

THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

A quarterly eJournal published by the
Marcus Aurelius School
of the College of Stoic Philosophers

JAN/FEB/MAR 2014: Issue #9

Stoicism and the Philosophies of the Jedi and the Sith

by WILLIAM O. STEPHENS

William O. Stephens is Professor of Philosophy and of Classical & Near Eastern Studies at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. His reference for this work is from “Star Wars Episode V: the Empire Strikes Back,” the George Lucas epic saga about a young man learning the ways of the Jedi Knights from his master, Yoda. It’s a science fiction film released in 1980, so understandably the special effects are dated. In addition, there is a juvenile comic book quality in both appearance and dialogue, but the character development is one that lends itself to an understanding of Stoic wisdom. For that reason alone, I can recommend renting this movie soon after reading the following insights by Dr. Stephens. [editor]

Stoic ideas have influenced the history of Western philosophy for centuries. This is because Stoic ideas provide effective strategies for addressing conflicts, interacting positively with people, and coping with adversities. Stoic ideas also appear in Hollywood science fiction films, including the *Star Wars* movies. Many elements of the Jedi philosophy, and even a couple of elements of the Sith philosophy, are very Stoic in character.

Consider Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back*. When Yoda offers to take Luke to the Jedi master he seeks, Luke insists that it be done immediately. Instead, Yoda suggests that they first eat. When Luke objects, Yoda replies “For the Jedi it is time to eat as well.” *Timeliness* is a virtue for Yoda. Why is it a virtue? Because just as *what* one does and *how* one does it matters, so too *when* one acts matters. Whereas Luke often doesn’t act appropriately for the moment, Yoda’s acts are timely. Timeliness is a key virtue for a Jedi, as it is for the Stoic wise man.

While Yoda prepares their first meal together, Luke is impatient to be brought to the Jedi master. Yoda urges Luke to have *patience*—a virtue Yoda has cultivated over centuries. Luke’s impatience becomes frustration and vexation. Disappointed, Yoda tells Obi-Wan Kenobi’s disembodied presence that he cannot teach Luke because Luke has no patience. It finally dawns on Luke that this weird, elderly goblin is the Jedi Master himself. Luke’s assumptions of what a Jedi Master looks like had blinded him to reality.

Yoda criticizes Luke for his inability to focus on his present situation and dismisses his lust for adventure and excitement as things a Jedi does not crave. Yoda is never distracted by frivolous desires for adventure or excitement, nor does he worry about things beyond his control. This too is characteristic of the Stoic, who enjoys equanimity and peace of mind. Yoda focuses on the task at hand and how to act in the present, whether consulting with other Jedi, eating, training Luke, or resting. Focus on the present is another Jedi virtue, and one which is shared by the Stoic.

Yoda cautions the young Anakin that “A Jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind.” This warning is repeated decades later to Luke. Yoda’s mental seriousness, deep commitment to the lifelong Jedi pursuit of mastering the Force, and rejection of frivolity, however, do not make him humorless. Yoda indulges his sense of humor in allowing Luke to be blinded by his presumptions about what a Jedi master looks like.

Yoda observes in *The Empire Strikes Back* that there is much *anger* in Luke, like there was in his father. Yet Yoda, in contrast, never gets angry. As he says, “Fear is the path to the Dark Side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” Wiser words are never spoken in all of *Star Wars*. Later Yoda tells Luke: “Anger, fear, aggression. The Dark Side of the Force are they.” This is the logic of the Jedi: (1) Fear leads to anger, then to hate, then to aggression. (2) Aggression leads to the suffering of *both* aggressor *and* victim. That Yoda is never seen to *suffer* implies that he is never fearful, angry, hateful, or aggressive. The Stoic wise man, just like Yoda, lacks the vices of fear, anger, hatred, and aggression. But does rejection of aggression require pacifism? When can a Jedi fight? Yoda says, “A Jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defense, never for attack.” Although Yoda actively defends and protects when necessary, he lacks the vice of aggression.

Yoda wisely knows that fear, anger, hate, and aggression lead to suffering and the Dark Side of the Force, and his wisdom allows him to tell the difference between the Light Side and the Dark Side of the Force. Yoda explains to Luke that he will know the difference between the two when he is “calm, at peace, passive.”

The parallels between Jedi philosophy and Stoicism are striking. Stoics identify the goal of life as living in agreement with Nature. This means several things. First, Nature, that is, the cosmos as a whole, is structured and well-ordered through and through according to *Logos*, reason. *Logos* is akin to the Force. Second, to live in agreement with Nature requires embracing and making good use of all events that unfold in this rationally structured universe. So living in harmony with cosmic events entails living in agreement with our distinctive human nature. While we have various functions in common with other animals, Stoics believe that reason is our special, distinctive natural endowment. So to live well is to harmonize our distinctive human reason as individuals with the larger rational structure of the universe. Epictetus expresses this idea in *Discourses* i 6.19-21. Stoics understand the perfection of reason to be virtue itself. So the successful, good human life is the life in agreement with virtue. Virtue is the one and only necessary and sufficient condition for the happy life, according to Stoics. Vice guarantees misery. Because of this, they believed that virtue is the only thing that is really good, and that vice is the only thing that is really bad. Knowledge of what is really good, what is really bad, and what is neither, they thought, is crucial to living well. Moreover, Stoics believe that all the virtues—wisdom, justice, courage, self-control, piety, and generosity—are really just perfected reason applied to various spheres of conduct.

Reason leads the Stoic to concentrate on what is up to him and under his control rather than worrying about, fearing, anticipating, or being distracted by anything that is beyond his control and not up to him. Timely behavior, for example, is under one’s control and is a virtue of the Stoic. This mindful concentration on what is within one’s control allows the Stoic to be calm and even-tempered no matter what happens, and to be high-minded and noble of heart by rising above trivial or frivolous matters that plague non-Stoics.

In addition, the Stoic seeks to free himself from all passion, excitement, and frivolity in order to be able to apply his reason reliably. Stoics understand “passion” (*pathos*) to be a disturbing, unhealthy movement of the soul. That is why a sickness is termed a *pathology*. Stoics who have succeeded in freeing themselves from all disturbances to their reason have become good. Stoics believe that there are no degrees of goodness. Until a person is good, he is bad. For Stoics, the good person thus functions as a prescriptive ideal known as the perfect wise person or “sage.” The sage’s soul is steady, orderly, completely virtuous, and it does not suffer from any “passion.” However, the Stoic sage is not devoid of all emotion. Stoics believe that there are three “good emotional states” that are not

pathological movements of the soul, namely, benevolence (wishing someone good things for his own sake), joy (in virtuous deeds), and caution (reasonable wariness).

Yoda clearly has many Stoic traits. Yoda is free from the emotions that subvert reason. Yoda is not reckless or impatient, as Luke is at first. Nor is Yoda frivolous. Like a Stoic, Yoda never becomes perturbed or excited. Most significantly, Yoda does not succumb to anger. Seneca thought that anger was the most hideous and frenzied of all the emotions and that angry people were in a state of insanity.

Yoda also exhibits the positive emotions allowed to a Stoic. Since Yoda doesn't fear, get angry, or hate, he doesn't *suffer*. Yoda concentrates on what is up to him and what he can do in the present. He thus enjoys impassivity, the lack of disturbing passions the Stoics called *apatheia*. Yoda is calm and even-tempered. He can tell the difference between the good and bad sides of the Force, and knows what is good, what is bad, and what is neither. Knowing that only virtue is good, only vice is bad, and everything else is really indifferent to one's happiness is the heart of Stoic wisdom.

Yoda is also benevolent and cautious. His quirky humor displays a quasi-Stoic joy. His odd wit and unusual pattern of speech humanize him by tempering his seriousness. One of the ancient Greek names for the Stoic sage is *spoudaios*, which means "serious person." Perfecting one's mind by conditioning it to make only rational judgments about all things that occur is a very serious business that requires commitment. The Stoics called this arduous training and disciplined practice *askêsis* (from which we get the word "ascetic," a person devoted to austere self-discipline). Yoda too displays the virtue of commitment and lives an ascetic lifestyle in both his sparse quarters in the Jedi temple on Coruscant and his simple mud-hut on Dagobah.

The Stoics believed that the sage, the virtuous person, was as rare as the phoenix, due to the difficulty of disciplining oneself to make consistently rational judgments. Such mental discipline, they thought, required an entire life to cultivate. That is why the Stoics distinguished between those who are simply vicious and those who are making progress toward virtue, though still suffering from vice. Even if becoming a sage turns out to be unachievable over the course of an entire life, progress toward this ideal state is possible. Someone who is progressing toward virtue they called a "progressor." Similarly, Luke can be seen as a "progressor." He is an apprentice—first of Obi-Wan, then of Yoda—as he strives to learn the ways of the Force and become a Jedi.

To recap, the virtues the Jedi shares with the Stoic sage are patience, timeliness, deep commitment, seriousness (as opposed to frivolity), calmness (as opposed to anger or euphoria), peacefulness (as opposed to aggression), caution (as opposed to recklessness), benevolence (as opposed to hatred), joy (as opposed to sullenness), passivity (as opposed to agitation), and wisdom. Given all these virtues, Yoda certainly resembles what the ancient Stoics described as the sage—the ideal person who has perfected his reason and achieved complete wisdom. In contrast with Luke's youth and inexperience, Yoda has had over eight centuries to study and attune himself to the Force.

The perfection of the Stoic sage's character in his human reason mirrors the perfection of all of Nature, which the Stoics believed was coherently structured through and through. The sage acts in accord with and accepts events that occur in the world since his personal reason and his will harmonize with cosmic reason and fate. The sage understands the principles of regularity by which the universe operates. His knowledge of Nature thus guides his conduct. Is this similar to following the Force?

Yoda says that life creates the Force and makes it grow, and that the energy of the Force surrounds people and binds them, and that it pervades the entire physical world. This description resembles the ancient Stoics' idea of the 'breath' that pervades all objects in the cosmos. This 'breath,' composed of the elements air and fire, is the sustaining cause of all bodies, and it controls the growth and development of all living bodies. It holds the cosmos together as the passive principle of all matter. The active principle pervading the cosmos is the 'reason' that is one and the same as Nature, fate, providence, and Zeus. When Yoda uses the telekinetic power of the Force to lift Luke's X-wing fighter from the swamp on Dagobah, he uses the power of his mind to move matter. A Jedi master, it seems, while not omnipotent, can use the active power of reason to move passive matter. In this modest way,

Jedi who use telekinesis act something like Zeus, as understood by the Stoics. Telekinesis, psychic perception of events that are distant in space and time, and the luminous afterlife of dead Jedi constitute the mystical side of the Force.

Stoics emphasize that ethics, physics (the study of Nature), and logic (the study of speech, language, and argument) are the three *interconnected* branches of philosophy. So does Stoic philosophy allow for the mystical? The mystical element of the Force conflicts with Stoics' understanding of the physical world. Yoda tells Luke: "Luminous beings are we . . . not this crude matter." This is confirmed by the scenes that show the deceased Obi-Wan, Yoda, and Anakin as non-physical yet visible and luminous disembodied spirits. Since the Emperor was a master of the Dark Side, would he too continue to exist as a luminous, disembodied spirit? Or would he be a dark, shadowy disembodied spirit? For Stoics, these kinds of metaphysical quandaries are ludicrous. Stoics are physicalists who believe that souls (minds) are just as physical as flesh and blood bodies. They reason that since one's soul causally interacts with one's body, and one's body is physical, then one's soul must be physical too. So, Stoics deny the existence of non-physical souls (or minds or spirits) that are the 'luminous beings' Yoda claims are the real Luke and Yoda. For Stoics, a person is destroyed when his body is destroyed, whereas deceased Jedi apparently enjoy an afterlife which allows them to speak with, see, and sometimes be seen by, the living.

While the naturalism of Stoicism rules out supernatural, disembodied spirits, the sage's understanding of Nature is amazingly profound and total. In fact, the Stoic sage has *infallible* knowledge of what should be done in every situation. The sage takes the right steps at the right times and does them in the right way to accomplish the right goal. But is Yoda a Stoic who acts from *reason* in every situation? No, Yoda *feels* the Force guiding his actions and the counsel he gives. Qui-Gon says to Anakin, "Feel, don't think, use your instincts." Obi-Wan tells Luke, "Trust your feelings." So, the character traits that make reason possible for a Stoic resemble the traits that make it possible for Jedi like Yoda to feel and harness the Force.

What about the Sith? Emperor Palpatine (Darth Sidious) seems to have several virtues. Like Yoda, the Emperor has a serious mind and the deepest commitment, though his is to the Dark Side. The Emperor is *the* Master of the Dark Side, the supreme Sith Lord, and this surely must count as a kind of supremacy. Moreover, in *Return of the Jedi* the Emperor urges patience on Vader in his search for Luke, a virtue Yoda shares. In these respects, the Emperor and Yoda *appear* to be similar. How are they *really* different?

A few scenes later the Emperor says that Luke's compassion for his father will be his undoing. The Emperor sees compassion as a weakness, not a strength, a vice, not a virtue. Stoics reject compassion as irrational. Taking on the "disturbing passion" (*pathos*) of someone who is miserable makes you miserable too, so it's foolish to be misery's company by *feeling* compassion. Unlike the Emperor, however, Stoics think that it's virtuous to *show* compassion to others by acting to help them. Doing things to help others is beneficence. Beneficence can be motivated by philanthropy, kindness, or simple recognition of one's fellow beings as members of the community of rational persons in the cosmos we all inhabit. The ancient Greek Stoics originated this idea of a citizen of the universe or *cosmopolitan*. The Emperor has no such inclusive vision of the subjects populating *his* empire.

So, while the Emperor is correct, from a Stoic perspective, to reject the *feeling* of compassion as a weakness, he is wrong to be cruel by failing to *show* compassion to those he can help. From the Stoic perspective, his Sith logic is twisted. What makes the Dark Side of the Force *dark*? The logic of the Sith philosophy is revealed in the moving conversation between Luke and Vader. Vader and the Emperor want to recruit Luke to the Dark Side. Luke senses the moral conflict within Vader, and wishes to return his father to the Light Side. Vader tells Luke "You don't know the power of the Dark Side. I must obey my master."

The Force is power that can be directed toward good or bad ends. Obi-Wan, Yoda, and all the 'good' Jedi use the Force to achieve their goals. Vader and the Emperor do the same. Yoda says that

the Force is his *ally*. Vader, however, is a *servant* of the Dark Side. Vader is in its power, because he must obey his Master, the Emperor. So the essence of the Dark Side is mastery over others, that is, tyranny. Sith logic is this: (1) Anger leads to hatred. (2) Hatred leads to aggression aimed at the mastery of others. (3) Mastery of others is true power. (4) True power is irresistibly desirable. When Luke slashes off Vader's right hand with his light saber, the Emperor congratulates Luke: "Your hate has made you powerful." But Luke refuses to kill Vader, as the Emperor wishes, so the Sith Lord Emperor tries to destroy the defiant Jedi.

Consequently, the Emperor, Sith Lord Darth Sidious, is a propagator of terror, hatred, and cruelty. He gloats and takes pleasure in the distress of others. The ancient Stoics were quite familiar with tyrants like Cambyses of Persia, Hippias of Athens, and Gaius Caligula. These tyrants, along with Emperor Palpatine, can be contrasted with Marcus Aurelius, who ruled the Roman empire from 161 to 180 C.E. The benevolence and rectitude of the Emperor Marcus is plain in his *Meditations*. The Stoic never tries to exploit others. Rather, the Stoic aims at emotional self-sufficiency and cultivating his own mental discipline. This means that the Stoic sage has succeeded in mastering himself by having mastered his desires and having eliminated vice from his character. Luke is therefore urging Stoic wisdom upon Vader when he tells him to let go of his hate. Unfortunately, hatred has had such a vise-like hold on Vader for so long that he tells Luke: "It is too late for me, son. The Emperor will show you the true nature of the Force. He is your master now." For the Sith, the servants of the Dark Side, the true nature of the Force is servitude to evil, enslavement to hate. Like virtues, vices tend to control one's behavior. Vader has used fear and hatred to achieve his ends for so long that now the superior hatred and aggression of the Emperor use him. Vader's mastery of the Dark Side is at the same time servitude to it.

As a tyrant, the Emperor's goal is to master things and people that are in fact beyond his control rather than to master himself by becoming virtuous. Since the Emperor fails to understand what is really good, namely virtue, and what is really bad, namely vice, he lacks Stoic wisdom. Since he lacks wisdom, he lacks all the virtues, and so he is full of vice. Since he has no desire to gain wisdom, his mind is fundamentally flawed and his vice is incurable. As a consequence, when Vader throws him into the reactor shaft, he appears to die suffering.

The Jedi use discipline, commitment, and training to control themselves, thereby harnessing the power of the Force. The Sith, in contrast, stoke their anger and hatred to empower themselves with the Dark Side of the Force. They feed, rather than overcome, the negative emotions within themselves. They seek to control not themselves, but others, in an ultimately doomed attempt to fill the cold, black void behind the mask or the hood with the false satisfaction that arises from domination and oppression of others. A Stoic could never be seduced by the Dark Side, but might well feel at home among the calm, self-disciplined, virtuous Jedi.

* * * *

Professor Stephens has published on topics in Stoicism, Epicureanism, ecology and vegetarianism, ethics and animals, sex and love, the concept of a person, and Stoicism and popular culture. He teaches a course on Stoics in Film and Literature. His essays on Stoicism and popular culture include "Real Men Are Stoics: An interpretation of Tom Wolfe's A Man in Full", "The Rebirth of Stoicism" (http://puffin.creighton.edu/phil/Stephens/rebirth_of_stoicism.htm), "To Cheer Without Fear: Could a Cubs Fan Be a Stoic?", "A Philosopher-Emperor's Approach to Conflict Management" (http://puffin.creighton.edu/phil/Stephens/Marcus_Conflict_Management_CU-Mag-Spr-2012.pdf), and "Marcus, Maximus, and Stoicism in Gladiator (2000)."