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# Balance through Struggle: Understanding the Novel Cosmology of the Force in *The Last Jedi*

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*Abstract: This article examines the cosmology of the Force presented in the film Episode VIII: The Last Jedi in the context of how depictions of the Force have shifted since the release of Episode VII: The Force Awakens, and it offers a charitable interpretation the film's depiction of the Force. Tales from the Star Wars universe have described the relationship between the light and dark sides of the Force in two different, often incompatible, ways. Sometimes they have described a cosmotic relationship between good and evil where the light and dark sides of the Force are in conflict and strive to eliminate each other. This cosmotic view of the Force aligns with the cosmologies of religious traditions like Zoroastrianism and the Abrahamic traditions that eschew any notion of normative balance between good and evil. Other times, their relationship has appeared more in line with acosmotic cosmologies like Daoism that depict good and evil as necessary features of a larger whole that inevitably balance one another. Many fans hoped that The Last Jedi would continue the recent emphasis on an acosmotic view of the Force that started with The Force Awakens and was further emphasized in Star Wars Rebels by showing lead characters such as Rey and even Kylo Ren becoming Gray Jedi, Force users who rejected the cosmotic views of the Sith and Jedi by balancing the Force within themselves. Fans who hoped for the first canonical, filmic depiction of the Gray Jedi felt betrayed when the film appeared to default to a cosmotic view of the Force with the final fight between Rey and Kylo Ren. This article argues that the film, in fact, offers an acosmotic view of the Force commensurate with the Aztec idea of teotl, which describes reality as a dynamic process that balances itself through the conflict of matched opposites.*

Keywords: cosmology, Daoism, Augustine, Aztec, privation theory of evil, Star Wars

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## Introduction

Many a *Star Wars* fan hoped that *Episode VIII: The Last Jedi* would put an end to the battle that has raged at the heart of the *Star Wars* universe for decades; not the physical contest between the Jedi and the Sith or the political struggle between the empire and the Republic but, rather, the dispute between Augustine and Laozi about the nature of the Force in *Star Wars* (Johnson 2017a).<sup>1</sup> They hoped the film would finally answer the question: is the Force a morally good cosmic will superior to, and dogged by, its corrupted dark side, or is the Force a balance of the light and the dark where both sides are necessary and natural? This article enters this debate by reframing it with the question: “is the Force part of a *Star Wars* universe that is cosmotic or acosmotic?” Sometimes the Force in *Star Wars* aligns with cosmotic belief systems that hold that there is really only one true thing or order in the universe, that it is morally

good, and that evil is just a corruption of this one, true thing. The *Star Wars* universe appears cosmotic when it depicts a cosmic arena wherein two combatants—the good light side of the Force and the evil dark side—duke it out eternally like the divine and fallen forces in Zoroastrianism and the Abrahamic religions.<sup>2</sup> However, at other times, the light and dark sides of the Force relate to each other more like dancers or waves that renew the ocean through their eternal ebb and flow. In these moments, the Force echoes the acosmotic ontologies more common among Asian belief systems such as Daoism that rest on a cosmology that is process-oriented rather than teleological (MacMullan 2012; Robinson 2005). *Star Wars* fans have argued for decades about the relationship between the light side and the dark side of the Force without a clear resolution because the *Star Wars* films and expanded universe are replete with both cosmotic and acosmotic depictions of the Force.

But then the 2015 release of *Star Wars, Episode VII: The Force Awakens* seemed to break this stalemate by tipping the scales in favour of an acosmotic view of the Force (Abrams 2015). Many fans hoped that the new creators at Disney might even sanction the ultimate expression of an acosmotic view of the Force in *Star Wars*: the Gray Jedi who had long been a staple of the games and novels of the *Star Wars* expanded universe, but who had not yet received the imprimatur of a reference within a canonical film.<sup>3</sup> Where the light-side Jedi and dark-side Sith lend themselves to a cosmotic interpretation of the Force, the Gray Jedi—with their belief that both sides of the Force must be balanced within the spirit of the Gray Jedi—represent the ideal of the acosmotic view that good and evil are not antagonists but, rather, facets of the Force. The hope that the following film, *The Last Jedi*, might finally reward the *Star Wars* faithful with the first Gray Jedi in a canonical film was stoked by countless theories on fan sites and even *Star Wars* creators themselves (McCluskey 2017). However, despite the fact that the first two-thirds of the film emphasized the theme of balance between light and dark, the hope that the film would depict a Gray Jedi balancing the Force within themselves was dashed by the climactic scene where Rey and Kylo Ren vied against each other for Luke's lightsaber. After this scene, the film reverted back to the cosmotic struggle of Jedi against Sith. *Star Wars* fans bemoaned the lost opportunity to depict good and evil co-existing within the Force, in favour of the more simplistic message that good and evil must inevitably try to destroy each other.

This article offers a more charitable interpretation of how the Force is depicted in *The Last Jedi* and proposes that it does in fact offer a nuanced view of balance within the Force, just not one that its critics were expecting. After summarizing cosmotic and acosmotic moral ontologies and illustrating some of their most prominent appearances in the *Star Wars* universe, it argues that the conflict between Kylo Ren and Rey at the end of *The Last Jedi* need not entail a rejection of an acosmotic view of the Force. Even though Rey and Kylo Ren were thrown back into their roles as light and dark antagonists after coming tantalizingly close to being Gray allies, we can still see the Force as achieving balance through their struggle. *The Last Jedi* offers a novel depiction of a Force in balance that bears great resemblance to a belief system that blends the processive cosmology of acosmotic belief systems like Daoism with the agonistic elements of cosmotic systems like Zoroastrianism and the Abrahamic religions. We can both make better sense of the intimate, but combative, relationship between Kylo and Rey at the end of *The Last Jedi* and also draw merited scholarly attention to a complex, but insufficiently studied, cosmological system by attending to the Aztec ideal of *teotl*.

The Nahuatl-speaking Mexica people who established the Aztec civilization within the Valley of Mexico taught that all things are *teotl*. *Teotl* was neither a divine being nor the totality of all static things but, rather, a living process that balanced and recreated itself through the often violent conflict of matched opposites (Maffie 2014, 152). Reading *The Last Jedi* through *teotl* offers a more charitable interpretation of this film's cosmology of the Force and, more

importantly, illustrates how *teotl* combines elements of cosmotic views that emphasize the struggle between good and evil with elements of acosmotic views that see all things in balance. Placing the cosmological teachings of Aztec *tlamatinime* (sages) in dialogue with those propounded by familiar figures such as Plato, Augustine, and Laozi broadens our moral and cultural horizons of meaning and reveals a new valence to the relationship between good and evil (León-Portilla 1990, 20; Maffie 2014, 1). Aztec cosmology warrants greater attention if for no other reason than that it stands as a unique *tertium quid* between the process metaphysic that is common to many Asian belief systems and the more static ontologies of Zoroastrian, Abrahamic, and Greco-Roman traditions.

Further, respectfully studying and engaging Aztec philosophy and cosmology helps correct centuries of concerted Eurocentric cultural genocide that depicted the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, including the Mexica people of the Aztec civilization, as lacking any sophisticated philosophical thought or religious systems. The denial of the existence of Indigenous thought, like Aztec cosmology, was a necessary justification for colonialism. For example, the German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel (2004, 86) famously dismissed the totality of the Americas as being philosophically immature (*umreife*) and bereft of history: “America is therefore the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World’s History shall reveal itself.” The careful study of the cosmology of the Aztec *tlamatinime* is a humble, but meaningful, correction of the myth that they lacked significant thought—that devastating lie that Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel (1995, 97) refers to as the “myth that supported domination and militarism, and anticipated the myth of modernity.”

### **Light and Darkness: Cosmotic and Acosmotic Views of the Force**

Virtually every adventure, conflict, and storyline in the *Star Wars* universe plays out against the background of a Force that has a light side and a dark side. *Star Wars* became an immediate, global phenomenon in large part because it portrayed a cosmic struggle between good and evil that was vivid enough to resonate with the audience but general enough so that any person, from any religion or background, could identify with the heroes and root for their struggle against the villains. This universality was completely intentional; George Lucas, adhering to Joseph Campbell’s concept of the mono-myth, believed that all moral teachings share certain core messages about good and evil (Campbell et al. 2001). Lucas envisioned *Star Wars* as a galactic version of this one mythic story that would crystalize the basic truths that he believed resided in the heart of every religion or philosophy (Campbell et al. 2001; Moyers 1999). For Lucas, this was the idea that we all face an internal struggle between kindness, selflessness, and compassion, on the one side, and greed, corruption, and cruelty, on the other (Seastrom 2015).

As a result, *Star Wars* is a kind of spiritual Rorschach test; when commentators describe what they see in *Star Wars*, they often say far more about what they bring to it than what they find in it. This is why there is an entire cottage industry of books that say: “*Star Wars* is really about my creed/philosophy/religion.” We have Christian *Star Wars* in *The Gospel According to Star Wars* (McDowell 2017) and *Star Wars Jesus* (Grimes 2007), Buddhist *Star Wars* with *The Dharma of Star Wars* (Bortolin 2005), Daoist *Star Wars* as described by *The Tao of Star Wars* (Porter 2003), and Hindu *Star Wars* with *The Jedi in the Lotus: Star Wars and the Hindu Tradition* (Rosen 2010). However, since Lucas designed *Star Wars* as a trans-cultural mythic morality tale that could appeal to any person from any culture, the moral framework of the *Star Wars* universe contains discrepancies and has drawn criticism for cultural appropriation (Westmore 2000). Philosophical commentators have long described numerous moral

and philosophical inconsistencies within the *Star Wars* universe, including the fact that the films depict the Force through incompatible conceptions of good and evil (Dees 2005; Dunn 2015; Fader 2005).

Sometimes the relationship between the morally good light and the morally evil dark fits a cosmotic moral ontology where good and evil are mismatched opponents in a cosmic battle. The cosmotic view assumes that good is in some way more real, or at least more in line with the deepest workings of reality, than evil and that evil is meaningfully inferior or defective. Roger Ames and David Hall (2004, 14) describe a cosmotic moral ontology as the “notion of a single-ordered Divine universe governed by natural and moral laws.” This is the version of the Force that borrows its depiction of good and evil from cosmotic moral systems like Zoroastrianism, Platonism, and Augustine’s influential conception of Christianity. In all of these systems, the universe is marked by a constant, cosmic struggle between good and evil, light and dark, soul and body, peace and turmoil. The oldest manifestation of this dualism appears in the *Gathas*, the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism, which “identifies the essence of evil as being completely other than that of good” (Rose 2011, 692). Moral goodness is associated with “Ahura Mazda as the sole creator of the universe in a state of perfection and goodness” (692). The Jedi wage battle against the Sith for millennia, just as Ahura Mazda and his followers are eternally “arrayed against a counter-organization of seven evil forces headed by Angra Mainyu” (693).

*Star Wars* also depicts the Force in ways that are commensurate with belief systems that understand the relationship between good and evil according to a privation theory of evil. In this conception, there is really just one thing, either good or light, and evil and darkness are absences of that one thing. George Dunn (2015, 197) explains this theory in the context of *Star Wars* in his article “Why the Force Must Have a Dark Side”: “Evil, on this view, isn’t something that actually exists in its own right. It’s simply the absence of good, a lack rather than a tangible presence. When that Death Star blasts Alderaan into oblivion, the evil consists in the sudden loss of a lot of goodness.” Two correlates of this theory are that, first, moral behaviour is a kind of naturalism: being good is being natural whereas evil behaviour is artificial and unnatural. Second, good and evil are not equivalent to each other in terms of reality, because goodness is more real than evil. Dunn cites the greatest disseminator of the privation theory of evil, Augustine of Hippo, who equated “God with Being-in-Itself, the most complete and fulsome expression of existence, as well as with the Good-in-Itself, the epitome of every form of perfection. On this view, *being* and *goodness* are correlates of each other, so that everything else that exists has a share of goodness simply by existing” (198; emphasis added). Augustine adapted this privation theory to a Christian context from the neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus, who in turn expounded on Plato’s argument that the forms were both more real than and the original source of the objects of the inferior material realm (Yount 2017).

A crucial point to remember about cosmotic views of good and evil when discussing the recent changes in how the Force is depicted in *Star Wars* films is that these viewpoints do not advocate that good and evil should be balanced. Plato does not believe that reason should occasionally cede control of the soul to the appetites; justice is when everything does its job, which means that within the soul of a just person the appetite obeys reason (Plato 1996, 137). Neither Augustine nor the Zoroastrians believed in finding the right amount of evil to balance out excessive good. Evil, by its nature, is an abomination in this view because it is the absence of the only true thing, which is good. As Augustine (2009, 320) wrote in *The City of God*, “evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name ‘evil’.”

Key figures in *Star Wars*, especially Jedi, frequently describe the light and dark sides of the Force cosmotically. One of the most telling cosmotic portrayals of the Force in *Star Wars*

pertains to the fact that no one ever says “the *Light side* of the Force” in the original trilogy. Obi-Wan teaches Luke about what he simply calls “the Force”: the power he believes guides and fortifies the actions of the Jedi. Obi-Wan and Yoda offer young Luke cautionary tales about the dangers of succumbing to the “Dark side of the Force.” By using the term “the Force” and not the qualified “the Light side of the Force,” the original trilogy emphasizes the cosmotic idea that moral goodness is not just preferable or commendable to evil. The moral goodness of the Force is natural and primary for the Jedi; thus, it is for them just “the Force,” whereas the evil side is the one that needs the special modifier, “the dark side.”

Obi-Wan further strengthens the cosmotic depiction of the Force when he tells Luke that Vader was once a Jedi who was seduced by the dark side’s promise of unnatural power. Because of his submission to the dark side, he became less real or, as Obi-Wan puts it, “twisted and evil, more machine than man.” This echoes the Christian and Platonic beliefs that if you are seduced away from the one true thing—either God or the Good—you become less real. This is why Augustine (2009, 347) argues that moral evil stems from a prideful act of rebellion, explaining that when a “will abandons what is above itself, and turns to what is lower, it becomes evil—not because that is evil to which it turns, but because the turning itself is wicked.” We hear a similar cosmotic caution from Yoda in *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* when he warns Luke that if he gives in to the dark side it will ultimately enslave him: “Beware the dark side. Anger, fear, aggression; the dark side of the Force are they. Easily they flow, quick to join you in a fight. If once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny, consume you it will, as it did Obi-Wan’s apprentice” (Kershner 1980). Even the Sith emphasize this cosmotic depiction when figures like Palpatine, Vader, and Kylo Ren brag about “the power of the dark side” (and not, say, “the true Force that the foolish Jedi mistakenly call ‘dark’”). The fact that they are aware of their Faustian bargain with the dark side of the Force reinforces the cosmotic depiction of the Force as being bifurcated into a light and dark.

Cosmotic philosophies assume that the rift between good and evil necessitates a total war between the two. We clearly see this cosmotic battle in the devastating galactic struggles between the empire and the rebellion and between the Sith and the Jedi. Even though they stand for good, the Jedi make no attempt to rehabilitate or coexist with the Sith. From the point of view of Jedi piety, the age-old war can only be resolved through the utter eradication of the errant followers of the dark side. Obi-Wan and Yoda scold Luke when he confides his doubts about killing his own father and his hope that Anakin might still be redeemed. By insisting that he must physically confront Vader and by refusing to accept that he might be redeemable, they reflect the absolutist mentality of the Christian crusaders, who argued that they were technically not committing homicide (the killing of a human being) but malecide (the eradication of an evil that just happens to be inside a human being). This handy fallacy of equivocation was concocted by the theologian of the Knights Templar, the venerable Bernard of Clairvaux, who “announced the Templars as the champions of a higher struggle in which homicide, which was evil in Christian eyes, was really malecide, that is the killing of evil itself, which was good” (Haag 2009, 103). Finally, at no point do we ever hear a Jedi in the first six films speak about the need to balance the light and the dark. Whenever they hear about the existence of the Sith, the imperative to eradicate them is axiomatic. For the Jedi, the only balance they understand—the balance they think of when they remember the Prophecy of the Chosen One—is the balance that will happen with the elimination of the Sith. Balance for them is not an equal distribution of Sith and Jedi, but the total destruction of the imbalanced Sith and the unchallenged supremacy of the balanced Jedi. This cosmotic view of the Force enjoys a kind of heavenly *eschaton* at the end of *Episode VI: The Return of the Jedi* when the rebels and the

Ewoks rejoice in the final destruction of evil on the Edenic paradise of Endor (Marquand 1983).

However, while the light and the dark sides of the Force often appear to function like the cosmic antagonists of good and evil in Zoroastrianism and the Abrahamic religions, they appear at other times to be far more like the paired opposites of acosmotic cosmologies such as Daoism. This view eschews the privation theory of evil as well as a being-centred metaphysic in favour of a processive metaphysic that emphasizes the balance of light and dark, not their struggle. As Roger Ames and David Hall (2004, 14) explain, “the Daoist understanding of ‘Cosmos’ as the ‘ten thousand things’ means that, in effect, the Daoists have no concept of cosmos at all insofar as that notion entails a coherent, single-ordered world which is in any sense enclosed or defined. The Daoists are, therefore, primarily, ‘acosmotic’ thinkers.” Daoism teaches that everything is part of the Dao and that what we perceive as individual things are in fact processes within the Dao that are related to all other movements within the Dao. Daoism does not hold to the idea that we are moving toward an end, like the *eschaton* of the Abrahamic traditions. Instead, it teaches that the Dao is in a perpetual state of becoming or a process of developing integrity as “consummatory relatedness” whereby things become whole through their inter-relatedness with all other things” (16). This notion of the Dao as relatedness is explained perfectly in the very first lesson we learn about the Force, when Obi-Wan describes the Force in *Episode IV: A New Hope* as “an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together” (Lucas 1977).

Perhaps the quintessential acosmotic feature of Daoism is its teachings about yin and yang. Yin and yang are not described as being in conflict with each other nor is yin the absence of yang. Instead, they are interrelated elements of the Dao that balance and mutually define each other. In Stephen Mitchell’s (1999, ch. 5) translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, we read that the ultimate truth of the Tao is bigger than either good or evil:

The Tao doesn’t take sides;  
It gives birth to both good and evil.  
The Master doesn’t take sides;  
She welcomes both saints and sinners.

Where Augustine judges the moral worth of an action according to its proximity to the ultimate truth of God’s will, acosmotic philosophers like Laozi reject such privation theories of evil in favour of a processive cosmology that relies on a naturalized conception of good and evil. As Master Waysun Liao (1990, 17) explains, “[a]ccording to the legendary theory of Yin and Yang, *ch’i* exercises its powers ceaselessly, moving in a balanced manner between the positive (constructive) and the negative (destructive) powers.”

One of the clearest connections between *Star Wars* and Daoism has to do with the Daoist precept of *wuwei* or “non-coercive action” (Laozi 2004, 32). Daoism counsels us to avoid acting according to formal norms in favour of acting spontaneously, naturally and simply; as Obi-Wan tells Luke during his first lightsaber lesson: “You must learn to act on instinct.” The Daoist ideal of *wuwei* is even more clearly illustrated in the climax of *A New Hope* when Luke is speeding through a trench on the Death Star as part of mission to strike the base’s one vulnerability. He turns on his tracking computer, only to hear Obi-Wan’s spirit urging him to “use the Force” and, even more Daoist, to “let go.” It is only when Luke turns off the computer and feels his connection to the Force that he is able to effortlessly do what he needs to do by doing as little as possible (Lucas 1977).

While acosmotic belief systems like Daoism and cosmotic ones like Augustinian Christianity both influence *Star Wars*, they do not cohere well. Laozi (2004) would reject Abrahamic moral cosmology as being too rigid, and Augustine (2009) would reject the idea that good and evil are just interrelated manifestations of one eternal process as a prideful error. Laozi strives for a fluid balance that avoids conflict, where Plato, Zoroaster, and Augustine all see us thrown inexorably into an *agon* of good against evil and the soul against the flesh. Thus, to recall the question from the start of this article: are the Jedi like Daoist monks who reach out with their feelings and strive to accept the interrelatedness of all things, or are they like Christian crusaders ever vigilant of the depredations of the dark side and zealous in their pursuit of the evil Sith? Many *Star Wars* fans hoped that the new trilogy would clarify this once and for all.

### **A Disturbance in the Force: Recent Shifts in the Depiction of the Force in *Star Wars***

The 2015 release of *The Force Awakens* signalled that the *Star Wars* creative team at Disney might resolve this tension by emphasizing an acosmotic view of the Force in the new storylines. A significant early indicator of this change was the fact that the enigmatic villain of *The Force Awakens*, the voluble and brooding Kylo Ren, did not fit comfortably into the mould of a conventional villain from a cosmotic cosmology. Kylo Ren struggled openly with his commitment to the dark side of the Force. In a unique confluence of pop culture and ancient tradition, the Vatican's newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, the media outlet of the world's most venerable authority on cosmotic notions of good and evil, chided director Jeffrey J. Abrams, saying his film "fails most spectacularly in its representation of evil" (Child 2015). The Vatican was troubled by *The Force Awakens*'s inversion of the Augustinian concept of seduction with a scene wherein Kylo Ren confesses to the fact that he felt seduced by the light! This would not only be heretical in Augustine's eyes but impossible, like falling up or being too faithful to God!

The animated (and canonical) television show *Star Wars Rebels* (2014–18) continued this movement away from a cosmotic view of good and evil with their 24 September 2016 episode "Steps into Shadows," where we hear a conversation between Kanan, a rogue but good Jedi, and a strange Force-using creature on the planet Atollon named Bendu (Ridge, Bosco, and Zwyer 2016). Bendu's name is significant because it is a clear reference to Jolee Bindo, a non-player character in the immensely popular 2003 game *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* who was the first character in the *Star Wars* expanded universe to self-describe as a Gray Jedi. When asked by Kanan if he is allied with the Jedi or the Sith, Bendu explains his relationship to the Force by describing it in expressly acosmotic terms, saying "*Jedi and Sith wield the Ashla and Bogan, the light and the dark. I'm the one in the middle. The Bendu.*" By including a character in a canonical story whose name is a reference to the first Gray Jedi and who speaks like a Gray Jedi, the *Star Wars* creators took another step toward establishing the acosmotic view of the Force as definitive.

The eagerly anticipated and minutely dissected trailers for *The Last Jedi* further bolstered the hope among fans that *Star Wars* creators would lead the saga deeper into acosmotic terrain. In the first teaser trailer, we hear Luke counselling Rey to "breathe. Just breathe." He tells her to reach out then asks: "What do you see?" She answers: "Light ... darkness ... the balance," to which Luke replies: "It's so much bigger" (Johnson 2017b). The clear implication is that the old view, the view of light against darkness, is small and dogmatic compared to the greater truth of the balance of these two forces. The hope that the new trilogy would depict a subtler view of the Force was reinforced by Luke's ominous proclamation: "I only know one truth: it's time for the Jedi to end." Finally, in case there was any doubt that the new trilogy

would offer a new take on the Force, we hear Luke's nephew Kylo Ren urge Rey to "let the past die. Kill it if you must." These trailers led to a veritable feeding frenzy of speculation about whether or not the Gray Jedi would finally make an appearance in a *Star Wars* film. In "Rey or Luke Will Likely Become Gray Jedi, According to the 'Star Wars: The Last Jedi' Trailer" (a hugely influential post that summed up the fan *zeitgeist* of the day and was shared over 20,000 times), author [Brian McCormick \(2017\)](#) parsed the trailers and official posters for the film to support his claim that the film would reveal that "Rey is actually the Gray Jedi" capable of "using philosophies of both sides of the Force."

When *The Last Jedi* was released in 2017, it seemed that the hope of an acosmotic *Star Wars* complete with Force-balancing Gray Jedi was justified. Or at least it appeared so for the first two-thirds of the film. It presented a jaded Luke who spoke like a cynical, lapsed Catholic who repudiated his old views as embarrassingly dogmatic. He chided the Jedi for their presumptuousness at pretending to speak for the entirety of the Force and their arrogance for thinking they could ever obliterate the dark side. The greatest indicator that *The Last Jedi* continued *Star Wars'* movement away from the cosmotic view of the Force was the long-distance pseudo-romance between Kylo Ren and Rey. The two antagonists manifested character traits associated with their opposite. Rey was uncharacteristically aggressive by firing a blaster at Kylo's phantasm and snarling threats at him, while Kylo showed an oddly genial side, quizzically asking: "Can you see my surroundings? I can see you but not your surroundings" ([Johnson 2017a](#)). Their Force-mediated conversations brought them so close that astral-projected Kylo and Rey virtually held hands like awkward teenagers, which prompted Luke, playing his best angry dad storming into the basement when things got too quiet, to dispel Kylo's presence. The two-year-long buildup toward an acosmotic view of the Force comes to a head when Kylo and Rey fight side by side against Snoke's Praetorian Guard. The slow motion start to the fight frames the pair in the centre of the screen surrounded by enemies, symbolizing that like Bendu they stand in the middle of the Force. Kylo risks his life to save an agent of good and eliminates the evil supreme leader just before Rey kills with a lightsaber for the first time. After a gritty fight sequence during which the pair seamlessly weave their attacks to dispatch their deadly foes, Kylo Ren reaches out his hand to Rey and asks her to join him in creating a new galaxy without Sith or Jedi.

This is the moment many faithful were waiting for, when Kylo Ren and Rey would finally step beyond the simple dichotomy of good versus evil and find balance together as allied Gray Jedi! Their alliance would be the logical culmination of creative shift toward an acosmotic depiction of the Force! Rey lifts her hand but then attempts to Force-pull Luke's lightsaber from Kylo! Kylo is as stunned as the audience, and the two are immediately thrown into a battle of wills that sunders Luke's lightsaber along with their burgeoning friendship and any hope that Rey would become a Gray Jedi. It was as if in the moment of their closest intimacy, they were forced to resume their antagonism.<sup>4</sup> From this point on, all gentleness in Kylo Ren is gone. He becomes the Force-choking, vein popping, "More!" screaming Supreme Leader hell-bent on destroying Luke and any remnant of the Jedi legacy. Rey becomes a beatific, rock-lifting saviour anointed by Luke as the last Jedi. This left many to wonder what happened to "the Jedi must end," and all the talk about balance, not to mention the flirty chemistry between Rey and Kylo Ren. It seemed that all of the buildup toward a new view of the Force was false advertising; the trailers hinted at an acosmotic Force balanced within Gray Jedi but delivered a good-guys-versus-bad-guys space western.

*The Last Jedi* provided fans with a surfeit of targets for their criticism. However, unlike the racist complaints about too many people of colour and the sexist complaints about too many prominent women, [Kofi Outlaw \(2017\)](#) raised a cogent critique in his 19 December



2017 piece “Why ‘Star Wars: The Last Jedi’ Misses a Big Gray Jedi Opportunity,” where he argued that “not going the route of the Gray Jedi may have been a big missed opportunity for *The Last Jedi*’s narrative and thematic arc.” His assessment perfectly summarized the lost hope felt by many fans who believed that *The Last Jedi* would cover new moral ground:

The Last Jedi is grasping for something beyond the concepts of the past. And yet, by the end, the movie seems to revert back into tradition: Kylo Ren becomes the fallen Jedi in full, Rey is the new hope, etc. It’s a fine rehash of Empire Strikes Back, but could’ve been something more, if one or both characters had to walk some new middle ground.

So while the new creative team signalled for over two years that they would emphasize the acosmotic view of the Force that had been latent in the stories for decades, it appeared that *The Last Jedi* defaulted to the cosmotic tale of good versus evil rather than good and evil in balance.

But perhaps *The Last Jedi* did not miss the opportunity to introduce an acosmotic view of the Force by including a Gray Jedi. Perhaps it offered a novel depiction of the Force as both in balance and in conflict. As luck would have it (if you, unlike Obi-Wan, even believe in luck!), James Maffie (2014) recently published *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*, which presents a careful description of Nahuatl cosmology that also happens to be a useful hermeneutical frame for charitably understanding the cosmology of *The Last Jedi*. It describes an Aztec ontology that is similar to Daoism, in that it is deeply processive and dynamic. However, where Daoism emphasized a gentle and non-coercive *wuwei* as means of being in harmony with the Dao, Aztec sages taught that, while the entire world and all things in it are part of one interrelated, complex, and dynamic life process they called *teotl*, they did not describe *teotl* through gentle metaphors like Daoism’s still water or the uncarved block (Ames and Hall 2004, 36; Maffie 2014, 152). *Teotl* was indeed a processive and self-balancing unity; however, it was a unity that balanced itself through an uncountable number of conflicts between matched, co-defining, and co-creating polar opposites.

This article argues that if we view *The Last Jedi* through the lens of the Aztec ideal of *teotl* we see a new facet of the Force that borrows elements of both cosmotic and acosmotic cosmologies that have been prevalent in earlier *Star Wars* tales. The problem was that the critics of the ending of *The Last Jedi* assumed that an acosmotic view of the Force would require the protagonists to become Gray Jedi striving toward Daoist balance. Instead, *The Last Jedi* depicts an acosmotic Force that strives for dynamic balance through, not in spite of, conflict. This is precisely the central trait of the Aztec idea of *teotl*: the cosmic totality that revivifies itself through the violent clashing of opposites. *Teotl* not only offers us a richer possible understanding of various fundamental religious and philosophical concepts relating to morality, balance, and the nature of good and evil, but it also helps correct the racist assumption that the peoples of the Americas have nothing to offer humanity’s vitally necessary reflections on and discussions about good, evil, and the nature of the universe.

### **Balance through Conflict: The Aztec Philosophy of the Force**

The acosmotic features of *The Last Jedi* are easy to miss as such because they are part of an acosmotic cosmology less studied and far grittier than the widely known and gentle instructions of Daoism. While there is indeed light in Kylo and darkness in Rey, the film shows us a version of the Force that cannot be balanced fully within one person, as the critics cited earlier expected. If it could, it might well end up like Anaximander’s *apeiron* or “indeterminate boundless”: the hypothetical original stuff of the universe that had no particular traits, and was neither hot nor

cold, wet nor dry (Copleston 1950, 25). This version of the Force would resemble nothing so much as lukewarm, gray mud, and a galaxy populated by Gray Jedi would be about as interesting. Instead, *The Last Jedi* advances a view of the Force in balance through the conflict of opposites and, thus, echoes the Aztec ideal of *teotl*, which shares elements of both Daoist balance as well as the Augustinian and Zoroastrian *agon* between light and darkness.

This article does not argue that the creators of *The Last Jedi* had Aztec philosophy in mind when they made their film. Instead, it hopes to add to the extensive scholarly literature that rests on the assumption that scholarly explorations of pop culture provide the opportunity for hermeneutical interactions between pop culture phenomena, on the one hand, and foundational and propaedeutic beliefs, on the other. These studies deepen our appreciation of popular cultural artefacts and give us a stronger grasp on concepts that can aid us as we struggle with the vicissitudes of our lives. In this case, *teotl* adds a new voice to the discussion about good and evil in *Star Wars* that might help viewers better appreciate the much-maligned film *The Last Jedi*. Also, just as *Star Wars* has helped illuminate religious and philosophical concepts from myriad traditions for countless students, so *The Last Jedi* might help us understand and appreciate the value of Aztec cosmology, which has received scant attention. The Aztec concept of *teotl* enables the viewer to have a charitable reading of the renewed conflict between Rey and Kylo Ren that is in line with the acosmotic message of balance that has been prominent in the *Star Wars* universe for the last few years. The sad story of Rey and Kylo Ren's failed friendship and botched romance reminds us, to use a prominent metaphor from the Nahuatl poetry, that we walk along a slippery path. Our lives are filled inexorably with pain, failure, and conflict, which we cannot always mitigate, no matter how hard we try (Maffie 2014, 401).

James Maffie's (2014) Aztec Philosophy stands as a valuable work of scholarship if for no other reason than it proves that Aztec people developed a philosophical system every bit as sophisticated and as applicable to our lives as those developed by the peoples of Ancient China, Greece, or India. Maffie opens a window on a philosophical and religious worldview that sees all things as being connected through a living, protean energy called *teotl*:

At the heart of Aztec metaphysics stands the ontological thesis that there exists just one thing: continually dynamic, vivifying, self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force or energy. The Aztecs referred to this energy as *teotl*. *Teotl* is identical with reality per se and hence identical with everything that exists. What's more, *teotl* is the basic stuff of reality. That which is real, in other words, is both identical with *teotl* and consists of *teotl*. Aztec metaphysics thus holds that there exists numerically one thing—energy—as well as only one *kind* of thing—energy. (21–22)

Addressing the shared acosmotic features between Aztec philosophy and Daoism, Maffie contends that while *teotl* and *Dao* are not equivalent to each other, “there are, nevertheless, striking resemblances between these notions,” especially the fact that, like the Daoist Way, *teotl* is not a thing so much as a dynamic process: “*Teotl* is a *process* like a thunderstorm or flowing river rather [than] a static, perduring *substantive entity* like a table or pebble” (23, 38; emphasis added). His choice of a thunderstorm as a metaphor for *teotl* is especially apt since it underlines the fact that while *teotl* is processive and acosmotic like the *Dao*, it is very different in terms of how this dynamic balance is maintained: “*Teotl*'s process of continual and continuous self-transformation is defined by what I call *agonistic inamic unity*, that is, the continual and continuous cyclical struggle (*agon*) of paired opposites, polarities, or dualities. *Agonistic inamic unity* refers to a brute fact about the nature of reality per se” (137). The idea that *teotl* perpetually recreates itself through the actions of paired opposites, or *inimic* pairs, shows that *The Last Jedi*, in fact, continues the recent emphasis on depicting the Force as an acosmotic,

balancing process in flux, at least in the sense described within Aztec cosmology. Maffie translates the word *inimic* as “matched” (146). The elegance of this translation is that the English word “matched” bears many of the valences that are also present in the Nahuatl word *inimic*. It can cover everything from a matched romantic pair, to two competitors in a tennis match and even two combatants locked in a death match. *Inimic* rests on the idea that there are fundamental concepts that we can only understand relationally alongside their matched opposite: life and death, health and illness, light and dark. Therefore, reality according to Aztec metaphysics is an uncountable number of processes through which naturally matched opposite pairs balance and mutually define each other.

Sometimes these *inimic* pairs balance each other gently or non-violently, like the processes governing the interactions of two dancers, a groom and a bride, or, even the Aztec equivalent of peanut butter and jelly, “large folded tortillas and hot chili sauce” (Maffie 2014, 149)! However, Aztec philosophy teaches that conflict, pain, and brutality are woven into the fabric of the cosmos. There are some *inimic* pairs whose interactions are momentous and painful because if one side were to completely dominate the other, catastrophe would ensue:

Life emerges from death, and death from life. Life depends upon death, and death upon life. What’s more, life can exist neither apart from death nor apart from the life~death unity of which life forms an essential component. Analogously, the sun’s daytime light alternates with its nighttime darkness of pain of earthly things’ burning up. (147).

Teotl recreates itself through the never-ending struggle between life and death, light and dark, not their blending into gray, undead half-life/half-death. Therefore, if we read *The Last Jedi* through the Aztec concept of *teotl*, we see that Rey and Kylo Ren had no chance of becoming Gray Jedi allies. The Force needed them to be apart. It needed light distinct from darkness, so they might balance the Force through their struggle, but a blending would obliterate them both.

Teotl is not progressing toward an end time where goodness triumphs over evil; *teotl* is a moving living process that exists for its own sake, like the Dao. While the Aztecs agreed with Abrahamic believers and Zoroastrians that the universe was a cosmic arena wherein powerful forces strove against each other, they did not see this as a cosmic battle between superior good and inferior evil:

Aztec metaphysics conceives neither reality nor human existence in terms of a struggle between good and evil. Indeed, good and evil as such simply do not exist. *Teotl* is thoroughly *amoral*. Agonistic *inimic* unity thus differs strikingly from Zoroastrian- and Manichean-style dualisms that have exercised so much influence upon Western religious and philosophical thought. (Maffie 2014, 155)

Reading the Force as akin to *teotl* explains why Luke chided the Jedi for their hubris in *The Last Jedi*. The fact that the Jedi served the light did not make them truer servants of the Force than the Sith. The Force needed the Sith and Jedi to both raise their banners—their Ashla and Bogan—and serve their side of the Force, but neither was right or wrong to do so. The Force needed them to struggle for life to exist and to bind the galaxy together.

Because of the recent shake-up at Disney, it is impossible to know if the recent emphasis on depicting a Force in balance will continue. Perhaps the Grand Moff at Disney will use the story of Kylo Ren and Rey to refine the acosmotic view of the Force where light is no more or less real or necessary than the darkness. However, unless they veer hard away from the cosmology of the Force in *The Last Jedi*, it looks like the Gray Jedi fans might be out of luck. *Episode IX* will not be Bonnie and Clyde meets Harry met Sally, where mismatched, star-crossed

Gray Jedi buddy lovers gallivant across the universe, respectively impossibly charming and super jacked in high-waisted pants, each strong in the Force while maintaining the balance of light and dark within themselves. Alas, the Force does not work that way. The Aztecs understood that balance sometimes demands the brutal conflict of opposites, not their blending into lukewarm, gray mush. The Force is the struggle: “In sum, struggle (*agon*) is as ineliminable and indeed an essential aspect of the processing of teotl, reality, cosmos and all things. It plays an essential role in agonistic inamic unity. One attempts to eliminate struggle on pain of folly” (Maffie 2014, 153). The Force seeks balance through struggle: light rises and darkness rises to meet it. Reality is not even about things like the light or the darkness at all but, rather, about the rising, the balancing, the processing, the teotl, and the Force.

## Notes

1. For more on Augustinian, Daoist, and other cosmological perspectives on the Force, see Dees 2005; Dunn 2015; Fader 2005; McDowell 2010, 2017.
2. For more on divine conflict depicted in Zoroastrianism and the Abrahamic traditions, see Bernstein 2005; Crosby 2018; Dunn 2015; Rose 2011.
3. While the term “Gray Jedi” can mean any Jedi operating independently of the Jedi Council, this article uses the term to refer to Force users who balance both sides of the Force within themselves, instead of using either light-side or dark-side abilities as do the Jedi and Sith. See Wookieepedia n.d.
4. I hope the reader will forgive my use of “Forced” here!

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