

Book Review

Cass Sunstein: The World According to Star Wars

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Book details

The World According to Star Wars
Cass Sunstein

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Professor Cass Sunstein, Professor of Law at Harvard University, co-author of *Nudge*, considered as one of the nation's best constitutional scholar, has written a book about Star Wars! Yes, "I am your Father" Star Wars, *May the Force Be With You*, Star Wars. The book is about more than Star Wars. It is about fathers and sons, parents and children, constitutional law, and of course behavioral economics and nudges. The book is easiest to follow if you know the basic plot and characters of Star Wars. Regardless, the book is well written, and discusses behavioral economics and constitutional law by one of the nation's experts in both. If you have an interest in Star Wars then there is probably a lot of things that you may not know about Star Wars. Things such as Lucas's confusion about what would come next in the saga, his relationship with his own father and the producer and actors, and books such as *Star War Infinities*. In part the book is a back stages tour of Star wars.

George Lucas's and Frederick Hayek's Creative Style.

In Episode 1, yes, chapters are Episodes, Sunstein reports that Lucas underestimated how much time it would take to write the movie the *planning fallacy* and did not recognize all the twists and turns which would occur in the course of writing the movie *myth of creative foresight*. When Lucas began writing Star Wars his thoughts were "abstract and vague" (p. 12). He felt a tickle, or an itch which needed scratching. In 1993, *A New Hope* was released in the theatres in 1977, Lucas said that, "When you are creating something like that, the characters take over, and they begin to tell the story apart from what you're doing... Then you have to figure out how to put the puzzle back together so it makes sense" (p. 18). Hence his abstract and vague thoughts.

Lucas's creative style is similar to what Frederick Hayek

calls a "puzzler" in his article, *Two Types of Mind*. Puzzlers, Hayek says he is a puzzler, create with "wordless thought", they "see" connections between and among things but can't put them into words. They reflect and then discover and the discovery elicits the well know *aha* experience. Alfred North Whitehead said that puzzlers create from a state of "confusion". Clarity of thought is not their guide: intuition is their guide. or, if you prefer, they are "guided" by their unconscious. Hayek, and George Lucas. *May the Force Be With Them, Always*.

Star Wars Box office. Episode 3, "Secrets of Success", he asks what determined the success of Star Wars. He implies a box-office revenue production function containing non-orthodox inputs such as culture and "buzz". People wanted and felt the need to talk about Star Wars creating network and bandwagon effects, reputational cascades and courtesy bias.

There was something about Star Wars for everyone. The response in Europe to the movie *Revenge of the Sith* was that Russian correspondents thought it was about Russian politics, while American correspondents thought it was about, who else, George W. Bush. Sunstein says that "In general, human beings tend to believe what they want to believe, and not to believe what they don't want to believe" (p. 126). An example of the *confirmation bias*?

Lucas thought he had a huge flop on his hands. Harrison Ford, who played the rogue Hand Solo said that "There's this giant guy in a dog suit walking around. It was ridiculous" (p. 36). He is talking about his side-kick Chewbacca, who together became one of the great duos in the (modern) history of cinema. However, after the film became a blockbuster, everyone knew that it would become so, and why it would succeed. Everyone expressed the *hindsight bias*.

Thinking About the Meaning of Star Wars. In Episode 4, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Star Wars", Lucas mentions Christianity, Buddhism, Feminism, Thomas Jefferson the Jedi Knight, and Behavioral Star Wars, to mention five. Behavioral Star Wars discusses human beings as deviating from perfect rationality, because we suffer from "predictable biases". He then gives examples of several cognitive biases mentioned below. Reading through the 13 ways reminded me of why Herbert Simon said that our rationality is bounded; there is only so much information that we can use effectively.

Behavioral Economics. Behavioral economics concepts can be found throughout the book, but often it is not made explicit. However, like Chewbacca, they are easy to recognize. These concepts include bandwagon effects, confirmation bias, courtesy bias, hindsight bias, herding, network effects, informational and reputational cascades, status quo bias, overconfidence, self-serving bias, optimistic bias, present bias, inertia, choice architecture, framing, gift exchange, Systems 1 and 2, the planning fallacy, and the myth of creative foresight. They are used to explain the Star Wars saga, the behavior of George Lucas and that of individual characters and groups.

Constitutional Law. Sunstein shows similarities between Lucas's creative style and the Star Wars saga, and constitutional law. It appears in Episode 8, "Constitutional Episodes". Judges create new laws, or Episodes, and they rely on existing laws. However, the new laws are not pre-ordained or inevitable results of existing laws. It is one outcome out of many possible outcomes from existing Episodes. Lucas's creative style was similar, and so is the entire Star Wars saga. Sunstein, referencing the novels *Star Wars Infinities*, plays the "what if" game. What if Luke didn't go to Alderaan with Obi-wan to fight the Empire. What if he hadn't destroyed the Death Star? What would have come next? Sunstein's main point is the fact of uncertainty in the creation of the Star Wars saga and in constitutional law. As to the many examples about constitutional law, the Force definitely wasn't with me...

Rebels. The rebels fought the Empire, and then they fought the First Order. Some rebels went charging into battle and some were nudged. But at the same time even rebels tend to prefer the "existing narratives" in our life (p. 121), or are constrained by the status quo bias. Sunstein says that rebels succeed or don't succeed because of social dynamics: "Everything depends on what each of us think that the rest of us think" (p. 127). An example of a Keynesian type *beauty contest*?

Freedom. In Episode 6, "Freedom of Choice", Sunstein turns to the subject of freedom, what he believes that it is a central theme in the saga. The subtitle of Episode 6 is "It's Not About Destiny or Prophecy". It's about free will. He says that many people regardless of occupation live on "autopilot" (*inertia*) The inertia is a result of the *choice architecture* or the *force* which surrounds us. But we are free to choose, and the freedom to choose is inviolate. This one reason why nudges are preferred to government intrusion. Luke, Anakin, and all the other characters in the Star Wars saga made choices. To

kill or not to kill, to fight or not to fight, to turn to the Dark Side or not. Sunstein says that "At every moment—whether small or large—you get to decide what to do with your own life" (p. 108). More about this with Episode 5.

Jedi mind tricks. Episode 9, "The Force and the Monomyth" reveals how to perform Jedi mind tricks. Become in-tune with the Force after spending years in an Ashram? No. Understand the effects of *framing*. State something the way you want and it affects what people see and do what you want from them. Phishermen, as described in Akerlof and Schiller's book *Phishing for Phools* can manipulate phools. *Reciprocity* or *gift exchange* can get people to act the way you want them to, as can *social proof* and *herding*.

Being able to *recognize patterns* is another way of seeming to be almost omniscient. Sunstein mentions the abilities of chess masters to play numerous number of other chess players at the same time. Chess masters have tremendous pattern recognition. Herbert Simon wrote a lot about this. But he also reminded us that when a chess master sees a pattern of pieces that he has never seen before that his skills are no better than an average chess player. Sunstein also talks about athletes as having well developed *System 1*, and System 1, intuition, "seems like Jedi stuff" (p. 166).

I Love My Children. Now for Episode 5, "Fathers and Sons". A central idea of Star Wars saga is a father (Darth Vader), who renounced his entire life and died in order to save his son (Luke). And his son recognizes his father's failings and loves him nonetheless. The father is forgiven and redeemed. The son feels his father's love.

In this chapter Professor Sunstein includes a one line song he sang to his son and daughter when they were young, as well as their children's reaction to the song. It is very poignant. He is so "open" that I was "taken-aback". Professor Sunstein uses this chapter to expose his emotions for his children. He knew that he was risking being ridiculed and criticized for his displays of emotion and yet he did it anyway. It was an act of love. An act rarely if ever seen by an academic. It helps explain why Cass is the person he is.