

“Another Solution Will Present Itself”: *The Phantom Menace*, Daoism, and Doing without Trying

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The Phantom Menace (TPM) is one of the most polarizing films in the *Star Wars* franchise. When it was first released in 1999, some fans claimed that it ruined their childhood. But for many fans since then, it's *been* their childhood. Ironically, Daoism – the philosophical religion that rejects controversy and division – has a lot to do with this controversial and divisive movie. If we watch this film with some classical Chinese philosophy in mind, the different narratives, themes, and characters start to make more sense. In short, the philosophy in TPM is to Daoism what Taco Bell is to Mexican food: TPM may not be most authentic example of Daoist philosophy, but it's got some of the same flavors.¹

“This Is the Way”

Classical Daoist thinking, found in texts like the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, says that everything we experience is always changing, often into its apparent opposite.² Day is always turning into night, and night is always turning into day. Cold weather becomes warm in the springtime, and warm weather turns cold in the fall (at least, this is how it works in China. On Hoth, the weather just tends to stay cold). There's a rhythm in the natural world – the sky produces water, which nourishes trees, which are then burned in fires, which send

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smoke back into the sky, and so on forever. When living things die, they become food for other living things, and so on forever. This constant flow from one state of being to another is the nature of all things. Nothing is permanent ... except for change.

This is true not just of the natural world, but also of the political one. Totalitarian, rigid empires tend to become overbearing, which causes rebellions and anarchy. Anarchy creates a power vacuum, which leads to new rulers (like the First Order) who become increasingly rigid in their use of power, and so on forever. In our own lives, too, we see this fluid, changing process. If you are calm and permissive, you let things happen that'll ultimately make you angry, yet expressing your anger ultimately calms you down. Everything flows into its apparent opposite; nothing is static and fixed for all time.

Apparent opposites also *depend* on one another. "Warm" means nothing without "cold." There's no such thing as being cold unless warmth also exists. If it were not for darkness, there could be no light. We would not be able to label anyone "tall" unless we are comparing them with other people who are "short." We could not recognize Chewbacca as "strong" unless we contrast him with someone who's "weak," like C-3PO. The distinctions we use to separate things into "good" and "bad," "hard" and "soft," "calm" and "angry," can make us forget that these apparent opposites depend on one another and are always turning into one another.

According to Daoism, there's a fundamental unity to all of reality that we forget when we try to separate what's valuable from what's worthless. We have the tendency to make sense of the world by privileging one side of a dichotomy over the other. Happy is better than sad, young is better than old, moral is better than immoral, smart is better than dumb, sharp is better than dull, fast is better than slow. After making these distinctions, we tend to find value only in one side and not the other: "I'm wealthy and not poor. I worked very hard to be wealthy and not poor. I'm proud of myself for being wealthy and not poor." By doing so, we forget that any one side in a dichotomy depends upon its apparent opposite, flows into its apparent opposite, and is part of a more fundamental unity. Wealth depends upon poverty and is always coming from and returning to poverty. To think otherwise is to be deluded.

A classic example is dirt and flowers. Flowers grow out of the dirt, and then they die and decompose and become dirt. In *The Last Jedi*, Rey gets a glimpse of this when she's meditating on Ahch-To: "Life. Death and decay, that feeds new life." For Daoists, the human

problem is basically that we want there to be flowers without dirt. We want to hold on to one thing at the expense of its apparent opposite, but that's impossible. Symbols like the well-known Taiji diagram (the "Yin/Yang" symbol that's emulated in the Jedi temple on Ahch-To) can help us remember the fundamental unity of all things and free us from our tendency to think in terms of stark opposites. Everything contains within itself the seed of its opposite, so apparent opposition is always misleading. In addition to those symbols, Daoist writings also feature many stories where someone who may seem useless ("another pathetic life-form") turns out to be successful, or something that seems to be worthless turns out to be invaluable. One classic example is a tree so gnarly and curved that it cannot be turned into planks for building. The tree grows to a great height and provides shade for the emperor, and it's able to do that precisely because of its worthlessness. As the *Daodejing* says, "The soft, the weak, prevail over the hard, the strong"³ – just as we see the tiny, primitive Ewoks help topple the technologically sophisticated and powerful Empire.

"A Symbiont Circle"

In *TPM*, there's similar emphasis on the inevitability of change and the tendency for opposites to depend on each other. In one scene, young Anakin Skywalker has just been freed and is saying goodbye to his mother, Shmi. He complains, "I don't want things to change," and Shmi responds, "But you cannot stop the change any more than you can stop the suns from setting." This sounds a lot like the *Zhuangzi*. Just as we cannot keep the sun (or suns) from setting, so all of our efforts to hold on to happiness, wealth, or reputation are ultimately going to fail. But since the sun has to set in order for there to be a new morning the next day, we too can let ourselves change without really suffering any loss.

TPM also features many examples of those who are apparently useless and worthless triumphing over those who have better training, technology, or skills. The "local boy" Anakin implausibly defeats Sebulba, who "always wins." The "young and naive" queen of Naboo drives out the powerful Trade Federation. The "little droid" R2-D2 restores power to the shield generator. The "primitive" Gungan militia holds their own against the vastly superior droid army. *TPM* emphasizes that we should not rely too much on our judgments of who is capable and who is not. The seemingly insignificant slave boy is in the

process of becoming a Jedi Knight, and the seemingly indestructible Droid Control Ship is in the process of becoming space dust.

Symbiosis is also a theme that runs through *TPM*. Two civilizations on the same planet – the Naboo and the Gungans – depend upon one another. As Obi-Wan Kenobi explains to Boss Nass, “You and the Naboo form a symbiont circle. What happens to one of you will affect the other.” Flowers depend on dirt which depends on flowers, light depends on dark which depends on light, cold depends on warm which depends on cold. The opposition between the Naboo and the Gungans only conceals their fundamental unity. Qui-Gon Jinn echoes this idea when teaching Anakin about midi-chlorians. He says that living beings and midi-chlorians are “symbionts ... life-forms living together for mutual advantage.” Mutual dependence, not opposition, is the natural order of the world.

Doing without Trying

If we agree with the Daoist picture of the natural order, what should we do about it? Do we just do nothing? Well, yes and no. Instead of striving to be rich, virtuous, or famous, the better way to live is to recognize the fluid nature of reality and act accordingly. This is the idea of “non-action,” or *wu wei* in Chinese.

If, when we act, we are striving to grasp one side of a dichotomy but not the other – to have flowers without dirt – we’ll constantly fail and be frustrated. The more we try to make things turn out the way we want them to, the more we’ll mess them up – just as Anakin’s turn to the dark side in order to save Padmé tragically results in her death. Striving to achieve one side of a dichotomy ironically drives one further into its opposite. The more a nation clings to security and pursues it at all costs, the more insecure and ultimately susceptible to fear and war it becomes. The more a parent tries to control a child, the more rebellious the child will become. The harder you concentrate and try to accomplish something, the more you’ll psych yourself out and become unable to do it. Daoists read history this way, too: one dynasty overreaches and tries to control too much or govern too strictly, and then that dynasty collapses, making room for the next dynasty – the Old Republic, out of fear and war, becomes the Empire, which later collapses and the New Republic is born, which then falls to the First Order until the last is defeated, not by a navy, but “just people.”⁴

If our actions align with the natural flow of reality, however, we'll be able to succeed without really having to do anything: the person who moves fastest down the river is not who swims the hardest but who positions themselves so they are carried along by the current. Daoist sages (*zhenren*) give up anxiously trying to make things turn out how they want them to be; instead they let their actions be governed by the same fundamental unity that governs the constant flow of change in the natural world, the social world, and the emotional world.

The *Daodejing* says, "Act on things, and you will ruin them. Grasp for things, and you'll lose them. Therefore the sage acts with non-action and has no ruin. Lets go of grasping and has no loss."⁵ The way to gain power and long life and peace is paradoxically by *not* trying to achieve them. Acting organically instead of intentionally, you can live in the moment rather than using all of your energy to try fruitlessly to bring about a specific future. So, if you had to give a one-sentence summary of Daoism, you could do a lot worse than, "Do or do not. There is no try."

"Concentrate on the Moment"

TPM is filled with characters who are not living in the moment but are focused on the future. More specifically, it's filled with people making predictions that turn out to be wrong.

The Jedi assume the trade negotiations will go smoothly. They are right, but not in the way they expect. The Trade Federation leaders assume the Jedi will be no match for their destroyer droids. They are wrong. Jar Jar predicts that the bosses will do terrible things to him. That does not happen. Amidala thinks the Senate will side with her. They will not. Nute Gunray thinks Amidala will be easy to control. Wrong. Palpatine says that the Jedi will be no match for Darth Maul. Half-true. Watto says he knows Sebulba's going to win. He does not. Captain Panaka thinks this is a battle they cannot win. They do. I could go on, but you get the idea. Every story involves characters not knowing what's going to happen – this creates dramatic tension and is art being true to life. But more than most movies, *TPM*'s characters keep thinking they know what's going to happen, keep trying to make things happen, and keep misjudging the future. One theme in *TPM* is that predictions and assumptions are, in general, best avoided, which connects with the

Daoist emphasis on existing in the moment rather than trying to discern the future and make it turn out the way you want it to. To be empty and open to what happens is wiser than being fixated on your expectations, assumptions, and plans.

Daoism emphasizes that success comes most often through a complex set of factors too multifarious to comprehend or even take into consideration. It's not that you should not want good things to happen, but rather that the act of *trying* to bring about your understanding of a good future is as likely to bring misery as to bring happiness. Good outcomes are often unplanned and spontaneous, and we should be open to what happens rather than focusing our energy on trying to make something happen. Daoist stories depict apparent chance bringing about good fortune – people finding something exactly when they were not looking for it or folks saving the day exactly when they stopped trying to play the hero. These stories remind readers that human beings aren't great at making events turn out how they want them to, but this is no reason to despair.

One Daoist parable is about a drunk man who falls from a horse and is not injured. He does not tense his body up to brace himself for the impact, he just literally rolls with it, and his relaxed muscles and joints do not get injured (a trick pro wrestlers use). The implied lesson is that if you stay flexible and roll with things as they happen, you'll be better able to live in the world than if you always think about what you are doing and whether it's working or not. (The story, by the way, is not endorsing drunken horse-riding. Or at least, I'm not endorsing drunken horse-riding. You should always have a designated driver, or at the very least, a sober horse.)

Qui-Gon exemplifies this tendency to stay in the moment and trust in the flow of reality. In some ways, Qui-Gon's actions and non-actions resemble those of a Daoist sage. In fact, the name "Qui-Gon" is likely derived from *qigong*, a set of Chinese practices for aligning the energies of one's mind and body with the natural order. Qui-Gon tells Anakin, "Remember, concentrate on the moment. Feel, do not think. Use your instincts." As the prequel trilogy goes on, we see to what degree Anakin fails to follow this advice.

Everyone else in *TPM* is stressed and worried about things, but not Qui-Gon. So you are being eaten by a fish? Do nothing: "There's always a bigger fish." Jar Jar asks, "Where weesa goin'?" Qui-Gon responds, "Do not worry. The Force will guide us." Their bongo starts to lose power, and Jar Jar exclaims, "Wesa dyin' here!" Another wrong prediction. Qui-Gon calmly replies, "Just relax. We're not in trouble yet."

Cannot get where you are going? No problem, land on Tatooine. Sandstorm coming? Cool, stay with the nearest nine-year-old. Betting everything you have on a child in a death race? This is fine. After Darth Maul arrives on the scene, Anakin asks, "What are we gonna do about it?" Qui-Gon takes a deep breath and says, "We should be patient."

When there seems to be no way off Tatooine, Qui-Gon says, "I'm sure another solution will present itself." This summarizes his whole character. After a Sith assassin comes for the queen, Qui-Gon laughs and counsels patience. Afterward, we see Palpatine, Amidala, and Valorum talking about how "distressed" and "anxious" they are, clear contrasts to Qui-Gon. Unlike almost everyone else in *TPM*, Qui-Gon is not quick to make judgments. When asked whether the queen's idea will work, he does not answer. He often says, "I'm not sure." Even when he thinks Anakin is the "chosen one," when asked about it, he says, "I do not presume" This starts to change toward the end of the film, but for the most part Qui-Gon remains in the moment, doing non-doing, being mindful, and aligning his will with "the living Force."

The *Zhuangzi* says, "When you let go of the world, you are free of entanglements. Free of entanglements, you are balanced and untilting. Balanced and untilting, you are reborn along with every presence that confronts you."⁶ This sounds like Qui-Gon Jinn. He is not chasing a goal so much as allowing every encounter to show him something, acting based on what each changing moment offers to him.

"Now *This* Is Podracing!"

TPM's final victory is not the result of conscious intention. Anakin does not have a plan to fly to the Trade Federation's control ship. He just starts pressing buttons, and things keep working out for him. The Queen has a plan, but it's failing. Meanwhile, Anakin's actions are the opposite of a plan. He's on autopilot, and then when he's not, he's like, "I'll try spinning, that's a good trick." This is not exactly a strategy. After Anakin shoots the torpedoes that destroy the ship, all he can say is "Oops!" Intercut are similar scenes of Jar Jar succeeding through his own seeming incompetence. He keeps accidentally dropping bombs and destroying enemy droids by chance. It's played for laughs, but there are similarities with Daoist stories of eccentrics achieving success without trying for it. Victory comes, not through

careful planning or heroic effort, but rather by Anakin being in the moment, acting without acting, just like Qui-Gon told him to do. He's not "doing" anything, and yet everything is done.⁷

Notes

- 1 For further discussion of Daoist themes in *Star Wars*, see Walter (Ritoku) Robinson, "The Far East of *Star Wars*," in Kevin S. Decker and Jason T. Eberl, eds., *Star Wars and Philosophy: More Powerful than You Can Possibly Imagine* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 29–38.
- 2 *Daodejing* (or *Tao Te Ching*) is often attributed to the sixth-century BCE philosopher Laozi (or Lao Tzu), though its authorship is debated. *Zhuangzi* is a collection of works by or about the fourth-century BCE philosopher Zhuangzi (or Zhuang Zhou).
- 3 *TaoTe Ching*, trans. Ursula K. Le Guin and J.P. Seaton (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1998), chapter 36.
- 4 For further discussion of how dynastic changes influenced the development of Chinese philosophy and parallel political changes in *Star Wars*, see Kevin S. Decker. "Dark Times: The End of the Republic and the Beginning of Chinese Philosophy," in Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker, eds., *The Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy: You Must Unlearn What You Have Learned* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 53–64.
- 5 *Daodejing*, chapter 64, in *Introducing Daoism*, trans. Livia Kohn (University Park, PA: Journal of Buddhist Ethics, 2009), 21.
- 6 *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2020), 149.
- 7 *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 48.