

Why is the Evil Empire “Evil”?
Morality and Ethical Constructs in *Star Wars*
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“It is a period of civil war. Rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, have won their first victory against the *evil* GALACTIC EMPIRE,” (Lucas, 1976, p. 2). Accompanied by John William’s fanfare, we watched, entranced by these larger than life yellow words as they scrolled listlessly into the starlit abyss of the cinema screen. Before the end of the prologue of this film called *STAR WARS*, we knew the score: The “Rebels” were the good-guys and the “GALACTIC EMPIRE” was “evil”. However, have you wondered, in specifics, what really makes the Empire more morally deficient than the Rebel Alliance? Following, I will lay out my case that the Galactic Empire is objectively evil only under a narrow set of criteria, those qualities that the Empire/Sith has in terms of their behavior and philosophy that are uniquely dissimilar to that of the Jedi/Rebels, the “good,” (as purposed by the author) embodied in the Empire’s abolition of representative government, it’s elimination of economic liberties, and it’s brutal military tactics, the true stuff that makes the evil Empire... well, evil.

In order to establish the ethical failings of the Galactic Empire, we must first accept that the *Star Wars* universe is one of moral absolutes. You may not find an answer to every moral question, but there is a simple but definitive morality that is pervasive and often referenced throughout the saga. As with any moral universe, *Star Wars* must have an ultimate moral authority, something to separate opinions and tastes from imperatives. To a degree, this role is played by the Force, but not without difficulty. The Force is an impersonal field of energy that, in the words of Jedi Obiwan Kenobi, “... surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together” (Lucas, 1976, p. 26). Although it is implied throughout the films that the Force also communicates a will and moral code, an energy field doesn’t seem capable of being the objective moral arbiter; intelligence/personality is required. As such, the revelation of *Star Wars* moral absolutes must be done by the creator: George Lucas. Though not a character in this film, he sets

the moral tone, and his word is absolute, chiseled into yellow celluloid. In *his* universe there is *good* and there is *evil*. Otherwise, the crawl labeling the Empire as “evil,” might have instead read “the methodically different and dissimilarly motivated but likewise morally valid GALACTIC EMPIRE.” Without this truth, all of the villainy of the Empire could be justified.

The Empire is evil, and few seem to disagree on this point, but the mystery is that which makes it evil. While seemingly obvious, the truth is much more nuanced and comes down to just a few important grievances. Among them is the disenfranchising of Imperial citizens. During the Clone Wars, Palpatine manipulated “the Senate into granting him exceptional powers in order to face the emergency of the impending war with the Trade Federation,” (Reagin, 2013, p.132). Once secure in his office, he declared himself Emperor for life, fully realizing his ambition in the abolition of the senate in favor of planetary governorships under himself, 18 years later (Lucas, 1976, p. 27). As *Star Wars* was created primarily for an American audience with values of self-governance, it is clear that this act was intended by Lucas to be looked upon with unique disgust.

Another of the Empire’s crimes against liberty is its assault on economic freedom. In *Episode IV*, the soon-to-be rebel Biggs Darklighter, while trying to persuade Luke Skywalker to leave his Uncle’s farm and join the rebellion said, “What good is all your uncle’s work if it’s taken over by the Empire?... You know they’re starting to nationalize commerce in the central systems... It won’t be long before your uncle’s merely a tenant, slaving for the greater glory of the Empire” (Lucas, 1976, p. 11). In this, *Episode IV*’s first spoken impeachment of the Empire, the evil of the socialization of privately owned means of production is self-evident.

Chief among the Empire’s crimes are those against prisoners and civilians. Uses of torture comprise some of the film’s most dramatic moments, fully displaying the scruples of the

Empire. In *Episode IV*, on board the Tantive IV and in Princess Leia’s cell on the Death Star, Darth Vader, the Empire’s second most important leader uses torture to try to extract information from two suspected Rebels (Lucas, 1976, p.4 & 29). Additionally, the Empire’s evil is shown in its targeting of civilians. It’s true that in any war non-combatants die along with legitimate military targets, however, when civilians become the target, the moral ramifications are quite different. In *Episode IV*, Imperial Governor Tarkin, in an attempt to force information from Rebel Princess Leia and also send a clear message to the galaxy on resistance, uses the Death Star to destroy the unarmed planet of Alderaan, killing millions of non-combatants: those with rebel and neutral leanings and perhaps even Imperial sympathizers alike (Lucas, 1976, p. 40 & 41). Being one of the film’s emotional highlights, and considering the target audiences suspected animus against genocide, this event is clearly meant to convince of the evil of the Empire.

Some may say that the real reasons for the Empire’s evil are more basic, such as the Sith’s opposition to the Jedi. While it’s true that the Sith (the spiritual spine of the Empire) play yang to the Jedi’s yin, mere opposition doesn’t inform why they are evil and it ignores the great similarities they share. For instance, they have the same deity: the Force. If their instructions come from the same source, it’s a little difficult to condemn one side over the other based solely on opposition to the more established group, and would be like condemning Buddhists in favor of Zen-Buddhists. Also, they share the same goal: power for survival. In *Episode III*, Sith Lord Palpatine tells a young Anakin Skywalker (the future Darth Vader), “Anakin. ‘All those who gain power are afraid to lose it.’ Even the Jedi.” “The Sith and the Jedi are similar in almost every way, including their quest for greater power,” (Lucas, 2005, p. 38). One group seeks power to keep the other from having power over them, with both sects dedicated to the other’s

destruction, while convinced of their own rightness. Opposition is fair when survival is at stake, and absent of other information, this proves insufficient as proof of the evil of the Empire/Sith.

Another argument is that the Empire is clearly evil because of its use of war and deception. This would be a valid point if war and lying were uniquely congenial to the Empire and not the Jedi, but the Jedi often used both. In the case of war, even if you accept that the Jedi operated Athena-like out of the just-war theory, a just-war is still war. Also dishonesty and even mind-control seemed handy to the Jedi. The most stunning example concerns Obiwan Kenobi’s distortion of the identity of Luke Skywalker’s father, Anakin Skywalker. Kenobi didn’t just tell a lie of omission, he told Luke that Darth Vader betrayed and murdered his father (Lucas, 1976, p.26). Kenobi created this fantasy to motivate the ankle-dragging Luke to accept Obiwan as his teacher, preparing Luke to kill the Emperor and Vader, his father. “When Luke finally discovers that he has been deceived by those closest to him, he confronts Kenobi with the fact, and the latter is forced to acknowledge the deception, though he argues that it was a form of mental reservation - that is, what he told Luke was true ‘from a certain point of view.’ Luke is not impressed by this qualifier — nor should he be. Judged by standards of real-world moral theology, the mental reservation employed by Kenobi is not morally licit,” (Akin, n.p., Para. 21).

Lastly, a claim for the evil of the Empire could be that its creation was illegitimate, the product of careful subterfuge and crisis exploitation by the Republic’s Supreme Chancellor and future Emperor Palpatine, much like the Roman Emperor Augustus (Octavian). In his essay, *I Sidious*, Tony Keen compared the two figures. “Senator Palpatine manipulates the Senate in the way at which Octavian proved most adept. He recognizes the problems faced by the Republic – in this case, corruption within the Senate and an excessive influential bureaucracy that hampers his making decisions in government – and Palpatine exploits them, as Octavian and his

predecessors did. He gets himself made chancellor as Octavian demanded the Roman Senate make him consul,” (Reagin, 2013, p.131 & 132). This point is valid, but it is equally valid to note that many respected real world leaders, even US Presidents like Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama, have broken laws, even supreme ones, in pursuit of their agendas. More often than not, history ignores or justifies their law-breaking, and few of their critics contest the legitimacy of their rule. Playing loose with law (when it gets in the way) and telling people what they want to hear (while pursuing contrary agendas) seems like clever politicking in the light of history. Additionally, if the actions of the Sith to gain power are compared to the Jedi’s actions to keep power, the murky waters of *Star Wars* political ethics become even more muddled. For example, consider that the Jedi attempted two executive assassinations to avert the rise of the Empire, an act outside the legitimate bounds of law (Lucas, 2005, p. 56 & 72). Legitimacy is defined by what will be accepted by the masses, alone. The real question of power appears to not be “Should you?”, but rather “Can you get away with it?”

Often, even the best of stories crumble under the weight of its own analysis. And *Star Wars*, while having powerful lessons, may fall short when looked at through the glass of the religious inconsistencies and anecdotal unethical examples of the Jedi and the Sith. However, if one chooses to stand in judgment on the Empire (or anything else for that matter) it is so important to know what grounds one stands apart from opinion and prejudice. The enduring quality of *Star Wars* is the ethics it conveys, concepts like the right to the fruits of one’s own labors, the ethical operation of war, and the right to representative government under law and not subjugation to rule by the whims of a personality. These lessons that the Empire failed to heed remain powerfully communicated in the mind of the audience, long after the projector has stopped and the theater lights have gone up.

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