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— THE —
ULTIMATE

**STAR
WARS**
AND PHILOSOPHY

YOU MUST UNLEARN
WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

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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

WILEY Blackwell

This edition first published 2016
© 2016 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex,
PO19 8SQ, UK

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The ultimate Star Wars and philosophy : you must unlearn what you have learned / Edited by Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker.

pages cm - (Blackwell philosophy and popculture series)

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-119-03806-1 (pbk.)

1. Star Wars films. 2. Philosophy in motion pictures. 3. Philosophy in

literature. I. Eberl, Jason T., editor. II. Decker, Kevin S., editor. III. Series:
Blackwell philosophy and popculture series.

PN1995.9.S695U46 2015

791.4375-dc23

2015012933

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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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

wooning 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?”

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

1

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? 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 Bespinn 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