

Star Wars Final Essay

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Implications of a Dualistic Force in the Star Wars Prequel Trilogy

George Lucas once said during an interview in 1994 that “Star Wars is a saga of Good vs. Evil, divided into nine parts.” This simplistic assessment of Star Wars is typically characteristic of a George Lucas quote, but in this case, I think he is largely right. Throughout the arc of the Star Wars saga, the dualistic conflict of good vs. evil manifests itself in many forms. Some obvious examples are Luke (good) vs Vader (evil), more generally the Jedi (good) vs the Sith (evil), the Rebellion (good) vs the Empire (evil), Republic (good) vs Trade Federation/Separatists (evil), I could go on. Naturally, as we are in a Star Wars universe, central to each of these conflicts is the Force, which itself is often described in similar dualistic terms: i.e. the dark and the light sides of the Force.

The idea of a dualistic light and dark side has been corroborated by many scholarly critics of the Star Wars saga as well as George Lucas himself. Speaking on the morality of Star Wars, Dees says “Star Wars has two colors: black and white”. Lucas said in an interview that he tried to express the Taoist notion of yin and yang, “a push and a pull”, in the Star Wars movies. In this essay, I will analyze the dualistic Force as a Jedi construct and its implications on the Jedi’s downfall in the prequel trilogy. First I will unpack exactly how I see the Jedi to view such a dualistic Force by looking at the similarly dualistic Yin-Yang Binary, Yoda’s famous “path to the dark side”, and the Jedi Code. Then I will describe key moments for the character of Anakin in the prequel trilogy starting with his attachment to his mother and Padme, and then to his realization of the hypocrisy of the Jedi.

The Dualistic Force: A Jedi Construct?

From the very outset of the saga, a dualistic Force is implied by the Jedi. After rescuing Luke from tuscan raiders in A New Hope, Obi Wan introduces the notion of the Force for the first time in its relation to the dark side, that which seduced Vader toward evil. It is important to note that Obi-Wan does not reference a light side of the force and in fact, the light side of the force is never specifically referenced in the entire Star Wars saga. That the Jedi never actually reference a light side and the implications this has on the characters in Star Wars is something I will address later on, but for now what is important is that by mentioning one polarity of the Force, Obi-Wan implies the other.

As mentioned earlier, many critics of Star Wars have compared the force to Yin and Yang, the taoist notion that all energy exists in a binary which is opposite yet complementary. It is important to note that this Yin-Yang binary is not always composed of contradictory elements as its popular symbol would suggest, and the relation was historically cyclical and harmonious in nature. This notion of a balance of opposing elements is also relevant to the Force in the Star Wars universe. In his essay “The Foundational Structures Behind Star Wars” Nusz claims the Jedi philosophy is akin to the Yin-Yang binary in that it is precisely “The goal of seeking a balance with both the light and the dark.” Further he claims that the Jedi never actually try to eliminate the dark side of the Force. The Jedi certainly mention balancing themselves with the Force, but never do they actually describe what this entails. In fact, balance for the Jedi may be the exact opposite of what Nusz says. A close look at the Jedi and their teaching reveals that a

balance with the Force signifies avoiding the dark side and possibly even eradicating it completely.

Throughout the prequel trilogy, the Jedi repeatedly reference the dark side as a source of evil which must be avoided at all costs. Yoda references the path to the dark side multiple times: fear ->anger->hate->suffering (dark side). At first glance, that Yoda encourages the Jedi to avoid fear in this way could be seen as a positive aspect of his teaching, but upon further inspection it turns out to be quite sinister. It is easy to see Yoda's intention — he wants his students to avoid suffering: that which causes pain on himself and others; the so called Dark Side. But, by describing the path to the Dark Side in such a linear fashion (a series of implications), he makes the path inescapable. Yoda tells Luke in ESB, once one begins to walk the dark path “forever will it dominate his destiny”. Crucial to the structure of a series of implications such as this, is that the last implication follows from the first. As a result, if one exists, so must the other. The problem here is that by developing such an implicit relationship between fear and suffering — an objectively negative human emotion — Yoda prescribes an avoidant relationship with fear. He makes his students fear fear. One can see that such a self-fulfilling structure could be problematic, especially so if fear already exists in an individual. As we will see later, this will manifest for Anakin in the prequel trilogy.

It is clear that Yoda, and by extension the Jedi council, view the Dark side as something to be avoided, but there is also evidence to suggest that the Jedi desire to fully eliminate the Dark Side. It is already clear from Yoda's teachings that Jedi are taught to eradicate the darkness from within themselves, but what about the manifestations of Dark Side in the physical world? What are the Jedi supposed to do about the Sith? According to Obi-Wan, the Dark Side is to be

destroyed. In ROTS, Obi-Wan says of Anakin and his supposed prophesy “Is he not the ‘chosen one’? Is he not the one to destroy the Sith and bring balance to the Force?” It is important to note in Obi-Wan’s language here that the Jedi’s actions against the Sith are not clearly protective in nature. That is, the Jedi don’t specify that their actions against the Sith are for self preservation or for the preservation of others, but “to bring balance to the force”. For Obi-Wan, balance is not a harmonious coexistence of dark and light, rather only light.

Obi-Wan’s interpretation of the balance of the force is not dissimilar to a misinterpretation of Yin and Yang attributed to a Confucianized Chinese society. Despite being an idea founded in harmony and balance, a common interpretation of Yin and Yang in 19th century China was of yang as male and yin as female. As a result, during the late 19th century and early 20th century, women were considered inferior and subordinated in a patriarchal society. While the subordination of the Sith by the Jedi is different from this historical example in important ways, they are both fundamentally similar in that through an interpretation of lightness and darkness, one side positions itself as superior to the other. Obi-Wan’s interpretation of the prophesy of the Force and this particular misinterpretation of Yin and Yang both constitute a dualistic battle, which itself implies there must be a winner. So for the Jedi, it is clear that a balance of the Force is not constituted by equal portions lightness and darkness, but rather a social ordering where the Jedi are superior to the Sith.

So far, we have seen that the Jedi seek “balance” with the force by avoiding the Dark Side through a fear of fear, and by subordinating the physical manifestation of the Dark Side. A look at the Jedi code suggests that the Jedi may even deny the very existence of the Dark Side.

While not specifically detailed in the movies, the Jedi Code is referenced by Obi-Wan multiple times, and is part of Star Wars canon. The code is as follows:

- (1) *There is no emotion, there is peace.*
- (2) *There is no ignorance, there is knowledge*
- (3) *There is no passion, there is serenity*
- (4) *There is no chaos, there is harmony*
- (5) *There is no death, there is the Force*

As you can see, the Jedi code likewise has a dualistic form, this time a series of dualities.

Looking at the language of the code, it is clear the Jedi deny the existence of one half the duality (“there is no..”) and assert the other as true. What the Jedi fail to realize is that emotion, ignorance, passion, chaos, and death are natural parts of the human experience and while the Jedi may be correct in saying that, for example, harmony is a better state than chaos and knowledge is a better trait than ignorance, the rigidity of the Jedi code invalidates and alienates those who experience natural human emotions. This will have dire implications for Anakin in his descent to the Dark Side in the prequel trilogy.

At this point in the essay, I will shift focus from the Jedi’s dualistic framework of the Force to the implications that such a framework has on the Jedi in the prequel trilogy. As the primary focus of the prequel trilogy is Anakin’s descent to the Dark Side, I will analyze the arc of Anakin as a case study using psychological evidence to investigate the implications a dualistic Force has on his character.

Anakin’s Attachments and the Hypocrisy of the Jedi

In the Jedi’s dualistic view of the Force, emotion is a path to the Dark Side. For Anakin, this is most problematic in that human experience is inherently emotional (Benoit). Unlike most

Jedi Padawans, he was not brainwashed from an early age to refrain from feeling certain emotions and by the time he joins the Jedi, his emotional attachments are already engrained in his psyche. Growing up in a situation of slavery, attachment — of the emotional and physical kind— was a core element of Anakin's life. The emotional attachment to his mother was likely crucial to Anakin's psychological well-being as a child. According to a study conducted by the National Institute of Health "A 'loving' primary caregiver and developing 'organized and secure' attachment to a primary caregiver acts as a protective factor against social and emotional maladjustment for children." (Bornstein) Indeed, attachment to a parental figure is important for any child and one can imagine it would be even more critical in Anakin's unfortunate situation of slavery. Up to the point of him joining the Jedi, attachment was a beneficial if not necessary aspect of his life and when the Jedi suddenly require him to distance himself both physically and emotionally from the only person who loved him as a child, it is no wonder he became distressed.

The other interesting example of attachment that becomes important for Anakin is his physical attachment to Watto, his slave-owner. The power dynamic of slave ownership seems to engrain itself in Anakin and later in life, Anakin exhibits a reversal of the dynamic; he begins to desire ownership of others. This manifests itself in Anakin's physical attachment to Padme as well as in his slave-like ownership of stormtroopers . Interestingly, this reversal is not unlike the cycle of violence for child abuse victims (an abused child is 3x more likely to be a perpetrator as an adult (Kolvin)). So Anakin's physical attachment to Watto from slavery resulted in his desire to exert the same physical attachment on others.

In the Jedi's defense, they are hesitant to take on Anakin as a Padawan learner exactly for his attachments. "Your thoughts dwell on your mother." Jedi Council member Ki-Adi-Mundi during Anakin's first interview with the council. Yoda himself says that Anakin will not be trained because he is too old (the Jedi train younglings from an early age to avoid development of such attachment). While I do not blame the Jedi for taking Anakin on as a Jedi — that Qui-Gon died at the hands of a Sith immediately before Anakin's fate was decided surely influenced the Jedi's belief that Anakin was the one mentioned in the prophecy — where I do believe Jedi bear some culpability is in their failure to acknowledge Anakin as a special case. Instead of delving into Anakin's unique attachment issues and addressing them head on, they treat Anakin largely as they would any other Padawan. They inundate him with platitudes about the Dark Side to brainwash him into subscribing to one half of the dualistic force, when Anakin's experience has taught him different truths about the human experience.

After having the vision/dream/premonition of Padme's death in childbirth, Anakin seeks out Yoda —supposedly the wisest of the Jedi — in what turns out to be a consequential moment for Anakin's character. In their conversation, Anakin reveals to Yoda his anxiety over his dreams of "pain, suffering, and death". Unable to bear the thought of losing Padme, the only person he truly loved beside his mother, Anakin marks his commitment to preventing her death. "I won't let the visions become real," he says. Anakin is trying to escape feelings pain and suffering — the exact feelings Yoda associates with the Dark Side — yet Yoda provides no assistance in dealing with these feelings. His advice: "The fear of loss is a path to the dark side" achieves nothing other than to alienate Anakin by condemning him to the Dark Side. When Palpatine offers Anakin a solution to his inner turmoil that involves the Dark Side, it is no surprise that

Anakin entertains the idea. However, this in itself does not fully alienate Anakin from the Jedi. Anakin becomes fully disenfranchised with the Jedi when he realizes that the Jedi masters, who should be held to a higher esteem than he, are no better at following the rigid rules and ethics of the Jedi than he is.

In AOTC Mace Windu says that the Jedi are “keepers of the peace, not soldiers.” In his analysis of the Force as law, Peters tends to agree:

“Jedi are associated with a form of letting go and disengagement, which is connected with peace and passiveness. Yet, at the same time, they, as the defenders of peace and justice need to engage in violence to ensure order—the order of ‘the Force’.”

As mentioned above, order of the Force for the Jedi comes with eradicating evil and its physical manifestation, the Sith. Mace Windu seems to view the violence of the Jedi as self defense, but if we look closely, the nature of their violence is often preemptive and impetuous. For example, when Obi-Wan was held captive on Geonosis in AOTC, the Jedi make no clear attempt to solve the hostage situation diplomatically, rather they send dozens of Jedi to lead the clone army in combat against the separatists. Or, when Anakin reveals to Mace Windu in ROTS that Palpatine is the Sith Lord, the Jedi do not develop a thoughtful strategy to remove Palpatine from office, rather they send a group of Jedi to arrest Palpatine with essentially no evidence. This inevitably leads to violence. When Mace Windu defeats Palpatine, he says to Anakin that he is “too dangerous to be left alive”, exactly the same words that Palpatine used to warrant Anakin killing Count Dooku earlier in the film. To Windu, violence in the name of a higher order or justice is warranted because, in his view, killing Palpatine is for the greater good of the galaxy. In

whatever case, Anakin realizes the subjective nature of this logic and that the Jedi have been hypocritical all along. For all their preaching against the danger of fear, it is the Jedi's fear of Palpatine, and fear of the Dark Side which drives them to murder. To Anakin, the Jedi have become the very thing that they teach to destroy. Seeing the hypocrisy of the Jedi, Anakin reaches a boiling point. He realizes that the Jedi and the Sith are not universal manifestations of good and evil as the dualistic preachings of the Jedi suggest, and rather good and evil rely on a of subjective point of view. At this point Anakin becomes fully disenfranchised with the Jedi. Fittingly, when Obi-Wan accuses him of becoming the very thing he swore to destroy: evil, Anakin says "from my point of view the Jedi are evil". Anakin's realization that good and evil are relative in nature and dependent on the experiences of the individual lead him to abandon the Jedi philosophy and join the Sith. Unfortunately for the Jedi, this leads to their ultimate downfall.

As presented in this essay, I have shown that the dualistic view of the Force by the Jedi is idealistic at best and hypocritical at worst and had dire implications for Anakin's transformation into Darth Vader. Surely other factors contributed to Anakin's descent that were outside of the Jedi's control, however it is clear that the rigid Jedi standards founded in their dualistic view of the Force led Anakin to feel disenfranchised with the Jedi and seek other sources of knowledge about the Force. Another goal of this essay that I hope I achieved was to highlight some of the profound philosophical and psychological elements of the prequel trilogy that are so often overlooked due to the trilogies much maligned acting, directing, and production. I believe that Star Wars is rich with compelling questions and profound truths that warrant further investigation analysis. For the sake of scope, I limited my analysis of Anakin's character to the prequels, but it

would be interesting to analyze the portrayal of Darth Vader in the original trilogy to see if and how his emotions and attachments manifest themselves in a different context.

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