdom is a virtue that is inextricably bound to humility and justice: it is found in the soul of the person who has learned to subdue their spirit and appetite through the exercise of reason. “Plagueis the Wise Lord of the Sith” therefore would present an insurmountable paradox to Plato: if Plagueis is a master of using, rather than calming, his spirit and indulging his appetites, how could he possibly be wise? How is it that he was able to live for well over a century without suffering the self-destruction that Plato foresees for anyone who does not rein in spirit and appetite?

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This paradox opens horizons for reflection on the themes of ethics, wisdom, and freedom. It also raises the possibility that Plato's ideal of wisdom is too narrow, and that a different philosophy of life might better explain the existence of a wise Dark Lord of the Sith.

Respect for the Difference between Knowledge and Wisdom

No philosopher is more tightly linked with wisdom than Plato. Indeed, when we think of *philosophy* as meaning “the love of wisdom” (*philo* means “love of,” and *sophia* is usually translated as “wisdom”), where wisdom is the virtue associated with rationality, moderation, and moral goodness, we are in fact using a definition developed by Plato. Like most philosophers of the ancient world, Plato distinguished knowledge (or *gnosis* in Greek) from wisdom. Knowledge is the straightforward matter of experienced information about the world: once Han Solo gets close enough to a mysterious, large object in space and registers the effect of a tractor beam, he *knows* that the Death Star is no moon. However, wisdom is a subtler thing: on board the *Millennium Falcon*, Obi-Wan doesn't know what the thing is either, but he's wise enough to exhort Han to turn the Falcon around before they're seized by a tractor beam. Plato quotes his master Socrates in the *Apology* as saying that “the wisest of you ... is he who has realized ... that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless.”¹ This ideal of wisdom rests on the virtue of humility: in the face of a universe of immense possibilities, the wisdom of a mortal creature is worth little or nothing. This is why Plato would have approved of Dexter Jettster's gentle scolding of Obi-Wan in *Attack of the Clones*: it was unwise to think that the knowledge contained in the Jedi Archives could ever be totally comprehensive. Unlike Jedi archivist Jocasta Nu, who somewhat proudly proclaims, “If an item does not appear in our records, it does not exist,” a truly wise Jedi would know she could not know all there is to know!

Before Plato, *sophia* had very different meanings. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) tells us that *sophia*, in its original sense, meant something like discerning taste.² So the original lovers of *sophia* were people who had cultivated a nuanced appreciation for the finer things, perhaps like the suave scoundrel Lando Calrissian, who – despite his

Bespin mining installation being infested by Imperial forces ready to abduct his friends – can't help but pause and admire Leia's beauty! During the time of Socrates and Plato, the word *sophia* had evolved to carry a grittier connotation, close to something like practical "know-how."³ In this second sense, the canny and resourceful Han Solo, not Yoda, would be the wisest philosopher.

The philosophical rivals of Plato and Socrates, the Sophists, were teachers of rhetoric and masters of persuasion, adept at swaying the masses. Sophists rejected the idea that there were universal standards for things like Justice, Truth, and Beauty, arguing instead that these ideals vary greatly, depending on one's point of view. One of these Sophists, Thrasymachus, was an intimidating thinker who would've been admired by the Sith. His arguments with Socrates and Plato also give us a clear sense of why Plato would find Plagueis paradoxical. Where Plato believed that there's no way to understand justice apart from wisdom, Thrasymachus argued that there was no way to understand justice apart from *power*. Where Socrates and his philosophical friends struggle to find an all-encompassing definition of *justice*, Thrasymachus cuts through their debate by asserting forcefully that "the just is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger."⁴

This is *precisely* the worldview of the Sith, for whom talk of right without might is a childish fairytale and the wise man who thinks he can somehow transcend the vagaries of power is a fool. We see the Sith follow Thrasymachus's teaching during the siege of Naboo in *The Phantom Menace* when Darth Sidious orders Nute Gunray to commence the Trade Federation's invasion. Expressing more concern for his own wrinkled hide than any actual ethical principles, Gunray timidly asks Sidious, "Is that legal?" Sidious hisses a reply that would've made Thrasymachus smile: "I will *make* it legal." Sidious knows that the law is just a tool waiting to be used by anyone wise enough to see that there is no justice beyond power, and that enough power can make anything just. In *Revenge of the Sith*, when Palpatine is revealed to be Sidious and is confronted by Mace Windu, who tells him, "The Senate will decide your fate," Sidious exclaims, "I *am* the Senate!" Sidious learned this philosophy of life from his master, Darth Plagueis, who long before the invasion of Naboo taught him that the Sith will triumph over the Jedi because "[t]he Sith are not placid stars but singularities. Rather than burn with a muted purpose, we warp space and time to twist the galaxy to our own design."⁵

Plato opposed this cynical view that might makes right. He knew that Athens had transformed, from an admired city-state that had bravely turned back the massive invading forces of the Persian Empire at the battles of Salamis and Platea, into yet another despised empire that was shattered by the Spartans during the Peloponnesian War. This occurred because the Athenians were swayed to the “Dark Side” teachings of the Sophists, convincing themselves that the powerful doing as they will is not injustice, but rather “a necessary law of their nature [that] they rule wherever they can.”⁶ Plato argued that this idea ultimately destroys whomever follows it, whether an individual or an entire city-state. Instead of a notion of justice as “might makes right,” Plato sought a definition of justice that doesn’t rest merely on power, but ultimately on wisdom.

“Unlimited Power!”

Plato would have admired the Code of the Jedi that brought millennia of peace and prosperity to the Galactic Republic after the Battle of Ruusan:

*There is no emotion; there is peace.
There is no ignorance; there is knowledge.
There is no passion; there is serenity.
There is no death; there is the Force.*

Consider now the Sith Code as taught by Darth Bane:

*Peace is a lie, there is only passion.
Through passion, I gain strength.
Through strength, I gain power.
Through power, I gain victory.
Through victory, my chains are broken.
The Force shall free me.*

Where the Jedi seek peace through mindfulness and control of their feelings, the Sith hope to *use* passion, power, and strength for the ultimate goal of freedom. As Plagueis explains the difference, “Remember why the Sith are more powerful than the Jedi, Sidious: because we are

not afraid to feel.”⁷ The Sith want to be free from convention, morality, government, law, and ultimately even the limits of the Force itself. This sort of freedom is what philosophers refer to as *negative freedom* because it is freedom *from* control, a freedom that says, “Don’t limit me!”⁸ But Plato teaches that no wise person should ever walk this path, as it is ultimately self-destructive. The truly wise see that this sort of freedom is not liberation: it is its own cage.

Plato asks us to imagine that our soul has three parts: the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive. When we are in balance, reason rules over the other two parts of the soul. Such a balanced person has the virtue of justice because they function the way they should: every part of the soul performs its proper function. Just as the eye is meant to see and the hand is meant to grasp, reason is meant to lead and everything else is meant to follow. A wise person is one whose reason rules their soul and is practiced at making good judgments. We should be suspicious of the freedom that the Sith long for, Plato argues, because “there exists in every one of us ... a terrible, fierce and lawless brood of desires, which it seems are revealed in our sleep.”⁹ Instead, the wise person must find a balance in which he satisfies his *necessary* desires – such as the desires for food, sleep, and sex. In short, the ethically good person *is* the wise person for Plato. Once he truly knows the good, he always at least *tries* to do good. This leads to a startling conclusion: for the wise person, *conscious acts of evil are impossible*.

Moving from the small canvas of the individual to the larger canvas of the state, Plato says that the just state is one guided by the truth that “each one man must perform one social service in the state for which his nature was best adapted.”¹⁰ In the case of a person’s soul, the rational part of the soul enlists the help of the spirit, or willpower, in controlling and subduing the passions. This allows us to live good and ethical lives – genuinely free lives – where our reason guides us through “a life of significance, of conscience,” the kind of life that Sidious knows Anakin seeks to live. Similarly, a just *state* is one in which the naturally wise rule while everyone else fulfills his or her individual function.

When we succumb to the notion that freedom means indulging our appetites or spirit as the Sith do, then our corrupted soul becomes our own inescapable prison. The freedom sought by the Sith *should* be its own worst punishment for Plato. The Sith, by hoping to use appetite and spirit as means to freedom, are in fact forging their own bonds of slavery. Their quest for unlimited power leads inevitably to

their spirit and appetite having power over them. And yet, this does not happen to Plagueis.

Darth Plagueis the Wise

To be sure, Plato's theory *is* plausible, given many tales of the Sith and others seduced to the Dark Side. The Dark Jedi Maw, for example, was a Boltrunian Jedi who gave into his selfish inclinations and became a grotesque and deformed vessel of pure, seething hatred.¹¹ Most famously, Anakin Skywalker, despite his exceptional connection to the Force, was never able to fully control his fear – first for his dear mother Shmi, who was tortured and killed by Tusken Raiders, and later for his beloved Padmé after having a premonition of her death in childbirth. Darth Sidious deftly exploited Anakin's passionate attachment to Padmé, using it to lure him to the Dark Side. The result was that Anakin suffered the last two decades of his existence as a twisted monster: a single, living, burning wound of passion encased within a dark prison of wires and armor plates.

However, the wisest of all Sith avoided these fates. Plagueis is undeniably evil from the point of view of Plato and the Jedi. He sacrifices others in service of his ambition to visit vengeance on the Jedi and conquer the galaxy for the Sith. He does not hesitate to put his will, rather than his reason, in charge of his Muunian soul. He does not seek peace by subduing his spirit and appetite: he fans them like the flames of a forge in which he crafts his ambitions. However, none of the other qualities that Plato associates with evil apply to him. He is capable of great violence and brutality, but yet is fully able to restrain himself when the time is right. He is a calm and careful scientist – even if a morally repugnant one – who experiments on living creatures in order to learn as much as he can about the Force. His plot to take over the Munn financial empire of Damask Holdings unfolds over decades, just as his plan to murder his own master, Darth Tenebrous, took a human's lifetime to come to fruition. Indeed, his connection to the Force is so great that many believe it was his manipulation of the Force that created Anakin, the Chosen One. Instead of descending into the madness and corruption that Plato and the Jedi foresaw for anyone who deviates from their path, Plagueis held his own steady course for decades toward the most ambitious vision of all. He did

not merely want to crush the Jedi and bring the galaxy to heel: as he told his droid One One-Four Dee, his goal was nothing less than “to extend my life indefinitely. To conquer death.”¹² This wise Sith Lord was a Platonic paradox: a restrained, patient, and rational being who used violence, passion, and lies in his quest for power.

More disturbing to Plato than the mere existence of an evil yet wise being would be the fact that Darth Plagueis mostly *shares* Plato’s vision. In the *Republic*, Plato describes a just city-state as an analogy for the ethical soul. In both cases, the rational element works with the spirited element, and together they

will preside over the appetitive part which is the mass of the soul in each of us and the most insatiate by nature of wealth. They will keep watch upon it, lest, by being filled and infected with the so-called pleasures associated with the body and so waxing big and strong, it may not keep to its own work but may undertake to enslave and rule over the classes which it is not fitting that it should, and so overturn the entire life of all.¹³

Plato’s concern that reason rule over spirit and appetite is *precisely* Plagueis’s motivation for destroying the Jedi and conquering the universe on behalf of the Sith. He hopes to call forth

a scouring storm that would lay waste to everything antiquated and corrupt, and pave the way for a new order in which the Sith would be returned to their rightful place as the stewards of the galaxy, and before whom all the diverse species would bow, not only in obeisance and fear, but in gratitude for having been drawn back from the brink.¹⁴

Plato and Plagueis agree that the average ignorant citizen is too foolish to accept his own inability to govern himself, and so wise rulers must rely on deception in order to protect the masses from themselves. Plato calls this opportune falsehood “the noble lie.”¹⁵ Similarly, the Sith use deception to trick the Republic into giving the Sith the power they need in order to finally protect the lesser beings from their own craven instincts, and bring peace and order to the galaxy. Finally, Plato argues that members of the proper city should practice selective breeding, matching wise with wise, strong with strong, in order to produce the best rulers and guardians for the city.¹⁶ Likewise, Darth Plagueis the

Wise was the fruit of selective breeding: his master Darth Tenebrous paired Plagueis's Force-sensitive father Caar Damask with a Force-sensitive female Muun in order to maximize the chances that their offspring would be worthy of Sith training.¹⁷ Plagueis himself carried on this eugenic legacy in using the Force to influence the midi-chlorians to create life.

So what are we to make of this? Perhaps Plagueis is not really *evil*: it might be that the sentients of the galaxy are so prone to disorder and self-destruction – just look at the dysfunctional Galactic Senate in *The Phantom Menace* – that only the Sith's dreadful medicine is strong enough to cure the malady of ignorance. If true, then the Jedi are merely prolonging a terminal illness by defending the Galactic Republic. On the other hand, perhaps Plagueis is not really *wise*: it might be that, no matter how patient, a creature driven by such self-centered ambition and so void of ethical principles is at best lucky and would never be suited to rule the galaxy fairly, as Plato envisions the rulers of his ideal republic doing. Perhaps Plagueis's own spirit and appetite would have devoured him in time if his apprentice hadn't consumed him first in a storm of Sith lightning while he slept. But perhaps Plato was simply wrong about wisdom, freedom, and justice, and we'd make better sense of Plagueis's contradictions and paradoxical nature by looking at him through the lens of a philosopher who, like Plagueis, scoffed at the Jedi-like ideals propounded by Plato. Friedrich Nietzsche can help us understand why Plagueis rejected the view of wisdom, justice, and freedom advocated by Plato without succumbing to the beast of his own spirit and appetite. Nietzsche looked on Plato with the same revulsion and contempt that the Sith demonstrated as they watched the Jedi slowly lose their connection to the Force and to life itself; the Sith scorned them for failing to understand the nature of freedom and the meaning of life.

The Wisdom of Seeking a Life of Great Significance

Consider now the Code of the Anti-Christ as taught by Nietzsche:

What is good?

All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself, in man.

What is evil?

Whatever springs from weakness.

What is happiness?

The feeling that power increases – that resistance is overcome.¹⁸

One of the strongest affinities between Nietzsche and the Sith is that he challenges a supposedly benevolent philosophy that has duped everyone into thinking that its notion of value is the *only* notion of value. Just as the Sith hoped to pierce the Jedi's pretensions to selflessness, benevolence, and justice, Nietzsche aimed to expose the rotten truth about Socrates, Plato, and even Jesus of Nazareth. Nietzsche feared that the philosophies of these men had weakened civilization and made it decadent. They were perspectives that did not encourage vitality or bravery, but servility and obedience. They were *slave moralities* that preached "the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good ... and you, the powerful and noble[,] are on the contrary evil."¹⁹ Instead, Nietzsche called on the rare, brave few to recover *true* morality, the ancient *master morality* that rejoiced in life, power, and vitality. Where the slave calls "good" those values that are useful for him, the master calls "good" those things that are in and of him and even his enemies if they be noble! The goodness of the noble is marked by "indifference to and contempt for security, body, life, comfort, their hair-raising cheerfulness and profound joy in all destruction, in all the voluptuousness of victory and cruelty."²⁰

Nietzsche hoped we might replace the decadent morality with the moralities of ancient warrior castes, and the Sith also sought to walk away from the Jedi path that placidly pleads for the assistance of the Force (humbly wishing, "May the Force be with you"). Instead, the Sith would boldly stride the galaxy-spanning hyperspace lanes of the Rakata who built the galaxy's first great empire – the fabled Infinite Empire – by bending the Force to their will and, with it, countless star systems.²¹ Whereas the Jedi often live lives with all the variety and excitement of Tatooine's Great Dune Sea, the Sith often seem to really enjoy life! What possible better image of "hair-raising cheerfulness and profound joy in all destruction" could there be than Darth Sidious cackling as he hurls gigantic senatorial pods at Yoda during their climactic battle in *Revenge of the Sith*?

The Jedi, like Plato, sought peaceful lives by restraining their spirit and appetite and by resisting the temptation to use their power needlessly. Nietzsche laments this error, and even more he regrets that

Plato's seductive charm led so many to follow his errant creed. Instead, it sounds like he is speaking words of encouragement to the Sith when he asks,

[D]o you want a *name* for this world? A solution for all its riddles? A light for you, too, you best concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men? – This *world is the will to power – and nothing else besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides!²²

Plagueis makes exactly the same point as he instructs Sidious on the essential difference between the Jedi and the Sith. He explains that the Sith follow the paths blazed by the first Force-users, the Rakata, who

didn't pronounce judgment on their works. They moved planets, organized star systems, conjured dark side devices like the Star Forge as they saw fit. If millions died in the process, so be it. The lives of most beings are of small consequence. The Jedi have failed to understand this. They are too busy saving lives and striving to keep the powers of the Force in balance that they have lost sight of the fact that sentient life is meant to evolve, not simply languish in contented stasis.²³

Where the Jedi and Plato taught that peace is our highest purpose in life, Nietzsche and the Sith counter that the peace they seek is natural only in the grave, and that life does not seek peace, but *power*. The Sith crave power to be free of any and all limits, even the ultimate limit of death.

In his allegorical masterpiece, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche included a chapter entitled "On the Despisers of the Body," in which the hero Zarathustra takes to task the decrepit philosophy that places spirit above the body. We could easily imagine him chiding Yoda for teaching Luke to despise his own body by teaching that "luminous beings are we, not this crude matter." Rejecting the age-old ideas that the "crude" body corrupts the "luminous" soul and that the wise person, conversely, is the one whose soul conquers their body, Zarathustra teaches, "There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom. And who knows why your body needs precisely your best wisdom?"²⁴ The living body is the source of true wisdom, and more than anything it seeks power to live! Nietzsche believes that the brave person doesn't need the fairy tale about the eternal soul: once they accept the truth about the will to power, they will live for the

sake of life – *real* life – and not fear the pain required to live a life of great significance.

The Jedi observe the death of the body calmly – perhaps a little *too* calmly – just as Socrates shows an eerie calm at dying needlessly for a crime he did not commit.²⁵ Yoda tries to keep Anakin within his Jedi flock by teaching him, after his premonition of Padmé’s death, “Death is a natural part of life. Rejoice for those around you who transform into the Force. Mourn them do not. Miss them do not.” The Jedi, like Plato and his master Socrates, seem to almost welcome the eternal peace of being free of the body. The Sith, on the other hand, cherish the body and seek ways to preserve it, strengthen it, even enable it to transcend death altogether. While some, like the Jedi, would call this power “unnatural,” the Sith, along with Nietzsche, would smile and ask in return, What could possibly be *more natural* than wanting to live? What is more natural, for young Anakin to serenely accept the death of his mother or to satisfy his visceral urge for vengeance? What is more natural, for Anakin to sit idly by as his love faces death alone or *do anything within his power to keep her alive*? The Sith and Nietzsche argue that the Jedi and Plato have it exactly backwards: the natural philosophy is the philosophy that cherishes life, and the unnatural one is the one that slips calmly into death. As Nietzsche puts it, “All naturalism in morality, that is all *healthy* morality, is dominated by an instinct of life.”²⁶ Plagueis was then the most moral and natural of all, for he focused, without apology, on the instinct of life by seeking to unlock the secret of an eternal existence.

The Force beyond Light and Dark

Yoda would be Plato’s philosopher-of-choice from the *Star Wars* universe, as Yoda completely agrees with his view that the soul is the true source of wisdom, and that loving wisdom leads one to look beyond bodily life. Nietzsche would undeniably pick Plagueis and cheer him on in his quest for life everlasting in the physical realm. Let him be called evil, Nietzsche might say, for great men are always called evil by those who envy them. When the Jedi condemn the Sith for being evil, it is like when lambs complain, “These birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey ... would he not be good?”²⁷ The Sith, for their part, feel no need to call the Jedi names or bleat about their faults. Instead, like the birds of prey, they

“might view it a little ironically and say: ‘we don’t dislike them at all, these good little lambs; we even love them: there is nothing more tasty than a tender lamb.’”²⁸ Let the Sith be despised and reviled and misunderstood in the darkness, for “[h]e shall be the greatest who can be the loneliest, the most hidden, the most deviating, the human being beyond good and evil, the master of his virtues, he that is overrich in will. Precisely this should be called *greatness*.”²⁹

Nietzsche offers a liberating wisdom in a verse worthy of preservation within even the rarest of Sith holocrons:

The overcoming of morality, in a certain sense even the self-overcoming of morality – let this be the name for that long secret work which has been saved up for the finest and most honest, also the most malicious, consciences of today, as living touchstones of the soul.³⁰

Not long before his wise and long life would come to an end at the hands of his apprentice Sidious, Darth Plagueis personally visited his vengeance on Ars Veruna – the corrupt and shameful ex-king of Naboo – for daring to assault his hidden lair on Sojourn. Having recently commanded a control over the Force that no known being had ever achieved, Plagueis killed his one-time ally by simply instructing his midi-chlorians to “return to their source.” Veruna gasped an insult at Plagueis, saying he was no better than the dreaded Anzati brain-eaters. Plagueis replies, not by defending his actions in terms of conventional morality, but by asking, “What does *better than* mean to those of us who have passed beyond notions of good and evil?”³¹ Plato and the Jedi give us a formula for how to be wise, and therefore good. Nietzsche and the Sith do not see themselves as *opposing* the teachings of their moralizing counterparts: they *transcend them*. They do not stand for evil that foils their good: they represent the hope that the truly great soul might live *beyond good and evil*.

Notes

1. Plato, *Socrates’ Defense (Apology)*, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, trans. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 9 (23b).
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, trans. Greg Whitlock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 8.