**“Like My Father Before Me”: Loss and Redemption of Fatherhood in *Star Wars***

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When Darth Vader makes his revelation to Luke Skywalker, “*I* am your father,” in *The Empire Strikes Back,* the shocking, unbelievable substance of his claim to fatherhood isn’t put into perspective until Vader’s backstory is completed in 2005’s *Revenge of the Sith*. But in 1980, it wasn’t certain that Vader was telling the truth; even James Earl Jones, Darth Vader’s voice, didn’t trust his own character’s statement when he read it in the script: “I thought,” he stated in an interview, “He’s lying. I have to see how they carry this lie out.”[[1]](#endnote-1) At the time, we could only wonder if perhaps Vader was seeking to manipulate Luke into accepting an alliance to rule the galaxy in a paternal lineage as co-Emperors or for them both to serve under Vader’s master. *The Empire Strikes Back* leaves us in suspense: we’re given a hint that Vader is telling the truth—why else would Luke react with the kind of horror he does if his own feelings didn’t confirm he was the offspring of a moral monstrosity? We’ve observed a completely unexpected overture by an arch-villain to our hero, seemingly to provide him with safety and power, and yet, at the end of Episode V, we’re left in the (perhaps tantalizing) dark. Eventually, we learn the truth that Luke is indeed the son of the great Anakin Skywalker, once a Jedi Knight who served the Galactic Republic well, but through murder and betrayal became Darth Vader.

The six episodes of *Star Wars* reveal that Anakin’s love for his mother, Shmi, and later his wife, Padmé, turns into a disastrous obsession with saving their lives. We believe that the desire for the continued life of those we love, and actively taking steps to preserve their lives, is both natural and often praiseworthy, *but not at all costs*. This is especially apparent when the cost involves the killing of innocent persons and aligning oneself with great powers that violently suppress dissent, not to mention annihilating populated planets. We suggest that, with the benefit of hindsight, observing the peculiar, dramatic moment when Vader declares his paternity, there’s a painful portrait of how fatherhood can go wrong. Fatherly love should be evident in caring for the health and good of one’s children, seeking to safeguard them from harm and to encourage their integrity. However, Vader promises his son’s survival only on the condition that Luke will serve his own monstrous, tyrannical master. We’ll uncover the transition in Anakin’s life from a natural love of others to a distorted, toxic caricature of love utilizing a *philosophy of love and goodness* to show how the parent-child relationship may be lost or regained. This philosophical treatment of love and goodness goes back to the ancient Greek Stoics.

1. As quoted in an interview for the DVD Documentary *Empire of Dreams: The Story of the Star Wars Trilogy*, dir. Kevin Burns (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)