

# IS THIS THE WAY?

The Mandalorian's Moral Journey

**Rowan Daneels, PhD**

The Armorer: *When one chooses to walk the Way of the Mandalore, you are both hunter and prey. [...] Have you ever removed your helmet?*

The Mandalorian: *No.*

The Armorer: *Has it ever been removed by others?*

The Mandalorian: *Never.*

The Armorer: *This is the Way.* (S1 E3, The Sin)<sup>1</sup>

When the Mandalorian bounty hunter Din Djarin returns to his secluded community, or covert, after collecting the bounty for the Force-sensitive child known as Grogu, he is questioned about the removal of his ever-present helmet. His covert, the Children of the Watch, is a religious faction of Mandalorians who follow a strict code or creed, which they refer to as the Way of the Mandalore. The Armorer, the *de facto* leader of Djarin's covert, explains a few rules of their creed, including the rule to never remove their helmets and reveal their faces to others. Other moral values such as honor in combat and community loyalty (e.g., helping other Mandalorians, taking care of orphans) are also part of this Mandalorian code.

Perhaps due to the Mandalorian emphasis on caring for orphans (or foundlings as Mandalorians call them<sup>2</sup>), Djarin feels remorse and rescues Grogu from the villainous Imperial forces. After rescuing Grogu, they embark on a quest to find surviving Jedi, with Mando protecting the child from bounty hunters and the Empire alike. However, through his increased interactions and growing father-son relationship with Grogu, Djarin starts to break with some of the Mandalorians' beliefs he once followed to the letter. For instance, he takes off his helmet on a few occasions, which eventually leads to his temporary exile.

This chapter discusses how Djarin's strict adherence to the Mandalorian creed gradually weakens due to his evolving relationship with Grogu. His sense of morality seemingly shifts from a strong loyalty to the Mandalorian community to loyalty, caring for, and bonding with Grogu. This dynamic is interpreted mainly from a moral psychology approach, which is used to examine which moral values are included in the Mandalorian creed and how Djarin's moral disposition changes throughout the series. Additionally, a positive psychology perspective addresses how Djarin's character development throughout the series can be defined as *eudaimonic* (i.e., focusing on worthwhile aspects of life<sup>3,4</sup>), improving his well-being mainly due to his growing connection with Grogu as well as his shifting identification as a Mandalorian. This chapter addresses whether and how Djarin's journey influences his moral values, decision-making, and his adherence of the Mandalorian moral code. The next section includes a brief overview of this moral psychology perspective. All of this is then discussed in the context of the first three seasons of *The Mandalorian* and the three final episodes of *The Book of Boba Fett* that featured a reunited Djarin and Grogu.

## **Exploring Moral Foundations and Its Impact on a Person's Well-Being**

Moral foundations theory (MFT<sup>5</sup>) is a psychological framework that argues that people have natural-born moral foundations, or intuitions, that guide their judgments and decision-making. According to MFT, there are five sets of moral foundations:

- Care/harm: physical and emotional harm of others, including virtues of kindness, gentleness, nurturance, compassion, and empathy.
- Fairness/reciprocity: notions of justice, honesty, reciprocal altruism, equity, and proportionality.
- In-group/loyalty: forming community bonding, coalitions, and self-sacrifice for the group.
- Authority/respect: ideas of leadership, followers, social hierarchies, and respect for traditions.
- Purity/sanctity: notions of living a noble life, but also feelings of disgust or contamination.

These morals are thought to be present in every human being, but their importance to an individual as well as how they shape people's judgments and decision-making differ from person to person, as they are formed through learning experiences or the specific culture an individual belongs to<sup>6</sup>.

While MFT focuses on individuals' intuitive gut reactions, rather than on more complex moral reasoning<sup>7</sup>, a dual-process model of moral judgment may exist: a quick, automatic, intuitive system based on mostly emotional decisions (i.e., people's gut reactions) and a slow, rational, deliberate system. This second component, the slow, rational system, is sometimes referred to as moral reasoning<sup>8</sup>. This is our controllable process that we deliberately engage after obtaining more information about a certain

situation. While moral reasoning can override our initial gut reactions, these intuitive reactions tend to be the driving force in people's moral judgments<sup>9</sup>. For instance, this may explain why Djarin is initially so hesitant to trust droids (based on his intuitions), but eventually lowers his guard around IG-11, who proves himself to be trustworthy through his (recently reprogrammed) actions (based on Djarin's more elaborate moral reasoning).

When we discuss moral foundations, we also need to include moral disengagement<sup>10</sup>. When people do something that violates social conventions or their own personal moral values, they tend to morally distance themselves from their own behavior to cope with feelings such as shame or guilt. This process is called moral disengagement. To distance themselves from their transgressions, people can, for example, make advantageous comparisons (i.e., comparing one's transgression to even worse behavior, arguing that their behavior is less harmful), not take responsibility, or ignore the consequences of the moral transgression<sup>11</sup>. For example, when Djarin hands over Grogu to the Imperial forces fully aware that they do not have good intentions with the innocent orphan, this could be seen as moral disengagement because he ignores the consequences and does not take responsibility for his immoral actions.

Finally, a tenant of moral foundations is that holding true to one's beliefs contributes to positive feelings about one's self. When someone is true to their moral foundations, they experience an increased sense of well-being. This sense of well-being is sometimes referred to as *eudaimonic well-being*, which refers to achieving one's best potential through a sense of autonomy and relatedness to others, personal growth, purpose in life, being able to express your own identity, and self acceptance<sup>12, 13, 14</sup>.

### **What Does It Mean to Be a Mandalorian? The Mandalorian**

## Code and Moral Foundations

*The Mandalorian* provides viewers with a clear introduction to Mandalorian culture, specifically regarding the moral values they adhere to. There are several instances where Djarin upholds important moral foundations and follows the Way of the Mandalore closely. Before Grogu, Djarin never removed his iconic Mandalorian helmet, as this is against the creed. Even when severely injured and in need of treatment from the IG-11 droid<sup>15</sup>, Djarin refuses to take off his helmet and insists on being left behind, rather than having his companions see his face. However, Djarin eventually gives in to the droid's medical assistance and removes his helmet to receive treatment. As a droid is not alive, this act only *bends* and not breaks his adherence to the creed.

There are additional moral beliefs that Mandalorians share beyond maintaining anonymity. First, they emphasize honor in battle, such as Djarin wanting to die a warrior's death after being injured<sup>16</sup> and his avoidance of shooting unarmed men<sup>17</sup>. Second, loyalty towards the Mandalorian community is essential. For instance, other Mandalorians from Djarin's covert help him and Grogu escape from the bounty hunter's guild and Imperial forces<sup>18</sup>. Third, the creed dictates that Mandalorians should take care of and train foundlings, ensuring the future of the community.

The Mandalorian creed, including the above values, can be connected to the five moral foundations identified by the MFT<sup>19</sup>. Looking after the foundlings and ensuring their well-being relates to the foundation of care/harm, while acting honorable and living a noble, honest life is associated with both the moral notions of purity/sanctity and fairness/reciprocity. The Mandalorians' awe and respect for the Armorer (their *de facto* leader) signifies the moral foundation of authority/respect, and the Mandalorians' strong sense of loyalty towards other members of their clan is an

example of making decisions based on the moral foundation of in-group/loyalty.

Interestingly, Djarin's profession as a bounty hunter contradicts some of these moral values included in the Mandalorian creed, including care/harm (for example, showing no compassion for the bounties he collects) and purity/sanctity (hunting down other individuals, even if they are wanted for a crime, is not a particularly noble way of living). His very first words in the series emphasize this contradiction: "*I can bring you in warm, or I can bring you in cold*" (S1 E1, *The Mandalorian*)<sup>20</sup>. This begins to change when Grogu comes into his life.

### **A Burgeoning Bond: Early Signs of Djarin's Relationship With Grogu**

When Grogu enters Djarin's life, there is no real bond, at least from Djarin's side. Initially, he hands over Grogu to the Imperial forces, who want to experiment on Grogu, with seemingly little hesitation. Djarin makes this decision based on his quick, moral intuition, led by the moral foundation of in-group/loyalty<sup>21</sup>, to get the reward (rare and valuable Mandalorian beskar) back into Mandalorian hands. To overlook this moral transgression against the care/harm foundation, he takes on another bounty as a form of moral disengagement to cope with the accompanying guilt<sup>22</sup> and forget about Grogu. Later, however, Djarin regrets this transgression and saves Grogu.

From this point forward, they start to develop a close relationship. Djarin acts like a parent, even reprimanding Grogu for pressing random buttons inside his ship on several occasions. He is also very protective when fellow gun for hire Mayfeld threatens Grogu<sup>23</sup>, acting concerned about leaving him alone on the ship during a prison break job. This relationship goes both ways. During an arm-wrestling match between Djarin and their

ally Cara Dune<sup>24</sup>, Grogu shows protective behavior when he uses his Force powers to stop Cara as he believes she is actually harming Djarin.

### Straying From The Way, But Gaining a Close Relationship

In the search for a Jedi to train Grogu, Djarin comes across others outside his covert that aid him. When Djarin encounters Mandalorians who stray from the creed or meets individuals wearing Mandalorian armor he does not deem authentically Mandalorian, Djarin quickly defends his own code. For example, when meeting marshal Cobb Vanth<sup>25</sup>, who is not Mandalorian himself but wore Boba Fett's iconic Mandalorian armor, Djarin demands the armor from him because Vanth is decisively not Mandalorian. Perhaps the most notable encounter with outsiders occurs when Djarin and Grogu are ambushed and saved by three Mandalorians in blue armor, including Bo-Katan Kryze<sup>26</sup>. When they remove their helmets, Djarin immediately goes on the defensive and calls them out for not covering their faces in accordance with his creed, as he believes this should be followed by all Mandalorians. Bo-Katan explains, to the benefit of audiences *and* Djarin, that Djarin is part of a splinter group of Mandalorians, the Children of the Watch. This is an important moment for Djarin, as he realizes there are other Mandalorian communities that do not follow the same strict moral code.

Encountering different perspectives on what it means to be a Mandalorian and wear Mandalorian armor bolsters Djarin's determination to follow his creed. Meeting others with different values provides a divide between him and them, enhancing his own beliefs and strengthening his personal identity. Indeed, Djarin doubling down on his own beliefs, even when confronted with the knowledge that other Mandalorians believe and behave differently, may be a way for Djarin to improve his own well-being. Self-acceptance<sup>27</sup> is relevant here. Djarin follows through

on his strict Mandalorian beliefs when claiming Boba Fett's armor from Cobb Vanth and defending his choice to conceal his face to Bo-Katan. These interactions help him express and validate his identity.

### **Djarin and Grogu's Relationship Transcends the Mandalorian Creed**

Djarin and Grogu start to develop their father-son relationship in small and subtle moments, and we see this relationship grow over time. Djarin reprimands Grogu on several occasions like a parent; for instance, when he eats the eggs of the so-called Frog Lady<sup>28</sup> or when he tells Grogu not to play with his chowder at the inn<sup>29</sup>. Their developing father-son connection is also recognized by the Jedi Ahsoka Tano, who mentions that Grogu has a strong attachment to Djarin, something Jedi are not allowed to have. However, this nurturing relationship likely leads to an improved well-being for both Djarin and Grogu, as it fulfills a fundamental human need to experience relatedness or the need to connect to others<sup>30, 31</sup>. As such, their close personal relationship leads to more purpose and satisfaction in both of their lives.

After their visit to Ahsoka and using the seer stone to find other Jedi, Grogu is captured by Imperial warlord Moff Gideon<sup>32</sup>, leaving Djarin alone and lost. To find Grogu, Djarin confronts a big moral dilemma. He must either stick to his Mandalorian creed – never remove his helmet and lose his only lead that would help him find Grogu – or give up his strict moral code to save him. In the end, Djarin alters his moral code for Grogu and removes his helmet so he can use an Imperial computer with facial scanning to find his location. This marks the first time Djarin reveals his face to sentient others since he was a child. Notably, Djarin may be prompted to remove his helmet and save Grogu by the moral foundations of care and loyalty he feels towards Grogu<sup>33</sup>. He does not necessarily forsake his original moral values, but rather holds



them differently: shifting from a sense of loyalty and care for his Mandalorian covert to a more personal sense of care and loyalty towards Grogu. Indeed, the quickness with which Djarin decides to take off his helmet in the Imperial base suggests his decision was based on the rapid, intuitive moral system (i.e., a moral gut response) following his entrenched moral foundations of care and loyalty, rather than a more rational, slower system of moral reasoning.

This shift would suggest that choosing Grogu over the creed fulfills his need for companionship and relatedness in ways that his Mandalorian covert cannot provide. Indeed, after telling Gideon that Grogu means more to him than he will ever know, Djarin begins the rescue mission. He is singularly focused on Grogu's safety: "*The child is my only priority*" (S2 E16, The Rescue)<sup>34</sup>. After rescuing Grogu and defeating Gideon, Jedi Luke Skywalker arrives to train Grogu in the ways of the Force. Although visibly conflicted between continuing his Jedi training and staying with Djarin, Grogu decides to go with Luke. During their heartbreaking goodbye, Djarin removes his helmet without much hesitation, demonstrating their meaningful relationship and its importance. At this point in the series, his relationship with Grogu is more valuable than upholding the Mandalorian creed.

### **Djarin Loses the Way: Losing Grogu and His Identity**

Rescuing Grogu and building a meaningful, close relationship with him provides Djarin with additional purpose next to serving his covert, which improves his well-being. By satisfying his basic human need for relatedness, Djarin grows on an emotional level, becoming a better, more complete individual. However, we see a rupture in Djarin's well-being following Grogu's departure with Luke to train as a Jedi. Djarin slips back into his old, harsh bounty hunter lifestyle, threatening his quarry with a quip used before

his time with Grogu: “*I can bring you in warm, or I can bring you in cold*” (*The Book of Boba Fett*, S1 E5, *The Return of the Mandalorian*)<sup>35</sup>. Reunited with members of his covert, Djarin confesses he removed his helmet in the presence of others. As a result, the Armorer banishes Djarin from the clan for his moral transgressions. In this moment, a core aspect of his identity as a Mandalorian is taken from him. This leads to Djarin immediately seeking a way to redeem himself. The Armorer mentions that this can only be done by locating the living waters of Mandalore and bathing in them.

Before going on his path towards redemption, Djarin attempts to reconnect with Grogu by gifting him a piece of Mandalorian armor<sup>36</sup>. Luke, however, presents Grogu with an important moral dilemma: either he commits to his Jedi training and becomes Luke’s first student (but is unlikely to see Djarin again), or he accepts Djarin’s gift and forsake the ways of the Jedi for good. Grogu is forced to choose between a strong personal relationship with Djarin or a life without strong attachment that can be purposeful in a more abstract manner (i.e., protecting the galaxy as a Jedi). Both choices lead down a path that can increase an individual’s well-being as either may bring about a purposeful life, albeit in different ways (one more personal, the other more abstract). In the end, Grogu chooses his personal relationship with Djarin<sup>37</sup>.

### **Finding His Way Back: Redemption and Reconciliation**

Djarin’s quest for redemption builds off previous conflict between Mandalorian subgroups by focusing on the broader Mandalorian cultural identity. For instance, upon learning that Djarin has never been to the planet of Mandalore, Bo-Katan mocks Djarin for believing that he is a real Mandalorian as he was raised on the Mandalorian moon of Concordia<sup>38</sup>. She also calls his redemption mission and his creed a fairytale. Djarin, however, defends his

Mandalorian identity even after his exile: “*without the creed, what are we? What do we stand for?*” (S3 E2, The Mines of Mandalore)<sup>39</sup>. By holding on to his strict Mandalorian creed and expressing himself as a Mandalorian instead of an exiled member of the group, Djarin maintains his sense of self and self-acceptance by standing firm to his identity, which fulfills his need for autonomy.

Later, Djarin succeeds in reaching the living waters of Mandalore, with help from Grogu and Bo-Katan<sup>40</sup>. Completing this redemptive act, Djarin does not take off his helmet again as he holds firmly onto his values and begins teaching them to Grogu. In the end, Djarin’s adherence to the Mandalorian creed remains fairly level across the series, only shifting in accordance with Grogu’s needs in dire times (i.e., removing his helmet when saying goodbye to Grogu). Taking care of Grogu, who does not by birth belong to his covert, includes a certain adherence to the creed itself. Not only is taking care of a foundling part of the creed, but introducing Grogu into the Mandalorian covert demonstrates the Mandalorian tenet that Mandalorian is not a *race*, but rather an adherence to the creed and its moral values.

Eventually, Djarin’s strict moral code and his close personal relationship to Grogu are reconciled by training him in the Mandalorian creed. Djarin, for instance, teaches him how to navigate in space on several occasions, as a Mandalorian needs to be able to read star charts<sup>41</sup>. At the same time, Grogu’s Jedi training (or lack thereof) fails to save Djarin from a robotic beast after his capture, but his instructions on flight navigation pay off when Grogu pilots a ship on his own to reach Bo-Katan, who ultimately comes to Djarin’s aid<sup>42</sup>.

Grogu’s training as a Mandalorian goes hand in hand with the further evolving connection between him and Djarin, as well as his improved well-being. Through the sharing of experiences, support, mutual respect and care, Grogu and Djarin’s relationship

grows closer. These aspects of their close relationship are often subtle. When Grogu is scared during hyperspace travel or when he is afraid of the dark in the Mandalorian mines, he stays very close to his father figure. These displays of affection, finding support with each other, and taking care of each other are demonstrated to improve Djarin's and Grogu's well-being<sup>43</sup>. In another instance, Djarin is proud of Grogu when he wins his fight against another Mandalorian foundling and he acts like a protective parent when he feels that Grogu is too young to operate his own IG-12 droid. Perhaps the most relevant example of how their relationship affects their well-being is when Djarin decides to adopt Grogu as his son. Grogu grows from a foundling to a Mandalorian apprentice and adopts Djarin's family name as Din Grogu. They explore the galaxy as mentor and apprentice, becoming independent contractors for the New Republic. The father-son duo finally settles down in a home on Navarro, their reward for all the struggles and hardship they endured together<sup>44</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

An important aspect within *The Mandalorian* is the moral values that Djarin upholds, established in the creed he was sworn to behold as a child, as well as within his broader connection to Mandalorian culture. While the Children of the Watch follow a strict code that prohibits members from removing their helmets in front of others, Mandalorians collectively adhere to broader moral values such as honor, loyalty to community, and caring for younger members or foundlings. When interpreted through moral psychology, the Mandalorian creed is built around several moral foundations (e.g., loyalty, care, sanctity). Djarin's adherence to the strict creed does not falter much, only when prioritizing Grogu's needs. While Djarin's journey leads to a few moral transgressions against the creed, overall, his father-son relationship with Grogu does not stop him from standing by his beliefs and passing them on to Grogu. Thus, Djarin's progressive

personal development and eudaimonic well-being (i.e., environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance) is understood in two ways: (1) through accepting himself and expressing his identity as a Mandalorian belonging to the Children of the Watch and (2) through his close, personal relationship with Grogu.

Ultimately, by raising Grogu as a Mandalorian, Djarin reconciles both worlds, that is, parenting Grogu and his Mandalorian beliefs. Throughout their adventures, Djarin's experiences lead to a more purposeful and meaningful life, including the fulfillment of autonomy and relatedness, having multiple positive relationships (not just with Grogu, but also with Cara Dune, Bo-Katan, the Armorer, even Greef Karga), having a purpose in life (training Grogu and raising him as his son), and being able to accept and express himself as a true Mandalorian.

## Notes

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