Good and Evil in Star Wars **[1]**

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A long, long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away... there was perhaps the most famous story (with an ardent following [2]) of science fantasy [3] that was ever known! It is an epic tale of good versus evil. But, many people may not realise that it is not the kind of good, or a kind of evil, which they may intuitively have expected. Indeed, while it superficially looks like the stories of good and evil familiar to Western lore, the story of Star Wars is rooted in a much different tradition, where the concepts of good and evil have a unique origin and different meaning.

The first Star Wars movie was released in 1977. At this time in the USA, there was a huge interest in eastern religions. The virtues and values of Christendom had become stale, and people were looking for something "new" and "fresh", and turned to the religions of Asia; often marrying them with drug use in an attempt to transcend the physical reality and experience the "true" spiritual reality. Star Wars itself had many influences, but a number of people have noted the strong similarity between the Force and concepts found in Eastern monistic religions; particularly Buddhism. This influenced the portrayal of good and evil in the film.

In Star Wars, the "good guys"—the Jedi—are the stoic, warrior-mystics who stand apart from the rest of society. They sometimes have the role of a "police force", but are weary of alliances, preferring to keep to practising their disciplines separate from the rest of the galaxy. Recognising their "separateness", they and are diametrically opposed to that which is evil. They act against evil, such as hate, greed, corruption and destruction. They are devoted to the Force, which is the energy which unites all things in the universe. The Jedi hold to a Code1:

> There is no emotion, there is peace.
> There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.
> There is no passion, there is serenity.
> There is no chaos, there is harmony.
> There is no death2, there is the Force.

In contrast, there are the "bad guys". Without worrying too much about nomenclature in this article, they can be thought of as the "Sith", "dark Jedi" or "dark Force users". They are impassionate, greedy, filled with hate and murderous desires. They seek to control and oppress.

Contra to the Jedi Code, there is the Sith Code:

> 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.

It is easy for a Western audience to identify the evil: hatred, murderous intent and megalomania. The "good guys" are easy to infer by their opposition to these "bad guys". But if we take a closer look at the values of these "good guys", we find that they do not quite conform to what we might expect to be "good" in the West. Something is missing; something that one might even call the essence of goodness.

While we may revere the austere, reserved and stoic hero, the Jedi ideals of being "emotionless" and "passionless" are a bit confounding.

The opposition to emotions and passions are an influence of Buddhism. In Buddhism, all desire must be put to death. An inner harmony—preferably a void—should be achieved. This is not possible if one holds on to things in the world, or to one's emotions, or even to logic.

This causes a problem for the traditional Western hero. The chivalrous knight is a lover, is bound by loyalty and passionate about justice. These would, essentially, not be desirable (pardon the pun) in Buddhist culture.

One can image Yoda scolding Jesus for driving out the money changers from the Temple. How could the stoic Messiah give in to passions like that?

This leads us to an important contradistinction between Christianity and Buddhism. When considering the meaning of good and evil, Christians believe that God is personal; He has personality and emotions. He is goodness Himself [4]. He is also holy, which means He is separate from that which is in opposition to Himself. God Himself revealed this about Himself: He loves mankind (John 3:16), He hates sin (Psalm 5:4), He is grieved (Ephesians 4:30), etc. Jesus was grieved and angered by death (John 11:35), Israel's unfaithfulness (Matthew 23:37), and corruption (Matthew 21:12–13, Matthew 23:1–36). And He unashamedly displayed and acted upon these emotions.

How do we reconcile emotions with a perfect God? Simply: emotions are good and wholesome. But they need to be controlled. Uncontrolled emotions and passions are not godly (Exodus 34:5–7). Justice is good. God loves justice, and it is good for Him to hate injustice. But more than that, these emotions point towards God's character and holiness. Jesus is grieved, for example, by the death of His friend, because death is unnatural [5], and mars the good creation. He is also angered by Israel's unfaithfulness and corruption, because that shows contempt, disrespect and rejection towards God, who desires to be in loving communion and relationship with His creation.

In the Sith (dark Jedi) we see wanton hate, which is bad. But what the Jedi ideal fundamentally espouses may be even worse. We typically think of the opposite of love as being hate. And this can be the case. But if hating, for example, injustice is a good thing, then hate is not always negative. Indeed, hate, even bad hate, at a minimum reciprocates an emotion. There is another opposite to love: indifference. Love is an emotion and a passion, but indifference is the absence of emotions and passions. Indifference is the ultimate put-down, the ultimate rebuttal. It is a black whole which absorbs all and radiates nothing. And this appears to be what the Jedi advocate.

This perspective forces a shift in our view of the love-hate dichotomy. It becomes a love-indifference dichotomy, or the dichotomy even disappears, as we have the tension between love, hate and indifference (trichotomy).

The Star Wars universe is eclectic and has diverse influences. One should be weary of taking any one theme or influence to the extreme. But with a little background knowledge, the heroes and villains can be cast into a new light. In the way which the bad guys are cast, it is difficult to find anything redeeming about them3, even if they do, at least, reject the passionlessness of the Jedi Order. It is interesting, though, that some Star Wars stories (outside of the movies) explore individuals who are "Force neutral" (being neither affiliated to the "Light Side" or the "Dark Side" of the Force): they reject the passionlessness of the Jedi, but also the evil and cruelty of the Sith. These may be more like the noble knights or cowboys with which we in the West are familiar. Clearly, the creators and writers of Star Wars media themselves continue to wrestle with the implications of the universe which they created.

The epic tale of Star Wars can teach Christians to think more carefully about different perspectives of good and evil, and what the implications would be. May it lead us to rejoin in that God is love, is passionate about justice, hates evil, and will restore the harmony which we desire, in celebration of our diverseness! One thing which God is not, is indifferent and distant!

- 1. Different Codes upheld by those in opposition, namely, the Jedi Code and Sith Code, are not found in the movies, but in other Star Wars stories, such as books and video games. There is a massive (some bizarre [6]) extended universe beyond the movies.
- 2. Typically Buddhists believe in reincarnation. But being reincarnated is not considered to be ideal. The ideal is to achieve a state of enlightenment which would allow one to escape the cycle of birth and rebirth. Once this happens, one is instead reunited to the impersonal essence to which all things belong and from which all things came. This point in the Jedi Code is therefore interesting, because death is a way to be reunited with the Force, which is similar to the ideal in Buddhism.
- 3. Although, of course, Darth Vader himself is ultimately redeemed.

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