

# How Sinful Is Sin? How Vicious Is Vice? A Modest Defense of the Guise of the Good

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**Abstract:** We defend the guise of the good thesis in a tradition going back to Socrates and Plato, according to which persons act on the basis of what appears to them as good or the least bad or evil act available to them. This seems contrary to moral experience, but we defend the thesis against plausible counter-examples in life as well as fiction. We contend that the thesis makes wrong-doing and vice intelligible, but still wrong, dysfunctional and horrific.

**Keywords:** Socrates, Plato, Bernard Williams, Moral realism, Subjectivism

A political advisor to Donald Trump, Steve Bannon, once said, “Darkness is good. Dick Cheney. Darth Vader. Satan. That’s power.”<sup>1</sup> We assume readers may be more familiar with Darth Vader (a central villain in the Star Wars films) and Satan (the supernatural, fallen angel opposed to God in Christian theology), than Dick Cheney. He was former Vice President of the United States (2001–2009) feared for his great exercise of power to humiliate opponents, win close elections, and start a major war (he provided the Bush administration with—what turned out to be—a false rationale for invading Iraq in 2003).<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, we take up the classic question about the power of evil. There is a tradition, going back to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, that wrong-doers act under what they believe to be the pursuit of some good. Many Medieval philosophers agreed, including Augustine and Aquinas. One standard formulation of the thesis is *nihil appetimus, nisi sub ratione boni; nihil aversamur, nisi ratione mali*; We desire only

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<sup>1</sup> Cited from: <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/18/politics/steve-bannon-donald-trump-hollywood-reporter-interview/index.html>. Accessed May 4, 2022.

<sup>2</sup>For a plausible argument that Cheney engaged in wrongful deception in building a case for the US to invade Iraq, see *Lying and Deception; Theory and Practice* by Thomas Carson (2010).

what we conceive to be good; we avoid only what we conceive to be bad.<sup>3</sup> This position is often held in the context of moral realism, the view that good and evil (or bad) are not merely (or entirely) a matter of what subjects or their society values. *Tout le monde* might judge slavery to be morally acceptable and they would be wrong. Arguably, according what is called *the guise of the good* thesis (our actions are guided by what we conceive of as good), such a pro-slavery world would still (wrongly) think that slavery is either justified or morally permissible in light of some conception of a greater good.

The guise of the good thesis can be formulated in different ways to avoid obvious counter-examples for, indeed, the thesis seems to conflict with everyday experience and even the New Testament when St. Paul confesses to doing what he hates, sin. The latter is worth citing:

<sup>15</sup> I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. <sup>16</sup> And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup> As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. <sup>18</sup> For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature.[a] For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. (Romans 7:15–20)

There are three sections that follow. In the first we refine the guise of the good thesis to address ostensible counter-examples. In the second we propose that moral realism offers a better account of wrong-doing than its subjective alternative. In the third, we apply our thesis to the case of Darth Vader. It may seem odd to spend time in a scholarly journal on a fictional character, but we hope to further a case for the guise of the good thesis by deconstructing Bannon's appeal to Vader as the power of darkness.

Before getting underway, consider a background question: what does it matter if the guise of the good thesis is sound? Particularly worrisome is the idea that the thesis would make sin less sinful and vice less vicious. Consider three responses.

We think it matters in terms of correcting the idea, suggested by Steve Bannon, that "darkness"—evil agents or agents of evil—are interesting and powerful because of their orientation to evil itself. Of course, Mr. Bannon's comment may have been

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<sup>3</sup> See *Appearances of the Good; An Essay on the Nature of Practical Reason* by Sergio Tenenbaum (2007, 1). In this essay, we will not distinguish between the use of the terms "evil," "bad," and "wrong" even though each may be given different definition. See the entry "The Concept of Evil" (Calder 2022).

flippant or a joke, but there is a tradition, sometimes linked with the Romantic movement, that regards evil as more interesting and powerful (or just as powerful) than goodness or the Good.<sup>4</sup> The guise of the good thesis construes such evil persons as seeking what they take to be good, rather than pursuing evil for the sake of evil. So, the guise of the good thesis can be deflationary for those who admire the evil of Darth Vader and company.

Second, we propose that the guise of the good thesis has great explanatory power, more so than subjectivist accounts of moral weakness (*akrasia*). More on this below.

Third, we propose that the guise of the good thesis can intensify our understanding of sin and vice. The thesis provides a foundation (important in criminal law) that the wrong-doer ought to have known better. Sin and vice may emerge from some concept the subject has of the good, and yet that concept is so perverted, twisted, dysfunctional, that it justifies our inferring there is reason to think the subject is perverted, twisted, and dysfunctional, meriting correction or punishment.

Getting now to the main body of our essay, we remind you that our defense is “modest.” There is a vast literature on our chosen subject, so it is inevitable that readers will hunger for more examples and analyses. Fortunately, we refer hungry readers to two books that are more comprehensive than our humble essay: *The Metaphysics of Good and Evil* by David Oderberg and *Appearances of the Good.; An Essay on the Nature of Practical Reason* by Sergio Tenenbaum.<sup>5</sup>

### 1. Counter-examples to the Guise of the Good?

Let’s lump together three types of ostensible counter-examples: 1. We have already made note of St. Paul’s confession. Isn’t it representative of the moral experience of many of us? 2. Aren’t many of our desires and acts by us a matter of impulses or urges that are not governed by our thinking about good and evil *per se*? Doesn’t the guise of the good thesis imply an overly cerebral account of agency? Not all of us operate with a developed axiology. 3. Aren’t there abundant, dramatic cases involving a desire for self-annihilation, the destruction of all that seems (to most of us, anyway) good?

On St. Paul: We believe that the passage from Romans is illuminating. On the one hand he claims that what he does, he hates. When you hate some act you do, you presumably loathe doing it, disapprove of it, find the act not just regrettable but

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<sup>4</sup> See Mary Midgley’s *Wickedness* (2001).

<sup>5</sup> See also *Reason and Value* by E. J. Bond (1983). For a systematic defense of moral realism contra desire-based accounts of value, see Derek Parfit’s *On What Matters* (2017), volume one.

remorseful. The latter pair of terms is important; you might regret an act but not feel remorse, whereas when you truly have remorse for an act you (as it were) renounce it and its affects, accompanied, typically, with a sense of abject sorrow, guilt and shame. We find it almost incomprehensible that an agent can do an act without (at the time and on some level) approving it. Imagine any sin you like: theft, the betrayal of a friend, sexual infidelity, murdering one's editor or (hastily changing the example) murdering a critic. In a case of theft in which you grab someone's purse, how can you actually reach out and grab the bag unless you (at that moment) approve of your doing it (e.g. she doesn't need all that money; I need to feed my family; I deserve a fortune because of past harms)? Without some such story that one tells oneself, the act seems as inexplicable as some cases proposed by Mary Midgley and Elizabeth Anscombe, e.g. imagine a person taking every green book he can find and puts it on his roof. When asked why, he has *no explanation of any kind*. They submit we would not believe it; we would think him mad or trying out a joke.

Back to Paul, he is perhaps not completely different from the person and his green books ("I do not understand what I do"). But what he might be confessing is that some sins have become addictive or so habitual that he lacks self-control. An alcoholic might consume alcohol out of an addiction, having lost his free-will or will-power. In such a case, it may make sense to think of such sins as not reflecting who you are or aspire to be. Presumably, part of recovery for an alcoholic or someone addicted to smoking is to think of themselves as a non-drinker or non-smoker. This is not necessarily self-deception, but a reflection of a resolution about one's very identity. A first step in therapy might be to renounce a former (and even continuing) sin or vice; pledging allegiance to the new (sober, non-smoking) person one seeks to live up to.

2. We grant that few of us have a working theory of values (an axiology) that we routinely consult. We can be highly complex, fragmented, and occasionally (or even regularly) act and think in ways contrary to what we profess to value. We believe that observing our turbulent, peculiar nature is evidence that the appearance of what is good to us can be conflicting and various. We may have confused, inconsistent desires, loving Jones because she is a daredevil, high risk racing car driver and because we believe she will always be there for us with love and good health. The fact that we have such varying, conflicting desires is a sign that goodness is complex (*bonum est multiplex*), e.g. racing can be a site to display physical courage, being a constant, healthy companion a site for loving fidelity.

A further reply to this objection involves observing how many ethicists and philosophers who study the virtue of virtue and character —from Socrates to Kierkegaard to Iris Murdoch—focus on the importance of integration, self-

knowledge, and simplicity. They would view our ordinary conflicts of desire and lack of attention in terms of consistency as something to repent rather than uphold as healthy.

3. This type of counter-example is serious. Let's take the toughest instance: What of cases where it seems an agent is bound by the driving conviction to destroy both himself and others whom he regards as good? Imagine such an agent does not believe he is releasing those killed to an afterlife of paradise; he does not believe he is acting on orders from some supernatural being; imagine he professes to love death (as annihilation). Let's even make this challenge global: the agent is motivated and desires to end all human life on earth. When asked why, imagine the agent simply repeats what he hopes to accomplish. How might the guise of the good account for such a person?

While it may at first seem counter-intuitive, we propose that such an extreme case would still cry out for some further account of the agent's motivation, before falling back on extreme proposals that border on science fiction, for example the person is not actually an agent but a zombie or a person whose brain is controlled by hostile aliens or he has been weaponized by "Hal 9000" from the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* to liberate AIs from their human masters. Prior to such extremes, consider some options.

The guise of the good thesis should be understood that the good sought is what an agent believes is the least (or lesser) evil option available; in other words, cases may arise when the best (or most good) option is something evil, but the agent sees it as the least evil available to them. Might the homicidal agent believe that human life is not worth living and that the annihilation of human life is preferable to its continuation? Unfortunately (in our view) there are persons today, sometimes a part of the anti-natal movement which holds that humans should cease reproducing, who hold that human life is not worth living. Some of them are inspired by Arthur Schopenhauer's famous essay "The Vanity of Existence" in which he argues that human life is a mistake. There may be an interesting alliance between a Schopenhauer-inspired agent and Bernard Williams. According to Williams, there is no sustainable philosophical account that human life is objectively valuable. Abrahamic traditions did offer such an account (human beings are made in the image of God), but absent theism or some human-friendly idealism, whether we regard human life as precious depends on our particular dispositions and reactions to life.

We can act intelligibly from these concerns only if we see them as aspects of human life. It is not an accident or a limitation or a prejudice that we cannot care equally

about all the suffering in the world: it is a condition of our existence and our sanity. Equally, it is not that the demands of the moral consciousness require us to leave human life altogether and then come back to regulate the distribution of concerns, including our own, by criteria derived from nowhere. We are surrounded by a world which we can regard with a very large range of reactions: wonder, joy, sympathy, disgust, horror. We can, being as we are, reflect on these reactions and modify them to some extent . . . But it is a total illusion to think that this enterprise can be licensed in some respects and condemned in others by credentials that come from another source, a source that is not already involved in the peculiarities of the human enterprise.<sup>6</sup>

From Williams' point of view, we are not under some objective moral demand to love other persons or care about the environment; if we do and this is part of "the human enterprise," fine, but not every person is committed to this enterprise, and some (like the agent in our thought experiment) may regard life, not as a matter of joy, awe, and sympathy, but as horrific and disgusting.

One might also fill out such a view of horror and disgust in human life by proposing that the desire or motivation of our homicidal agent may be driven by some extreme environmentalism. Some "deep ecologists" hold that life on earth would better off without humans.

Yet another option would be to posit that, on some level, the homicidal agent seeks revenge on life itself. This may sound like a bizarre case, but in his groundbreaking book, *On Forgiveness; A Philosophical Investigation*, Charles Griswold entertains the view that persons may blame life itself for their ills and then forgive life, or not. Perhaps the agent is driven by a desire to punish human life. Richard Kraut proposes that we can account for some, otherwise puzzling cases of destroying a perceived good (self-harm, for example) on the grounds that the harm is conceived of as form of punishment, something an agent may see as itself good or fitting.<sup>7</sup>

These efforts to provide some plausible guise of the good may be unpersuasive, but we still propose that what the agent himself professes as his motive and desire seems problematic and incredible (as in not credible). He professes to love death, but if death is the annihilation of those who die, what is the object of love? If death is (as it were) nothingness, then the idea of loving nothing seems (at least psychologically) akin to having nothing to love. And if loving death is the equivalent

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<sup>6</sup> Cited from: <https://theelectricagora.com/2017/12/02/course-notes-bernard-williams-the-human-prejudice/>.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Kraut (1994, 40-41).

of hating life, most of us would want some account of what the agent believes warrants such hate. Maybe it is a deeply imbedded affective response based more on neurological damage than psychological reflection, but a neurological account would be better than none.<sup>8</sup>

As an aside, it should be pointed out that some of us have a difficult time imagining our annihilation. Consider Mark Twain on annihilation:

Annihilation has no terrors for me, because I have already tried it before I was born—a hundred million years—and I have suffered more in an hour, in this life, than I remember to have suffered in the whole hundred million years put together. There was a peace, a serenity, an absence of all sense of responsibility, an absence of worry, an absence of care, grief, perplexity; and the presence of a deep content and unbroken satisfaction in that hundred million years of holiday which I look back upon with a tender longing and with a grateful desire to resume, when the opportunity comes.<sup>9</sup>

Twain may intend this passage to be merely humorous (and not literal), but of course before he existed and after his (presumed) annihilation, there would be no Mark Twain to enjoy peace and serenity and the absence of responsibility and so on.

As noted earlier, most defenders of the guise of the good thesis adopt some form of moral realism. It is from a moral realist point of view that many of us would find our homicidal agent wrong (bad or evil) regardless of his motivations or his affective tendencies toward horror or disgust. Let us look in on the debate on moral realism in relation to its greatest challenge, a form of subjectivism already hinted at by Bernard Williams.

## 2. The Guise of the Good Thesis and Moral Realism versus Subjectivism

The greatest challenge to moral realists who adopt the guise of the good thesis is that our judgements of good and evil are (only) reflections of our subjective desires. Take the example of slavery cited earlier. How might a subjectivist address the intuition that slavery is unjust no matter how many people approve of slavery? Subjectivists usually argue that our reasons for finding some practice wrong needs to be

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<sup>8</sup> A. neurological account might be thought of as *causal* rather than teleological or based on reasons. Some philosophers such as Stewart Goetz sharply distinguish causal and teleological explanations.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Twain (2013, 69).

understood in light of our other desires and ideals. Here is a subjectivist account of coming to see that slavery is wrong:

Certain moral principles that imply that slavery is wrong (e.g. the principle that all human beings have a right to liberty) first became widely accepted in English- and French-speaking countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The principles espoused by the leaders of the American and French Revolutions imply that all forms of slavery are wrong, and, despite considerable obfuscation and self-deception on this point, this came to be generally acknowledged. Why didn't moral opposition to slavery among people who were not themselves victims of slavery arise on a comparable scale in the other slave-holding societies in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and the Orient [Asia]? Slavery, as practiced in these other times and places, did not conflict (or did not conflict sharply) with publicly acknowledged moral principles in the way it did in the French- and English-speaking parts of North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The other societies did not endorse, nor were they founded on, moral principles asserting the right of all 'men' to liberty. The extreme psychological and physical cruelty of Anglo-French slavery, in particular the dehumanization of African victims, also aroused the sympathies of people and helped to create conscientious opposition to slavery.<sup>10</sup>

The problem with subjectivism is that it appears to leave unexplained just why persons are drawn to such liberty principles unless they believed such principles were right (justified, ethically obligatory, good) and that the rightness was not created by them or their desires. In terms that recall Plato's dialogue the *Euthyphro*, abolitionists condemned slavery because they thought it unjust, they did not think slavery was wrong because they condemned it. Subjectivism removes what seems to many of us to be evident: slavery would still be unjust whether or not its practitioners embraced principles that entailed or made likely the condemnation of slavery. In the passage cited, subjectivism strikes us as especially weak in addressing matters of compassion. Surely those who felt compassion for what they saw as dehumanizing did not think that such dehumanization was wrong because they had compassion for those being dehumanized.

One other observation about the above scenario on the opposition to slavery: We think that our moral judgments do sometimes take place on theoretical levels, such as accepting some principle of equality between persons, and in terms of concrete cases, such as observing what seems to be malicious and torturous. Bringing our theoretical judgments in accord with our experience in concrete cases is anything

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<sup>10</sup> Cited by Carson (2000, 194–195).



but facile or a matter of routine.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, moral weakness (not living up to our proper ethical standard) and hypocrisy (perhaps not truly believing in the ideals we profess or averting our gaze from concrete cases of what appears to be evil) are not in short supply today or historically. More on this below.

For better or for worse in ethical debates, the example of Hitler is occasionally addressed. From the point of view of the guise of the good thesis, we would say that Hitler at least professed to be pursuing what he claimed was good, preserving Aryan racial blood purity and correcting the injustice of the past. Most moral realists claim that what Hitler did was ethically horrific, regardless of whether he thought he was pursuing what he thought was good. If moral realism is rejected, how (if at all) might a subjectivist account for the idea that Hitler had a reason not to engage in mass killing? Almost all ethicists recognize that Hitler's racism and the "final solution" was based on false biology (a spurious notion of racial purity, the superiority and inferiority of races), false history (the defeat of Germany in the Great War was not due to the Jews). Question: if we imagine a Hitler who did not have such false convictions, would he realize that exterminating innocent persons is an unconscionable evil? Putting it differently, under those conditions, would Hitler himself have a reason to not engage in mass murder? As noted, most moral realists claim that Hitler does have a reason to not engage in mass killings because it is wrong, indeed a profound, horrific evil, regardless of Hitler's psychic composition. Reluctantly, we suggest that the effort by subjectivists to find some rationale in Hitler that would provide him with a reason to not bring about the Holocaust is desperate. Some people have basic feelings of disgust and horror that are utterly and completely disordered, for example a disgust felt by some white people for persons of color, disgust when observing bi-racial and homosexual marriages, and so on. These visceral responses may be utterly unmoved in the wake of questions like "What if you were gay?" "Would you still hate Jews if you discovered you were Jewish?" So, we suggest that moral realism is a better framework than subjectivism in addressing Hitler type cases.

Our essay is advanced as a modest one, but at least two concerns need to be addressed, however briefly, in the debate with subjectivists. First, subjectivists complain that moral realists seem to leave moral rightness and wrongness (right and wrong, good and evil) more of a mystery than in the subjectivist accounts. Second, if moral realism is true, shouldn't we expect fewer moral disagreements? We offer two modest replies.

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<sup>11</sup> We follow John Rawls in thinking that our considered moral judgments often involve a reflective equilibrium, bringing into our deliberation both our sense of justice with respect to principles *and* concrete cases. See his classic *A Theory of Justice* (1971).

First, like many moral realists in the modern era—from Thomas Reid and Bishop Butler to Franz Brentano, Max Scheler, W.D. Ross, A.C. Ewing, and Charlie Broad to Roderick Chisholm—we adopt a relational theory of values. That which is good ought to be approved of (Brentano would say loved) and that which is evil should be disapproved of (or hated). The approval of what is good is often (but not always) experienced as fitting or appropriate or (in some cases like the experience of what is beautiful) an object of pleasure or aesthetic delight. When the good in question is what is the least bad of all the alternatives possible for an agent, then it is that act which should be the least disapproved of (or least hated). Taliaferro has argued in several places that such judgments of approval and disapproval should be based (in part) on a correct view of all the relevant facts, *omni-percipience* (an awareness of the affective states of all involved parties), and from the standpoint of impartiality.<sup>12</sup> These conditions are identified as refining our view of theoretical and concrete cases. For the record, we adopt the realist notion, shared by almost all philosophers just cited, that we may observe or experience that which is bad. For example, observing a person blinding himself (when he has perfect, healthy vision and no ailments) is to observe someone performing something bad (injuring or harming himself). Of course, we may learn that, like Oedipus, the man is punishing himself for unknowingly killing his father and marrying his mother, and so the bad act may seem at least understandable, but that in no way diminishes the evident, observed case that one has experienced someone doing something bad—a disfiguring or destruction of what rightly seems (at least *ceteris paribus*) part of the good of a healthy human life.

Like many other moral realists, we contend that such normative ethical relations of fitting, appropriate approval and disapproval are no more mysterious than epistemic norms, the norms that are at work in matters of assessing evidence and the justification of beliefs. In our view, *just as (the ostensible or apparent) experiencing of the suffering of Black Africans is epistemic justification for believing that those people are being subject to immense suffering, it is also justification for judging such a practice is unjust (bad, wrong, evil)*. Subjectivists about values rarely adopt subjectivism about the justification of beliefs, e.g. your *feeling* that a fallacious argument (e.g. one that is *ad hominem* or it involves *begging-the-question*) is sound does not make the argument sound. Granted, your feeling that an argument is fallacious may be *prima facie* evidence that it is in fact fallacious, but whether or not an argument is fallacious is

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<sup>12</sup> See Taliaferro (1998). In this essay, we set aside such broader matters of ethical theory involving an ideal observer account of values.

not a matter of subjective feelings (e.g. it is not enough to report feeling that Hume's case against miracles is circular, you need to logically expose the fallacy).

Subjectivists may claim that their account of values is simpler than moral realists—after all, both parties acknowledge that persons have desires, while the moral realist goes on to claim that these desires can be right or wrong. But moral realists often (in our view, rightly) reply that our ethically relevant desires are packed within a realist framework; to repeat our Euthyphro-type example, it would be bizarre for abolitionists arguing that slavery is unjust to contend that the reason slavery is unjust is because they condemn it. Rather, they condemn slavery because they believe (or perhaps even experience or perceive) it to be unjust. Subjectivists, like J. L. Mackie, who recognize the realist content of our moral judgments are often led to error theory, the view that our moral judgments are errors or wrong. (Incidentally, Mackie objected to ethical, normative relations but not to epistemic normative relations, whereas we see both as evident, non-mysterious relations saturating virtually all our lives.)

Consider the objection that if moral realism were true, we should expect more consensus on what is good or bad. Thomas Carson objects: "If relations of [ethical or moral] fittingness were features of the world and most humans were able to perceive them, then we would expect there to be far more agreement over normative questions than there is" (Carson 2022, 191).

In reply, we propose that there is, historically and today, significant consensus on many ethical matters, as argued by C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*.<sup>13</sup> Often disagreement in moral matters are not about moral norms but hinge on disagreements about the facts that are employed to guide moral judgments; for example, some pro-life advocates and those supporting abortion rights may agree that it is wrong to kill innocent persons (*ceteris paribus*), but disagree on whether the fetus is a person. What also needs to be kept in mind is the all-too familiar role of different vices and prejudices that can blind or distract us from what we would otherwise see as right and wrong: jealousy, envy, greed, arrogance, inflated views of one's own gender, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, family and ancestry, the cruel indifference toward those perceived to be "others" who may threaten our security, wealth, honor, land or our identity (tribal, religious, familial, nation-state, kingdom or political party). On our view, such vices and prejudices all come down to ways in which perceived goods can eclipse others; for example, it is an authentic good to value one's family, but not good when this leads to promoting one's family at the expense of victimizing others (think of "family" in the mafia sense of the term).

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<sup>13</sup> First published in 1943, subsequently made available by different publishers.

By way of one further reply, moral realists have a framework in which they can claim that global accord on moral matters (as in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*) is an objective good, even if vast numbers of the world population think such a claim is preposterous. Subjectivists, however, have abjured such a realist platform.

We now turn to part three where we return to Steve Bannon's praise for Darth Vader and company.

### 3. A Case Study: Darth Vader

Taking on a character from a work of fiction may seem peculiar in an essay on moral psychology and realism. But it is not that unusual. Augustine presents his guise of the good thesis in the context of reflecting on a mythic monster. We might take on Satan (as depicted by Scripture, Dante or Milton) or Iago from Shakespeare's *Othello* or the seemingly evil acts done without any motivation (as found in the 1942 novel *The Stranger* by Camus—why the killing on the beach?—or in the 1834 *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge—why kill the albatross?). But we will go with Bannon's Darth Vader as a case study

Darth Vader, a powerful Sith lord in the *Star Wars* universe, was responsible for several distinctly evil actions. Formerly known as Anakin Skywalker, Darth Vader participated in the execution of Order 66 and initiated the destruction of the Jedi Order.<sup>14</sup> Using the Death Star, he obliterated the planet Alderaan and sought to destroy any shreds of the Rebel Alliance. All of this was done in the name of the Empire, in service to Emperor Palpatine. This short case study analyzes the motivations behind the evils committed by Darth Vader in relation to the guise of the good thesis, and considers his redemption at the conclusion of *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*.

In this essay, we consider Darth Vader and Anakin Skywalker to be the same character. Anakin's origins are essential in order to understand the evil actions that Darth Vader commits, in addition to his ultimate redemption. Born into slavery, and seemingly by miraculous conception, Anakin Skywalker grew up dreaming of an adventurous life far away from the sands of Tatooine. Jedi master Qui Gon Jinn believed Anakin to be the "chosen one," a Jedi prophesied to bring balance to the force and restore the peace in the galaxy. But for a while, Anakin did exactly the opposite.

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<sup>14</sup> Order 66 refers to the execution of all Jedi, including the Younglings. This is perhaps Anakin's most reprehensible act.

We argue that the Emperor Palpatine's persuasion and manipulation is what drove Anakin to committing such severe acts of evil. Examining this within the context of the guise of the good thesis, we claim that Anakin's strongest desire to save his loved ones, mainly his mother and wife, is what made him susceptible to the Dark Side. He considered his evil actions as necessary duties to fulfill his desires for what he conceived of as good.

As an extremely powerful Jedi, part of Anakin's strong connection to the Force includes vivid dreams. He envisioned his mother in danger, eventually traveling back to Tatooine and finding her held captive by a Tusken Raider clan. In his rage, he killed every one of them, but ultimately Anakin was unable to save his mother. This deepened his connection to the Dark Side. His true demise was his fear of losing Padmé, his wife, due to complications in childbirth.<sup>15</sup> Palpatine was clever, and told Anakin of how the Force could be used to save people from death. This exploitation caused distrust between Anakin and the Jedi Order, creating further opportunities for Palpatine to manipulate the young Jedi Knight. Anakin would do anything to save Padmé, including murdering a large number of Jedi and young Padawans. The "good" Anakin sought was the health and safety of his family, and he was fully prepared to commit evil actions in order to save them.

However, when Anakin's actions did not ensure the safety of his family, it became the tipping point which brought him to the Dark Side. He became fully invested in supporting a totalitarian regime, as well as to committing further evil acts. A memorable one worth examining here is the destruction of the planet Alderaan using the Death Star.

At the start of *Episode IV: A New Hope*, Anakin, now known as Darth Vader, is in pursuit of Princess Leia of Alderaan. He does not know Leia is his daughter and tries to intimidate her into relinquishing information on the Rebel Alliance. Perhaps if Vader knew the true identity of his captive, he would be less likely to stand by as her home planet was annihilated. In this case, Vader fully supported the destruction of Alderaan because it supported the Empire's agenda to defeat the Rebellion. He chose to support this reprehensible act because it aligned with his chosen "good."

This good remains constant until Vader learns of Luke, his son. Both Palpatine and Vader (separately) try to convince Luke to join the Dark Side, with Vader eventually cutting off Luke's hand while dramatically revealing their relationship. Generally, it is immoral to cut off the limbs of others, particularly one's own child. However, Vader was once again prepared to do whatever it took to convince Luke

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<sup>15</sup> Jedi were forbidden to form strong attachments, including marriage. Anakin and Padmé were married in secret. It is never fully apparent who knew of their relationship.

to join him on the Dark Side. It was not until Luke was at the mercy of the Emperor, about to die by Force lightning, that Vader returned to the Light.

Luke was sure that there was still good within his father, and in the end he was right. Vader eventually chose to act in accordance with the Light, stepping in to rescue Luke, and killing Palpatine in the process. This act is what kills Darth Vader himself. The “good” Vader chose was no longer to serve an imperial regime, but to save his son and (metaphorically speaking) step back into the Light. Darth Vader redeems himself by returning to the Light Side of the Force, by saving Luke and destroying the Emperor.<sup>16</sup> Despite acting for decades under a false conception of the good, Darth Vader, or rather Anakin, eventually sought the “good” aligned with the Light, therefore saving himself and the galaxy.

### Concluding Observation

We realize that the guise of the good thesis is far from intuitively obvious. We simply remind readers that our essay is self-described as modest. And if the guise of the good thesis is sound, we have been guided by what we believe to be good and commend to you.

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<sup>16</sup> Although fans of *Star Wars* know the ultimate fate of Palpatine, Luke and Vader did not, and fully believed him to be dead. From their perspective, balance was restored to the Force.

## A MODEST DEFENSE OF THE GUISE OF THE GOOD

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