above what anyone tells him, and as a symbol of this truth he builds and wields his own lightsaber. For this reason, he alone is able to move beyond words, appearances, and the dizzying kaleidoscope of individual perspectives. He not only sees the spark of Anakin Skywalker flickering within the mechanical shell of Darth Vader, but redeems him and thereby helps bring down the Empire and the Sith against all expectations. In doing so, he redeems the fallen honor of the Old Republic Jedi and restores their truth to what it should have been.

Philosophers in *this* galaxy have been debating the question of what truth is from "a long time ago" to this day, and if history is any indication, they aren't likely to agree on it anytime soon. But at least we finally have an answer to the question of the lying Jedi: they lie because truth isn't simple, and because they know that truth told without compassion can be brutal. Claiming that truth should always be told, regardless of other ethical considerations, is like claiming that there's nothing left of Darth Vader to be redeemed—true on only the most superficial level. Fans may not like to see their heroes as less than honorable, but the lesson of the lying Jedi is that truth depends on perspective, on intention, on intuitive understanding, and finally on a compassion that's willing to see the whole picture and not just a single "point of view."

17

Religious Pragmatism through the Eyes of Luke Skywalker

JOSEPH W. LONG

In a memorable scene from *A New Hope*, a skeptical Han Solo tells the idealistic Luke Skywalker, "Kid, I've flown from one side of this galaxy to the other. I've seen a lot of strange stuff, but I've never seen anything to make me believe there's one all-powerful Force controlling everything." Nevertheless, Luke becomes a hero because of his faith in his friends, his father, and most importantly, the Force, a mystical energy field in which he believes but which he cannot empirically verify.

The question of when to believe something and when not to believe is very important in the *Star Wars* galaxy and in our own. In fact, this is one of the central questions in the crucial branch of philosophy known as *epistemology*, the study of the theory of knowledge. Epistemology is important to all of us because clearly some things should be believed and others not. It seems, for example, somehow right to believe in the existence of black holes and wrong to believe in the existence of unicorns.

In this chapter, we'll explore the important matter of "when to believe" by first looking at the skeptical position of the nineteenth-century philosopher William Clifford, and then putting this position to the test with the help of arguments from the famous pragmatist philosopher William James. A pragmatist is a person who is committed to a practical and human view of the world and of epistemology. Pragmatists like James argue that in addition to reasons that show the truth of what we believe, there are also practical reasons to believe in something. We'll call the

former reasons *truth-conducive* and the latter *pragmatic*. We'll see that William James's position, that a pragmatic faith belief can be a positive thing, indeed our salvation, is exemplified well by Luke Skywalker.

"A Lot of Simple Tricks and Nonsense"

In his 1874 article, "The Ethics of Belief,"[1] William Clifford tells us that faith is "wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone."[2] It's easy to see how one could maintain that faith, or believing upon insufficient evidence, is wrong in an epistemic sense (that it may not lead to knowing a truth); but Clifford believes it is also morally wrong. To explain why he thinks faith is immoral, Clifford tells us this story: A shipowner is about to send a ship full of immigrants to the new land. The shipowner is warned that the ship is old and weathered and not overly well built at the start, and may not make the long journey. Although he could have the ship inspected and repaired if necessary, the shipowner decides to trust in Providence. "It has made many voyages," he reasons. "Surely, it will make this one also." Ultimately, the ship sinks and the immigrants all perish. Now, we can see why Clifford believes faith is morally wrong. It can lead to disastrous consequences. But what if the ship had made it to the new land successfully? In that case too, says Clifford, the shipowner would be guilty, "because he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him."[3]

When Luke turns off the targeting computer of his X-wing fighter and "uses the Force" to blow up the Death Star, he is guilty of the sin of faith. What makes holding a belief immoral is not simply a matter of whether that belief is true or false, or even whether it is fruitful or unfruitful, but rather of how it originated. The danger of faith is not only that we might have a false belief or even that we should pass on a false belief to others, although this is bad enough. Still worse, if we should be in the habit of not seeking justification for our beliefs, we may become overly credulous and thus, savage, like the barbarous Sand People of Tatooine.

Han Solo, at least the Han that we meet at the beginning of *A New Hope*, seems to be a skeptic like Clifford. Although he congratulates Luke on blowing up the Death Star, we can imagine how vexed he would have been if he were privy to Luke's unorthodox method. He believes the Force is nothing but "a lot of simple tricks and nonsense," and "no match for a good blaster at your side." We've all known people who adhere blindly to what they were taught as a child, never exposing themselves to experiences which might make them doubt. Clifford tells us that the life of such a person "is one long sin against mankind,"[4] and I believe he has a good point. We'd hardly respect Luke if he had refused to enter the cave on Dagobah where he faced his doubts and the knowledge of the Dark Side within himself. But does this mean that faith is always wrong?

"I Find Your Lack of Faith Disturbing"

Of course, faith is not always advisable. In *The Empire Strikes Back,* Luke has unwarranted faith in his abilities as a Jedi and foolishly leaves his training with Yoda to try to help his friends. This faith backfires and costs him dearly, as he loses his hand in an imprudent showdown with Darth Vader. But under certain conditions, William James argues that faith can be not only morally permissible, but even salvific or hero-making. Luke Skywalker's actions ultimately help demonstrate this. James discusses the importance of hero-making faith in "Ethical Importance of the Phenomenon of Effort":

> The world thus finds in the heroic man its worthy match and mate; and the effort which he is able to put forth to hold himself erect and keep his heart unshaken is the direct measure of his worth and function in the game of human life. He can *stand* this Universe. He can meet it and keep up his faith in it in presence of those same features which lay his weaker brethren low. He can still find a zest in it, not by "ostrich-like forgetfulness," but by pure inward willingness to face it with these deterrent objects there. And hereby he makes himself one of the masters and lords of life. He must be

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[1] William Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Lectures and Essays*; reprinted in William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright, eds., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, third edition (Harcourt Brace, 1998), pp. 456–461.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 460.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 456.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 460.

> counted with henceforth; he forms a part of human destiny. Neither in the theoretic nor in the practical sphere do we care for, or go for help to, those who have no head for risks, or sense for living on the perilous edge . . . But just as our courage is so often a reflex of another's courage, so our faith is apt to be a faith in some one else's faith. We draw new life from the heroic example.[5]

What are these conditions that must obtain for faith to be morally acceptable? First, it is acceptable to have faith only when the choice is *intellectually undecidable.* If a little bit of thinking could decide the issue one way or the other then we cannot simply choose to have faith. Also, the decision in question must constitute a *genuine option.* A genuine option is a choice which is *living, forced,* and *momentous.* A living option is one where there exist at least two real possibilities that may be chosen between. As a teen, Luke had few live career options. Perhaps he could be a moisture farmer like his Uncle Owen. Perhaps he could go off to the Imperial Academy next season after the harvest. But before meeting Obi-Wan Kenobi, being a Jedi Knight was not a real live possibility. It became a live possibility only after Obi-Wan told Luke about his father and after his aunt and uncle were killed by Imperial stormtroopers. Likewise, Han Solo's live choices are to be a mercenary or a smuggler before his adventures with Luke and Leia. Only later could he realistically choose to be an officer of the Rebel Alliance. In addition to being live, a genuine option must be forced. A forced option is one where a decision must be made, or where choosing not to decide amounts to choosing one way or the other. Luke and Leia's decision to swing across the retracted bridge on the Death Star in *A New Hope* was a forced option. Choosing not to decide would be identical to choosing death (or at least surrender.) Finally, a genuine option must be momentous. That is, it must be important and unique. Deciding to go to the grocery store to buy paper towels is not momentous. Nothing very important hinges upon the decision and the decision could be made again at any time in the future. Obi-Wan's decision to respond to R2-D2's message from Princess Leia, however, is momentous. A great deal hangs upon it and a decision must be made immediately for as Leia pleads, "You're my only hope."

Luke's decision to have faith in the Force seems to fit all of James's criteria. It seems clearly intellectually undecidable. How could Luke empirically test the power of the Force?[6] One must believe in the Force in order to act through it. Thus, he could hardly have the scientific skepticism necessary to set up an appropriate experiment and still control the Force. His decision is living. Either believing or not believing is a real possibility. The choice is forced. If he chooses not to decide, then for all practical purposes, he has chosen against putting his faith in the Force. And finally, it is momentous. Trusting in the Force opens for Luke unique and important opportunities. So, does this prove that Luke's faith in the Force is advantageous? Not yet, it seems. First, we must show that the advantage Luke could gain by believing a truth is greater than the disadvantage he could have by believing a falsehood.

"I Don't Believe It" . . . "That Is why You Fail"

James and Clifford agree that believing truths and avoiding falsehoods are our "first and great commandments as would be knowers;"[7] but these are two different things. For instance, one could avoid error by believing nothing, but it seems clear there is value in believing some things, particularly true things. So which is more important, or does each have same worth? Clifford stresses the avoidance of error, but it seems to me that James is correct when he says that believing what's true is equally or even more important than weeding out false beliefs.

Furthermore, some truths cannot be realized without faith. In *The Empire Strikes Back,* when even Han has become a bit of a believer, he intentionally flies the Millennium Falcon into an asteroid field to lose the Imperial TIE fighters chasing him. Han's

[5] William James, "Ethical Importance of the Phenomenon of Effort," in John J. McDermott, ed., *The Writings of William James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 716.

[6] The only empirical test I can think of that might be performed is the blood test for "midi-chlorians" that Qui-Gon performs on Anakin in *The Phantom Menace*; but as far I know, this test is not available to Luke.

[7] William James, "The Will to Believe," reprinted in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, p. 466.

belief in his ability as a pilot despite great odds (3,720 to one against, by C-3PO's calculations) helps create the fact of his (and his crew's) survival. By choosing to believe in spite of a lack of justification, Han may actually help create a truth, the truth of his survival. And this hardly seems morally wrong.

In some cases, it seems we can create truths through our beliefs. Take the often heard story of a man confronted by dangerous criminals in a dark alley. Instead of running from the criminals or fighting them, which would be futile, the man appeals to the good in the criminals, treats them as if they were loving people. And by treating the criminals as if they were loving despite better evidence, the criminals are made loving. This is perhaps what happens when Luke confronts Darth Vader on the second Death Star at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. The Emperor, meanwhile, tells Luke that his faith in his friends is his weakness. But Luke's faith proves to be his saving grace. After Luke surrenders on Endor, he reminds his father there is still good in him, that he is still Anakin Skywalker. He does this with no justification, only faith, for Obi-Wan has told him Vader is lost: "He's more machine now than man, twisted and evil." Eventually, Luke's faith saves him, as Vader kills the Emperor before the Emperor can destroy Luke. But Luke's faith is not only beneficial for himself. It also saves his father, for his faith turns Anakin back to the Light Side of the Force before he dies. It thus seems that there are certain circumstances under which it is not only morally acceptable to have faith (to believe without sufficient evidence), but it can also be salvific for oneself and perhaps even for others.

"A New Hope"

Faith is an important element of the *Star Wars* galaxy, but it is also important in our own. As a college teacher, I have learned the value of faith in the classroom. Before meeting a new class, I have no good evidence about whether my students will be good students or bad students. By "good" I mean intellectually honest critical truth seekers who are enthusiastic about philosophy. In fact, one could argue that I have inductive or circumstantial evidence that at least some of my students will not be good. After all, in the past I always have had some students that lack enthusiasm or honesty or are not committed to finding truth. Nevertheless, when I walk into a new class, I choose to believe that all of my students are good students and I treat them as such. Although I could be wrong, I believe that my decision to believe in the goodness of my students helps bring about the virtues of enthusiasm and honesty and commitment to truth in them. My reasons for believing in the goodness of my students is not "truth-conducive," that is, I don't hold this belief based on good evidence. Rather, as a pragmatist, I believe that there are practical reasons why one might be justified in believing something. For example, I believe in the goodness of my students because I think some good will come of it and no harm will be done.

Yoda and Obi-Wan lack good evidence that Luke can become a Jedi and vanquish the Emperor and Vader. In fact, they have good reason to doubt Luke's success because of Anakin's failure. Like Anakin, Luke is "too old to begin the training," lacks patience, and has "much anger in him." Clifford would agree with Yoda's initial reluctance to train Luke.[8] James, however, would recognize the potential for a great good that could come from doing so. And as we all know, James's pragmatic faith wins out in the end.

A better example of pragmatic thinking from our own galaxy can be found in Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech. In spite of a lack of truth-conducive evidence and in opposition to the prevailing social conservatism, Reverend King chose to believe that his dream of whites and blacks standing hand in hand as equals could become a real possibility. Although the struggle is not yet complete, his dream seems to be coming true in twenty-first-century America, and this could not have happened without his faith and the faith of

[8] Yoda and the other members of the Jedi Council had the same reluctance to train Anakin. It's interesting to speculate about James's attitude towards the justification of Qui-Gon's faith to take Anakin as his padawan. Initially, it seems that Qui-Gon's faith is unjustified since Anakin turns to the Dark Side. Nevertheless, it appears that in the end Anakin fulfills the prophecy by killing the Emperor, and thereby restoring balance to the Force. So perhaps Qui-Gon's faith was justified after all.

others like him. Because of this faith, we are in a better world today. The example of Reverend King demonstrates how faith can allow us to find a good and a truth outside of ourselves and give us all "a new hope."[9]

[9] I wish to thank Kevin Decker and Jason Eberl for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. I would also like to thank Seetha Burtner and C. Joseph Tyson for fruitful discussions about *Star Wars* and philosophy, as well as my mentor, Professor Charlene Haddock Siegfried, Donald Crosby, Wayne Viney, and William Rowe from whom I learned so much about William James. Additionally, I would like to thank Andrea (Cummings) Gerig who caused me to begin thinking about the ethics of faith "a long time ago."

Masters of the Jedi Council

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