



## Doing the Right Thing: Character, Moral Goodness, and Star Wars

A Review of

*Star Wars: Episode VII—The Force Awakens* (2015)

by J. J. Abrams (Director)

[\*Reader alert: This review contains spoilers.]

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Reviewed by

Lisa Sansom , Roger Bretherton , Ryan Niemiec 

“Use the Force,” one of the most popular phrases derived from the *Star Wars* canon, is aligned with many constructs studied in psychology, such as finding flow, the elicitation of trust, and tapping into mindfulness. We add that there is an important dimension of internal strength—more specifically, character strengths—reflected in this phrase.

The new science of character that has emerged in the last 15 years has revealed 24 character strengths (positive personality traits) that are studied from the perspective of identity (who you are), instrumentality (benefit to others and oneself when they are expressed), and morality (they lead to the greater societal good). While there has been recent progress in psychological research examining the identity and instrumental elements of these character strengths (for reviews, see Niemiec, 2013, 2014; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; and the VIA Institute on Character [[www.viacharacter.org/www/Research/Character-Research-Finding](http://www.viacharacter.org/www/Research/Character-Research-Finding)]), there has been less progress within the moral dimension, which will be the emphasis for this review.

The latest installment of the *Star Wars* saga (the first directed by J. J. Abrams) is already the highest grossing domestic (U.S.) film of all time and third-highest internationally (behind only *Avatar* [2009] and *Titanic* [1997]). The film is a success from an entertainment and cinematic perspective and brings substantial pedagogical value for the viewer. The pursuit of the good, moral exemplars, the display of moral courage, and the development of character strengths (the Force) are a few of the pedagogical tools the film demonstrates.

### Pursuing the Good

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Do characters make decisions that are intended for the good—the betterment of others or society? The importance of this question around moral goodness is clear at the onset of the film when Finn, a Stormtrooper who is charged to shoot up a village with his fellow troops, makes a stunning decision. Finn reverts against conformity and years of childhood brainwashing/training by refusing to engage in the destruction and helping a prisoner

escape, saying “It’s the right thing to do.” Once he crosses that threshold toward caring about the greater societal good, he never turns back to the dark side. Han Solo’s pursuit of the good is displayed prominently when he goes unarmed to help his dangerous son, Kylo Ren, and offers him love, support, and genuine connection. The heroine, Rey, who does “the right thing” for the greater good many times, decides not to sell a valuable droid she has found for food money, which she desperately needs. In the moment, these moral decisions are small but the impact of each has a substantial ripple effect throughout the film.

## Moral Exemplars

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These characters are moral exemplars, although there is limited information on their early life influences. Researchers find that the development of moral character can be significantly influenced by mentors and role models (Moberg, 2008) and those in one’s social circle high in moral character (Laham, 2013).

Moral exemplars are distinguished from non-exemplars by their strong life narratives involving motivational themes of agency and communion, viewing critical life events as redemptive and being viewed as helpers (Walker & Frimer, 2007). When moral exemplars are compared, there is evidence to show there is not one pathway of virtuous expression for moral character, as Walker and Hennig (2004) have observed distinctions among exemplars of justice, humanity, and courage. This echoes Peterson’s motto in regard to the science of character: “Character is plural” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

## Walker and Frimer (2007) Observe

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The evidence regarding the foundational core of the moral domain indicated that moral exemplars in general tended to have stronger motivational themes of both agency and communion in their life narratives than ordinary individuals. . . . The agentic aspects of personality here reflect the fact that these exemplars, both brave and caring, are engaged in action, in often challenging and adverse contexts. Such action requires control and awareness of the self, a willingness to assume responsibility and to pursue goals, and a sense of empowerment. . . . The communal aspects of personality here reflect exemplars’ focus on helping others, either in heroic rescues or volunteer service—an unequivocal other-orientation. (p. 857)

While we may not know who the moral exemplars are that influenced Rey, Finn, and Han Solo, viewers can learn from each by seeing them through the lens of exemplarity in bravery and care; indeed, they teach the viewer through the tough decisions they make, the mistakes that they correct, the care for others they repeatedly display, and the collaboration that they form for the betterment of others.

## The Development of Character Strengths

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The expression of character strengths is one way individuals can pursue the good. In the film’s climax, Rey and Kylo Ren face off with one other. Rey has begun to discover the powers that lie within her, whereas Kylo Ren has been actively growing his powers, though not as quickly as he’d like. Within the *Star Wars* canon, these powers are about harnessing

the Force, yet in the world of positive psychology, these individuals can be viewed as growing and harnessing their character strengths to varying degrees of effectiveness.

One of the paths to the development of character strengths is the realization that they do not exist as absolutes—they exist in a “golden mean” which is unique for that individual, at that time and in that situation (Grant & Schwartz, 2011). The use of character strengths in a balanced yet effective way is one that requires a deepening self-awareness and self-exploration and, at times, diligent self-monitoring to ensure strengths are used to an optimal level, not being underused or overused (Niemic, 2014).

In the film, the viewer sees Rey discovering her character strengths. She is brave as she encounters new situations and takes on the challenges in front of her. She is honest about what she knows and does not know. She perseveres in overcoming numerous obstacles and sticking with her quest to the end. However, she has been living a rather predictable and safe life on her home planet of Jakku. One could not say that it has been easy, but her solitary life of scavenging has become largely routine, and she imagines that her family, who left her there for reasons unknown, will return to reunite with her. She does not ever dream of leaving her planet. As such, her environment has not encouraged her to grow and realize her character strengths. She is largely blind to her character strengths (in other words, she has not learned to tune into herself and use “the Force” that resides within her and around her), until her new environment requires her to embark on this important journey of self-discovery and strengths development.

In contrast, the evil Kylo Ren has grown up with strong-minded parents who nurtured his strengths and enabled elaborate mental and physical training in the ways of the Force from Luke Skywalker. His parents, the viewer is led to believe, have been by his side and loved him even as he eschewed his birth name and embraced the dark side. While Kylo Ren demonstrates that his strengths lie in the Force quite early on, by stopping a blaster bolt in mid-air, as the movie unfolds, it’s clear that he is not using his strengths of character authentically. He needs others to encourage and lead him. He has used his strengths for malevolent purposes (i.e., character strengths misuse), to continue the legacy of Darth Vader, his grandfather, and seek power through the dark side (i.e., the First Order). The viewer learns that forces of darkness drove Kylo Ren to turn his back on his family and training with Skywalker, hence compromising his morality and any balanced, authentic use of character strengths.

## **The Display of Moral Courage**

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Rey and Kylo Ren provide an interesting contrast, particularly in their use of the character strength of courage/bravery. On several occasions throughout the movie, each is thrust into dangerous situations that require moral judgment and an understanding of the risk involved, yet chooses to take some sort of brave action despite their fear. This accords with the two-part definition of courage offered by Biswas-Diener (2012). On the one hand, courage requires the management of fear; on the other, the maintenance of performance in the face of what one fears. With Rey, we see this increasingly as the film progresses, nearly culminating in the moment when, held prisoner by a Stormtrooper, she quells her fear and bravely, for the first time, taps into the Force to manipulate her captor and gain her freedom. With ever-intensifying scenes, Rey calls on her courage time and time again, and

she successfully wins her way to the final battle against Kylo Ren. She exemplifies the notion that courage indicates a willingness to try (Sansom, 2015).

But, psychologically, courage is much more. Kylo Ren's journey to that same battle is somewhat different. He also needs to call on his courage, but he loses his moral compass and is compelled to demonstrate his bravery to others, rather than enjoying the use of that strength for itself. When behaviors are ethically dubious or foolhardy, we are much less likely to call them courageous (Harbour & Kisfalvi, 2014; Pury & Hensel 2010). Kylo Ren uses his courage to demonstrate to the First Order that he is worthy of their attention and training, rather than using it to help others. His use of his courage diminishes others, and is therefore not a true use of the strength. Here, it is clear that courage is an *interactive* strength (Gruber, 2011)—those who use bravery appropriately do so by recognizing that the situation in which they find themselves requires it. In this regard Kylo Ren undoubtedly falls short. The actions he undertakes to increase his courage, such as killing a family member, actually diminish him, and he fights in the final scene wounded, drawing strength from his own pain. He serves as a cautionary reminder of the need for individuals demonstrating courage to combine it with heart-based strengths such as kindness and social intelligence and to give close attention to accurately understanding the consequences of their actions.

Sometimes courage is demonstrated publicly in actions that would be universally acknowledged as brave, like the firefighter running into a burning building to save a life. At other times, courage is manifested psychologically in facing personal demons and overcoming them, whether anyone ever knows about it or not (Pury, Kowalski, & Spearman, 2007). In this respect, therefore, it is Rey who proves to be the stronger of the two characters, drawing from her moral courage (Putman, 1997), facing her fears, maintaining her integrity, and bringing benefit to others. Ultimately, as with Rey, courage connects us to other people (Amos & Klimoski, 2014), but with Kylo Ren its misuse leaves him isolated.

From a strengths perspective, we can see that character strengths such as courage can manifest very differently, even as they may lead to the same life point. It is not enough just to say that one has a character strength. The individual's external environment, motivations and intentions, and strengths development trajectory need to be assessed and understood. Rey's original external environment worked against her—it did not provide opportunities for her to truly realize who she is. However, as she changed environment and changed perspective, she tapped into her innate character strengths to help herself and help others. Kylo Ren, however, can be hypothesized to have grown up in a supportive environment with access to institutions that would help him grow his strengths, but his motivation became wrong-minded and amoral as he shifted to the dark side, and his character strengths were used for malevolent purposes rather than societal good.

## Conclusion

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Movies offer a unique avenue for depicting exemplars of strong character and moral goodness (for a review of over 1,500 movies depicting courage and other strengths of moral character, see Niemiec & Wedding, 2014). Character strengths, when expressed in a balanced and substantial way, are important pathways to moral goodness, benefitting others directly and improving society. The exemplary courage and character strength displays by the heroes and heroines of *Star Wars* offer viewers not only plenty of entertainment and education, but also new ways to "use the Force."

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