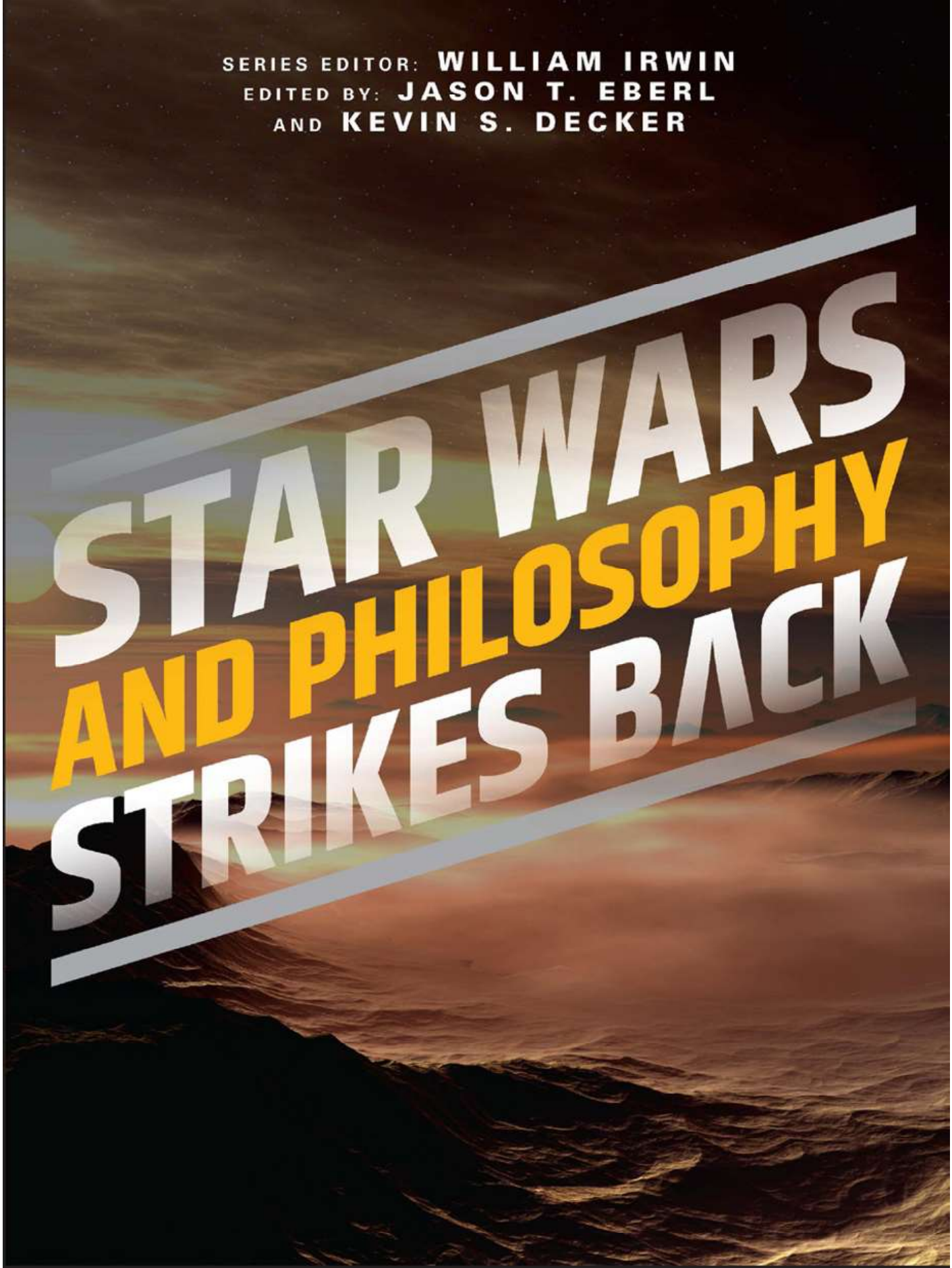

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

STAR WARS AND PHILOSOPHY STRIKES BACK: THIS IS THE WAY

Edited by

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The Non-dualistic, Redemptive Metaphysics of the Jedi

Michael Baur

The opening crawl to *A New Hope* tells us that "It is a period of civil war." An "evil" Galactic Empire, aided by "sinister" agents, opposes a group of Rebels, including Princess Leia, who together seek to "save her people" and "restore freedom to the galaxy." The Empire possesses a space station called a "Death Star," an ultimate weapon with enough "power" to destroy an entire planet. A first encounter with this opening crawl might lead one to conclude that the metaphysical view espoused by the *Star Wars* films is fundamentally *dualistic*: there is a civil war with an evil, sinister, power-seeking, destruction-causing Empire simply and straightforwardly opposed to a group of freedom-loving, people-saving Rebels who have a princess on their side. But is *Star Wars* really so dualistic?

"You Must Unlearn What You Have Learned"

Metaphysics, understood in its broadest sense, is the philosophical study of all reality whatsoever, including the reality of moral, political, epistemological, aesthetic, and other such properties. Dualistic metaphysical thinking conceives of reality as divided by a series of irreconcilable oppositions, such as good versus evil, truth versus falsehood, the desire for power versus the desire for freedom, independence versus dependence, activity versus passivity, and so on. The *Star Wars* narrative opens with a series of dualistic oppositions, but

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these oppositions begin to break down as we develop a better understanding of a wider story. In a similar way, certain dualistic oppositions begin to break down for Luke Skywalker as he struggles to discern the truth of his own narrative. Luke had been told that his father was killed by Darth Vader. At first, he passively accepts this narrative as a straightforward representation of a simple truth, and he does not see the need to actively interpret what it really means. The passively received truth is that Luke's father, one person, was killed by Darth Vader, another person. Later, once his true parentage is revealed by Vader and confirmed by Yoda, Luke rejects this narrative, regarding it as a lie. To the extent that Luke is capable of regarding the narrative only as either straightforwardly true or false – as something that can only be passively received or actively rejected – he remains within the grip of dualistic metaphysical thinking which fails to appreciate the possible interplay of truth and falsehood, appearance and reality, goodness and evil, activity and passivity.

With time, Luke becomes initiated into a broader, non-dualistic metaphysical view of the matter. He learns to see that the original story about Darth Vader and his father actually manifests a deeper truth; but his learning depends on Luke's ability to stop being a merely passive recipient and start becoming an active interpreter and participant in the truth. Luke's Jedi training can't be complete if it's based only on passively received stories about the past; Luke must actively enter into a direct, lived encounter with Darth Vader himself. Luke learns that the real truth isn't that one person simply killed another person. The truth is that the person who was Luke's father took on the identity of Darth Vader; and in taking on this identity, he effectively destroyed Luke's father as a Jedi role model that Luke might emulate. Once Luke learns to be both a passive recipient and active interpreter of his own story, he can recognize that the narrative given to him wasn't merely a deceptive appearance; it was an appearance which called for further interpretation and discernment, and which was able to reveal a deeper truth about Darth Vader and – as he learned in the cave on Dagobah – about himself. As we, the audience, learn about Luke's story, we too are invited to leave behind our initial, dualistic worldview which erects a fixed, unbridgeable gulf between truth and falsity, reality and appearance, activity and passivity, observation and participation.

To initiate ourselves further into a non-dualistic way of apprehending the world, we can consider the insights of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). According to Spinoza, no idea – considered simply in itself – is

untrue; *all* ideas are true simply *as ideas*. However, it's possible for an idea to be *more or less true*, depending on whether the idea is more or less connected with other ideas. Consider the idea that "There is a winged bantha." If I were to apprehend this idea and no others, then, according to Spinoza, I'd be right to conclude that there really does exist such a thing as a winged bantha; for, at the very least, there's a winged bantha in my imagination or in my dreams. The idea that there's a winged bantha becomes more or less true, however, to the extent that this idea is connected with other ideas which either include or preclude the idea of a winged bantha. For example, I might realize that the idea of a winged bantha is regularly connected to ideas which are associated with the idea of being in a dream-state, but regularly disconnected from ideas which are associated with the idea of being awake. As long as I apprehend the idea of a winged bantha and no other ideas, Spinoza argues, I have no reason to doubt that there's such a thing as a winged bantha, and I'm not making a mistake in concluding that there really does exist a winged bantha. It's only when I connect the idea of a winged bantha with other ideas of mine that I can conclude that a winged bantha exists, but not in the way that I had originally conceived – for example, the winged bantha exists in my imagination, or in my dreams, or in a chapter (namely, this one) which makes use of the idea of a winged bantha in order to convey a philosophical point.[1]

Consider the idea that "Luke loves Leia." That idea is true, according to Spinoza, simply insofar as that idea exists in the mind of some intelligent being. But that idea becomes more or less true depending on how it's connected with other ideas. At first we might think that "Luke loves Leia" is true without qualification, and thus that his love includes the possibility of a sexual relationship – especially after that now-awkward kiss in *The Empire Strikes Back*! Only later do we learn that the idea of Luke includes the idea of being a sibling to Leia, and that the idea of siblingship excludes the idea of a sexual relationship between them – an idea that took Han a little too long to grasp when Leia professes her love for Luke on the moon of Endor in *Return of the Jedi*.

What about the idea that "Han Solo is a mercenary"? That idea is true, considered in itself; but as we later learn, that idea is true only with qualifications, since that idea can be coherently connected with other ideas about Han which exclude purely mercenary behavior. What about the idea that "Darth Vader is evil"? True enough; but once again, when that idea is connected with other ideas about Vader,

we're led to second-guess our earlier judgments and thus realize that Vader is also good in some respects. We can see here how the non-dualistic metaphysics endorsed by *Star Wars* and Spinoza provides an important lesson about what it means to have a true idea about something. The more you know about a thing – the greater number of other ideas you're able to connect coherently with your idea of that thing – the less inclined you'll be to make immediate, unqualified, all-or-nothing claims about that thing. No wonder the virtue of patience (in both judgment and action) is an extremely important Jedi virtue.

"The Force Is What Gives a Jedi His Power"

For Spinoza, it's a mistake to think that there's a simple, unbridgeable, dualistic opposition between truth and falsehood, reality and appearance, goodness and evil, activity and passivity. Similarly, it's a mistake to think that there's a simple opposition between those who seek power and those who don't. According to Spinoza, all things – regardless of whether we characterize them as "good" or "evil" – necessarily seek power, a tendency Spinoza calls "conatus," often translated as striving, endeavor, impulse, inclination, drive, urge, energy, effort, or exertion.[2]

If all things seek power, it'd follow that even the Rebels, no less than their "evil" Imperial opponents, seek power. From Spinoza's point of view, it's superficial to think that the difference between what we call "good" and what we call "evil" is that the good seek power for "good purposes," while the evil seek power for "evil purposes." When something seeks power for "good" (or "evil") purposes, the achievement of such "good" (or "evil") purposes is just the thing's way of exerting its influence upon the world, and thus imprinting upon the world a sort of "stamp" that signifies its power.

Jedi Masters Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi conceive of the Force in much the same way that Spinoza conceived of "conatus." Yoda tells Luke that the Force is all around us: "Here, between you, me, the tree, the rock, everywhere." Similarly, Obi-Wan explains to Luke that all things participate in the Force and have their place in the galaxy on account of the Force, which "binds the galaxy together." The Force isn't simply inside or outside of us, but it "penetrates" and "surrounds" us. Furthermore, the Force is responsible for endowing things with power. Without any hint of embarrassment or apology, Obi-wan tells Luke that "The Force is what gives a Jedi his power." In a similar vein, Yoda explains to Luke that his ability to use the

Force is his ability to have power: "For my ally is the Force. And a powerful ally it is."

If the Force is similar to what Spinoza calls "conatus," then perhaps the reason why there's a difference between the "light" and "dark" sides of the Force has nothing to do with the (misguided) idea that some things seek power and some don't. Perhaps, instead, the difference has to do with the way in which a particular thing goes about seeking power. Those aligned with the light side seek power in ways that enable and facilitate a "balance" in the way that all things seek power, while those aligned with the dark side engage in a "zero-sum game" in which some things gain power only by destroying other things – this is one way of understanding Obi-Wan's seemingly paradoxical claim in *Revenge of the Sith* that "only a Sith deals in absolutes."

According to a dualistic worldview, a thing's independence from other things is simply incompatible with its dependence on other things; a thing's own "internal" properties (e.g. the distance between Chewbacca's own head and feet) simply can't be determined by its "external" relations to other things (e.g. the distance between Chewbacca and the center of the planet Kashyyyk). For dualism, then, a thing's own "internal" property of seeking power must exist independently of what any other thing is or does. And this would entail, furthermore, that the power-seeking exercised by one thing will always be uncoordinated with instances of power-seeking by other things. And so uncoordinated, unharmonized instances of power-seeking will inevitably result in a zero-sum game in which the power-seeking of one thing must either destroy or be destroyed by the power-seeking of another thing – an idea expressed clearly by the Sith "Rule of Two" authored by Darth Bane: "Two there should be. No more, no less. One to embody power, the other to crave it."

By contrast, in a non-dualistic conception of the world, independence and dependence aren't simply and straightforwardly opposed to one other. The apparently independent, internal properties that belong to one thing *necessarily depend* on that thing's relations to other things. Thus, for example, the swampy planet of Dagobah has a greenish color which belongs to it as one of its own properties; but the planet wouldn't have this property if it didn't reflect certain wavelengths of light which were perceivable by sentient creatures. Similarly, the Wookiee species possesses a tall, upright body-frame which belongs to it as one of its own properties; but Wookiees possess this property only because the planet Kashyyyk has particular properties

of its own. If Kashyyyk didn't have its particular mass but was instead much more massive, then its gravitational pull would've allowed the evolution of only shorter, stouter (non-Wookiee) body-types – Ewoks perhaps?

According to non-dualistic metaphysics, a thing possesses its own seemingly self-determined properties only because of its *relations to other things*. Similarly, a thing's particular manner of seeking power isn't determined independently, in isolation from all other things, but depends on the way in which it's related to other power-seeking things. And so Emperor Palpatine's own manner of seeking power isn't just self-determined but also depends on the ways in which other power-seekers, including Darth Vader and Luke, go about seeking power. Palpatine seeks power by adjusting his plans to fit the characteristics and the anticipated actions of Vader and Luke. In turn, Vader and Luke seek power by trying to figure out what Palpatine's planning. What Palpatine's planning, in turn, depends on what he expects Vader and Luke will do, which again depends on what they think Palpatine's planning. Thus there emerges a feedback loop of anticipating, planning, anticipating how others will plan in light of one's own planning and anticipating, and so on. All instances of power-seeking are ultimately interrelated and reciprocally determine each other. No thing's power-seeking takes place independently of the properties and the effects of every other thing's power-seeking. And so the power-seeking exercised by all things always involves the possibility of mutual adjustment and coordination, and doesn't have to become an inevitably destructive zero-sum game among independent things. According to the non-dualistic metaphysics of the Jedi, power-seeking ultimately isn't a matter of domination or destruction, but of "balance." As Yoda observes in *The Clone Wars* (Season 1, Episode 10), "To answer power with power" in an all-or-nothing way "the Jedi way is not."

"An Energy Field Created by All Living Things"

Obi-Wan Kenobi explains to Luke that the Force is a kind of "energy field created by all living things." Yoda similarly explains that life "creates" the Force and "makes it grow." It's clear that there's an intimate connection between the Force and life; but what's the nature and meaning of this connection?

Two key properties of living things are the ability to metabolize materials from the environment and the ability to reproduce. By means of metabolism, living things keep themselves in existence (they maintain their power) by allowing parts of the world outside of them to become internalized and integrated as parts of themselves. By means of reproduction, living things extend their existence (they increase their power) by making more living things which bear the "stamp" of their own nature and efficacy. Furthermore, since each living thing is a replica of some earlier living thing, each living thing is defined by a plan or blueprint which it inherits from a source external to itself. Ewoks come from other Ewoks, Hutts come from other Hutts, and clone troopers come from Jango Fett.

Living things are like all other things: they strive to maintain and increase their power. But they're unique because their manner of power-seeking demonstrates in an especially clear way how non-dualistic metaphysics is true: how independence and dependence, activity and passivity, aren't simply opposed but in fact interpenetrate and codetermine one another. Living things maintain and extend their power, but not by rejecting the influence of external things upon themselves. They do so rather by receiving and internalizing the input of external things – by being independent and dependent, active and passive, all at once. Through metabolism, as the philosopher Hans Jonas (1903–1993) observes, a living thing exerts its own activity and identity by allowing parts of the external world to become part of itself: "its self-concern, active in the acquisition of new matter, is essential openness for the encounter of outer being."[3] A similarly non-dualistic interplay of activity and passivity, self-assertion and receptivity, independence and dependence, can be seen in the reproductive capacity of living things. Through reproduction, living things succeed at being themselves because they receive, and allow themselves to be defined by, a plan or blueprint they receive from other things (their genetic precursors). Furthermore, living things aren't just the effects but also the causes of reproduction: having passively received the genetic blueprint which makes them what they are, they also exert their own influence by actively imprinting the "stamp" of this blueprint on their offspring.

The non-dualistic interplay of activity and passivity, self-assertion and receptivity, independence and dependence, is further demonstrated through the psychological lives of human beings. Humans not only internalize material parts of the external world which become

parts of their own bodies; and they not only internalize from their precursors a genetic blueprint which determines their nature; they also internalize from their parents (and other role models like Jedi masters) a set of psychological characteristics which influence their own mental dispositions and personality traits. It's thus no surprise that Luke has inherited many of the mental abilities and flaws of his father, Darth Vader: like his father, Luke possesses a heightened sensitivity to the Force, but he's also prone to bouts of impatience and anger.

The success with which human beings grow, mature, and enhance their power as psychological agents depends on their ability to properly internalize the personality traits they've inherited, on their ability to properly negotiate between being active and passive, self-assertive and receptive, independent and dependent, in relation to their parents and other role models. At first, most people are in denial about the negative psychological dispositions they've inherited; most people are unable to recognize the extent to which they are "fated" – by parenting and upbringing – to have the psychological dispositions they have. But as psychoanalysis teaches us, the more we're in denial about our negative psychological traits, the less power we have over them, and the more they'll exercise a debilitating and mostly unconscious influence over us. This is one reason why the mythological story of Oedipus plays such a central role in psychoanalysis. According to the story, Oedipus learns that he's "fated" to kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus thinks he can avoid this inherited fate and independently choose his own destiny. In trying to avoid his inherited fate, Oedipus resolves never to return to Corinth, the town in which he grew up. But his attempt to escape his inherited fate only guarantees that it will be fulfilled: by staying away from Corinth and traveling toward Thebes, Oedipus sets up the very conditions under which he will kill his father and marry his mother.

Luke's story is similar to Oedipus's, though the outcome is quite different. Even after Luke accepts the biological fact that Darth Vader is his father, he wants to deny the psychological fact that he shares several of Vader's psychological characteristics. By initially trying to escape his fate, by disavowing his psychological similarity to Vader, Luke manifests the very characteristics that he'd inherited from his father: impatience, anger, a willingness to destroy. As psychoanalysis shows, the attempt to deny or disavow your fated psychological inheritance is self-defeating. The more Luke denies the inherited psychological dispositions he shares with Vader, the more he allows

those dispositions to operate powerfully (and unconsciously) within himself. Luke can gain maturity and power over those inherited dispositions only by internalizing them in the right way: by acknowledging them and taking responsibility for them as his own, even though they exist in him only because of his dependence on and relationship to his father.

Luke's initial psychological failure is also a metaphysical failure, for in trying at first to deny his psychological inheritance from Darth Vader, Luke remained in the grip of a dualistic metaphysics: he thought that he could affirm his own independence, self-determination, and goodness only by denying any substantial connection with dependence, fate, and evil. But, as we come to learn from the non-dualistic metaphysics of Spinoza and the Jedi, there's something metaphysically incoherent in Luke's initial attempt at combining three different ideas: "Darth Vader is evil," "I am good," and "I come from Darth Vader." In the end, Luke learns to move beyond simple metaphysical oppositions. He learns to recognize goodness in Vader and evil in himself, and as a result he enables Vader's redemption which, in turn, enables his own self-redemption.

Notes

1 Spinoza himself uses the example of a winged horse, not a winged bantha. See Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 49, Scholium. For a reliable English translation, see Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992), 99.
2 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Propositions 6–7.
3 Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 84.