

Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal

Volume 2

Article 12

2010

Star Trek: A Guide to the Soul and Virtuous Action

Melissa Cherry
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cherry, Melissa (2010) "Star Trek: A Guide to the Soul and Virtuous Action," *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal*: Vol. 2 , Article 12.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol2/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Introduction

In this paper I investigate the intricacies of the three portion soul described by Aristotle by means of the popular science fiction television program, *Star Trek*. First, I briefly describe the series, and introduce a few of its main characters and their personalities as seen in a variety of episodes. I then explain Aristotle's view of the soul from his work, *Nicomachean Ethics*. To examine better the functionality of the soul, the next portion of the paper illustrates how the U.S.S Enterprise, the ship that is the central location of *Star Trek*, functions as an embodiment of the Aristotelian soul. Finally, I evaluate the moral worth of the Enterprise through Aristotle's description of virtue from the same writings on ethics. Through these analyses I conclude that for the Enterprise to be virtuous, Kirk must be the captain, but also listen to Spock's advice.

Series and Characters

Star Trek, the original series, was one of television's most popular science fiction programs. It ran from 1966 to 1969 but was not popular in its first season and did not begin to develop a cult following until the mid-seventies, after it had been cancelled. Set in outer space, the series recounts the adventures of Starfleet's Enterprise and her crew.ⁱ On the Enterprise many characters man the bridge: McCoy, Scott, Chekov, Uhura, and Sulu. Doctor McCoy (a.k.a. Bones) is the chief medical officer, and Scott (a.k.a. Scotty) is the chief engineer aboard the ship. Each of the other characters has a position on the bridge, serving a vital role in the function of the ship. Because these people only serve minor and technical roles, they are not depicted on a personal level, but viewers have ample opportunity to become familiar with Kirk and Spock as fully developed characters.

Despite being Captain and first mate, Kirk and Spock are quite different, especially when acting in positions of power. In the episode "The Galileo Seven," Spock and six other crewmembers are stranded on a foreign planet inhabited by hostile giants. The research party loses communication with the mother ship, leaving Spock in charge. When the giants on the planet kill a crew member, the rest of the research party, despite their superior technology, become frightened and insist on killing the giants before they can damage the ship and strand the crew on the planet forever. Spock, as acting captain, insists that the giants only be injured to deter them instead of killing them.ⁱⁱ It is logical to Spock in this situation not to kill the giants because simply scaring them should give Scotty sufficient time to repair the ship before they return. In other words, Spock reasons that a less violent action is in order as it will achieve the necessary end. Inevitably, the Giants do return and retaliate, killing another crewmember. Spock's miscalculation of the giant's ability to find the spacecraft infuriates the rest of the research party, nearly causing mutiny. Spock acted logically (given what facts he had) in this situation as he always does. If it weren't for Scotty's masterful engineering skills, the crew would have remained stranded. Spock uses only reason to determine action, but it is Scotty, using skills and reason, who saves the crew. Spock's leadership abilities are tested in this episode, and it seems that he fails to save his crew, relying on Scotty to save them by himself.

On the other hand, when Kirk is in charge, things seem to run more smoothly. For example, in "The Squire of Gothos" Kirk and his crew are captured by an alien. This alien refuses to release any of the crew, so Kirk tries to use everything to free them—pleading, threatening violence, using violence, and technology—but nothing works. In the end, Kirk negotiates a deal with the alien to release the rest of the crew, so long as Kirk will remain his slave for the rest of his life. After making this deal, Kirk manages to escape when the alien, who turns out to be a child, is called to dinner by his parents.ⁱⁱⁱ In a lucky turn of events, Kirk gets to keep his life, but at the same time he shows that he is willing to give up his life for the safety of his crew. As these episodes demonstrate, Spock uses reason to determine his actions, and Kirk makes

decisions based upon instinct. Each character reaps benefits from his type of decision making, but the best result is when they combine their uses of logic and emotion.

The Enterprise's Soul According to Aristotle

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle strives to describe the “virtuous person.” According to Aristotle, to become a virtuous person, one must first understand the soul. Aristotle believes the soul to have three parts, an understanding he reached by observing the living creatures on earth and how they function. Plants are simply biological beings without a consciousness. However, he also observes this characteristic in animals and humans as body systems. The circulatory system, for example, is something that the rational mind does not control; one cannot simply will one's heart to stop. Through this understanding Aristotle began to believe that every living being has a “plant-like” portion of its soul, or in his words, a portion “common to all living things.”^{iv} The next characteristic that Aristotle proposes is something that animals have but plants do not. This characteristic is understood to be a consciousness or a will to live. Animals eat, sleep, and live by following something often described as “instinct.” This is a characteristic that Aristotle also finds in humans by observing our reactions to dangerous or frightening situations. Almost always humans react with fear that drives us to act to save ourselves. Aristotle understands this to be another part of the soul, which he refers to as “animalistic” or (as I refer to it in this paper) “emotional.” The final third of the soul is something that only humans possess: reason. Reason, as Aristotle describes it, is “the understanding of mathematical propositions,” something that no animal has.^v The idea of reason extends beyond mathematics and into everyday life through logic. According to Aristotle, this reasoning part of the soul makes us distinctly human. Aristotle understands that there may be differences in the way that the animalistic and reasoning parts of the soul would have us act in certain situations. He feels that this supports the existence of the animalistic part of the soul. He writes, “There is something in the soul besides the rational element, which opposes and reacts against it.”^{vi} This opposition is what causes indecision in many situations.

These three parts of the soul—plant-like, animalistic and reasoning—are more easily understood through an analogy of the Enterprise and its crew. Spock, the Vulcan reasoning-machine, represents the rational part of the soul. As seen in “The Galileo Seven,” when he elects not to kill the giants, Spock uses only logic to assess and react to situations, calculating and rationalizing to determine the best course of action. Kirk, conversely, represents the animalistic part of the soul, doing what is necessary for the survival of the Enterprise through emotional response. When bargaining with the alien in “The Squire of Gothos,” Kirk makes an instinctual choice to sacrifice his own life to save his crew. This is just one occasion where he makes a decision based upon an impulse and not upon reason. His action, driven by instinct, results in a good outcome. The final, plant-like part of the soul is represented by the unnamed Starfleet employees who make up the rest of the crew and other members seen frequently on the bridge: McCoy, Scott, Chekov, Uhura, and Sulu. Like the plant-like part of the soul, these employees are vital to the function of the ship but have no power over the decision making like Kirk and Spock.

Having connected the three parts of the soul with the three parts of the Enterprise, it is possible to determine if the Enterprise is a moral person, or, as Aristotle would say, a virtuous person. Aristotle begins his argument in *Nicomachean Ethics* by explaining that “every action and choice, seem to aim at some good”^{vii}; therefore, all actions are both ends and means except happiness, which is only an end in itself. That is, happiness is the goal that every action aims to achieve, but those actions can also be ends, or goals. Aristotle then states that one must follow a particular path to achieve the goal of happiness, which he explains in his theory of virtue.

To achieve happiness as an end, Aristotle believes, one must perform one's function and do it well. He comes about this idea by postulating that objects referred to as “good” perform their function well, and that this function is determined by a distinguishing feature of the object. For example, a pair of scissors is good if it cuts well because it is fulfilling its cutting function. He then goes on to say that man's distinguishing feature is reason; therefore, if he reasons well he is good because he performs his

function well. It is through this function of reason that Aristotle believes man can achieve happiness, as he states here: “[reason] in conformity with virtue constitute[s] happiness.”^{viii} In other words, Aristotle believes there to be another component vital to the attainment of the state of happiness: virtue.

Aristotle describes virtue not as “the excellence of the body, but that of the soul.”^{ix} He goes on to explain that to understand virtue and reason one must first understand the workings of the soul. Because humans share the first two elements (plant-like and animalistic) with animals, it is the third (reason) that sets us apart from them and is, therefore, our function. This distinction also leads Aristotle to differentiate between two types of virtue: intellectual virtue and moral virtue. Intellectual virtue has to do with reasoning well and can be improved through education. Moral virtue, on the other hand, is related to acting well and can only be improved through habit. Each of these types of virtue also has a corresponding type of wisdom—theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom respectively. Both types of wisdom are needed to be wise, just as both types of virtue are needed to be virtuous.^x

Stepping back for a moment from the analogy of Kirk as a piece of the Enterprise’s soul, and viewing him instead as a whole person, allows us to examine the problems of the animalistic soul and the reasoning soul acting independently of each other. In “The Enemy Within,” Kirk explores a planet and calls to be transported back up to the ship. The transporter malfunctions, causing Kirk to be split into two identical bodies, each with an opposite personality, one logical and one animalistic. The animalistic Kirk roams the ship causing mischief, getting very drunk and almost raping a crewmember. He is a slave to his whims and desires. The other Kirk at first seems to function well, making decisions for his crew, but as time progresses he is unable to perform his duty as captain because he is so indecisive. He is able to understand what he should do but is unable to be motivated to act.^{xi} We can see from this episode that a human is not a person without reason, but neither is he human without emotion. Aristotle would find this to be a perfect example of both types of virtue needing to act together to function properly. Alone, the animalistic part is just that—

animalistic— while the rational part is left unmotivated to act. One part provides control over action while the other is the motivation for action. Without both parts a person cannot function.

It is through theoretical and practical wisdom that virtue can be formed because as one becomes more knowledgeable one also becomes more able to be virtuous. The most important step one can take towards becoming virtuous is imitating a virtuous person in order to develop the habit of following the doctrine of the mean.

The doctrine of the mean is a way to determine if one’s state of being during an action is virtuous. According to the doctrine, two vices correspond to every one virtue, one of excess and one of deficiency. For example, in kindness, the vice of excess is wastefulness and the vice of deficiency is stinginess while the mean is generosity. This doctrine does not mean that virtue is always the mean between the vices, but rather that, depending upon the situation, the virtue will always fall between them somewhere. As Aristotle writes, “there are many ways of going wrong, but only one way which is right.”^{xii} The doctrine of the mean is illustrated in the episode “The Corbomite Maneuver.” The Enterprise must make a decision about aiding an enemy ship that has been rendered helpless.^{xiii} The vice of excess in this situation might be bringing the crew of the enemy ship aboard because this is too generous considering the risks. Leaving the crew in its broken ship would be the vice of deficiency because that response is not generous enough. The mean in this situation might be towing the enemy ship back to its planet to get repairs because this does not put the crew of the Enterprise in danger and still helps the aliens in need. Aiding the enemy may be the mean in that situation because it is the best way to act, but if the circumstances were different the mean would also be different. If the defenseless ship were not an enemy ship, the virtue in this case would be to take the crew aboard the Enterprise because that would be the best way to act generously in this situation. This is, in fact, the route that the Enterprise takes in the end of the episode, not quite striking the mean, but still doing what is necessary to be generous.

Conclusion

After one begins to understand Aristotle's concept of virtue, it seems that something is not quite right on the Enterprise. Kirk, the animalistic (emotional) part of the soul of the Enterprise, is captain while Spock, the rational part of the soul, serves only as an advisor to the captain. This order of command suggests that emotion in this case has more power over action than reason because emotion (Kirk) has the final decision over all actions. According to Aristotle, a person must use both theoretical and practical wisdom to be virtuous, but for that to be possible one must be able to control one's emotions through logic. While Kirk often listens to Spock, this is not always the case. For example, in the episode "The Naked Time"^{xiv} Kirk refuses to listen to Spock's advice to attempt a controlled crash landing rather than a more dangerous maneuver that risks the lives of everyone on the ship. This example shows that Kirk makes decisions that do not align with what Spock advises. The Enterprise does not have intellectual virtue because she is not reasoning well; therefore, she is not virtuous. This problem might be solved if Spock were captain. However, as seen in "The Galileo Seven," having Spock as captain would also be seriously problematic.

The only way for the Enterprise to be a virtuous person is to retain Kirk as captain but have him always listen to Spock and consider his instruction. When Kirk does not listen to Spock the Enterprise does not reason well. On the other hand, if she had Spock as her captain she would never be motivated to act. This is illustrated in "The Corbomite Maneuver" in which the Enterprise is threatened and Spock, because he sees no logical way to avoid destruction, fails to act. Spock equates this situation to a game of chess that has reached a point of stalemate, where Kirk sees a game of poker and the chance to bluff. Again, the Enterprise must keep Kirk as captain, with Spock as first mate, if she wishes to be virtuous because if Spock were captain the Enterprise would never be motivated to act. Neither Kirk nor Spock functions well as captain without the other. This leaves only one possible solution, the one we see demonstrated in the *Star Trek* series: Kirk as captain listening to the advice of his first mate Spock. Together, Kirk, Spock, and the other Starfleet crewmembers enable the Enterprise to accomplish her five-year mission: "To seek out new

life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before"^{xv}

ⁱ CBS Studios, *Star Trek* Official Site, CBS Studios, <http://www.startrek.com/startrek/view/index.html>.

ⁱⁱ *The Galileo Seven*. *Star Trek*. television program. Los Angeles: NBC. January 5, 1967.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Squire of Gothos*. *Star Trek*. television program. Los Angeles: NBC. January 12, 1967.

^{iv} Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. M. Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Erill Educational Publishing), 30.

^v *Ibid*, 31.

^{vi} *Ibid*.

^{vii} *Ibid*, 3.

^{viii} *Ibid*, 25.

^{ix} *Ibid*, 29.

^x *Ibid*, 33.

^{xi} *The Enemy Within*. *Star Trek*. television program. Los Angeles: NBC. October 6, 1966.

^{xii} Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. M. Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Erill Educational Publishing), 43.

^{xiii} *The Corbomite Maneuver*. *Star Trek*. television program. Los Angeles: NBC. November 10, 1966.

^{xiv} *The Naked Time*. *Star Trek*. television program. Los Angeles: NBC. September 29, 1966.

^{xv} CBS Studios, Star Trek Official Site, CBS Studios,
<http://www.startrek.com/startrek/view/index.html>.