

SERIES EDITOR: **WILLIAM IRWIN**
EDITED BY: **KEVIN S. DECKER**
AND **JASON T. EBERL**

THE ULTIMATE
STAR TREK
AND PHILOSOPHY

THE SEARCH FOR SOCRATES

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

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THE ULTIMATE STAR TREK AND PHILOSOPHY

**THE SEARCH FOR
SOCRATES**

**Edited by
Kevin S. Decker
and
Jason T. Eberl**

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Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

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The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Acknowledgments

The Command Staff of Utopia Planitia

Every Federation starship, from the original *Constitution*-class *Enterprise* built in the San Francisco Yards—or in Riverside, Iowa, in the Abrams-verse—to the *Sovereign*-class *Enterprise-E*, has a dedication plaque noting those individuals who were instrumental in the design and construction of these mighty machines. Although a book like this is less likely to travel to the farthest reaches of the cosmos or be instrumental in making first contact with extraterrestrial intelligent species, there is nonetheless a veritable army of personnel no less crucial to its construction. First and foremost, without the authors who wrote the chapters you're soon to enjoy, there would be no book to begin with—just a cordrazine hallucination on the part of the editors. Furthermore, this volume is but one member of a larger fleet headed up by Admiral William Irwin, under the sector command authority of Admiral Liam Cooper at Starbase Wiley-Blackwell, whose command staff headed by Allison Kostka devoted countless hours to its final preparation that may have been better spent preparing for the next Borg or Dominion invasion.

Finally, Captains Decker and Eberl have benefitted from Starfleet's 24th-century policy of allowing families to accompany deep-space missions, meaning that that Jennifer and August, as well as Suzanne, Kennedy, Ethan, and Jack, have had to endure Borg cutting beams, Klingon *bat'leths*, Romulan disruptors, and Ferengi counterfeit goldpressed latinum in trying to eke out lives coexistent with wannabe Starfleet officers who've indulged in too much synthehol and spent too many hours in the holodeck. Hopefully, their sacrifices will be worth it to readers of this literary starship that we're finally ready to launch into the final frontier of philosophical imagination.

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Introduction

A Guide to Living Long and Prospering

GET A LIFE, will you people? I mean, for crying out loud, it's just a TV show! ... You've turned an enjoyable little job that I did as a lark for a few years into a COLOSSAL WASTE OF TIME! ... It's just a TV show dammit, IT'S JUST A TV SHOW!

One of the saddest days in *Star Trek* fan history was in 1986 when, in a *Saturday Night Live* skit, the incomparable William Shatner revealed to pudgy fans in Spock ears that there's more to life than *Trek*. Of course, most fans knew this already, but to hear it put so bluntly by "the Captain" himself was almost too much to bear. So let's just get it right out there, front and center: *Star Trek* is indeed just a TV show. But that fact alone doesn't render wasted the thousands of hours spent watching Kirk battling the Gorn, Troi sensing that somebody's "hiding something," or Archer feeding cheese to Porthos. By the way, you heard that right: *thousands* of hours—based on the reasonable assumption that a fan who's ranged omnivorously over all the series has watched each of the over 700 hours of *Trek* programming at least three times (some more, some less of course: Compare your frequency of *Wrath of Khan* viewings vs. the abominable VOY episode "Threshold" or, dare we say it, "Spock's Brain").

Certainly, there are more important matters demanding one's attention: work, school, family, *Star Trek* trivia (sorry, fell off the wagon there). As Jerry Seinfeld once exhorted his friend George Costanza, "We're trying to have a society here!" Given the human need to produce and consume, to have gainful employment, meaningful relationships, an SUV, and two plasma TVs, all of which require time and

effort, do multiple viewings of “The City on the Edge of Forever” constitute “time suckage”? No, because *Star Trek* clearly has something worthwhile to say.

Okay, but *what* does *Star Trek* say? Of course, there’s that “hopeful vision of the future” thing that can be heard in every interview about Gene Roddenberry’s legacy. But are there other metaphysical, moral, social, or political lessons we can glean from the Great Bird of the Galaxy’s vision? In 2008, the intrepid, forward-seeing (and humble) editors of this volume sought to answer this question by producing *Star Trek and Philosophy: The Wrath of Kant*, eighteen chapters on diverse topics in metaphysics, ethics, politics, religion, and logic—a veritable Babel conference on philosophy beyond the final frontier. The intellectual scope of the *Star Trek* universe, however, demanded that we set out on another journey. Just as the Federation expanded its exploration into the Gamma and Delta Quadrants (thanks to the Bajoran Prophets and the Caretaker, respectively), so we, too, have expanded our exploration into the *Trek* saga to mine it, not for dilithium or latinum, but for its treasure trove of intellectual riches.

Over the course of thirty-one chapters, our fellow explorers have tackled the kind of difficult questions that Q will probably challenge humanity to answer hundreds of years from now. In the realm of *ethics*, we examine the moral psychology of the elite individuals who rise to the rank of starship captain, as well as the reasons that justify the Prime Directive they’ve each sworn to uphold (with the occasional bending, ignoring, or outright violation). While Captains Kirk, Picard, Sisko, Janeway, and Archer often appear justified in their flagrant rule breaking, there are some instances in which their interference is evidently harmful: Why is Kirk so hellbent on destroying utopian civilizations? Is it out of jealousy for having “no beach to walk on” himself?

Other chapters examine the *social* and *political* ideas that underpin various nonhuman cultures: Why are the Klingons so different and yet seem so familiar to us? Do the Borg actually embody values that we might evolve into holding? Is the Federation economic system sustainable in a way that Ferenginar’s unbridled capitalism isn’t (at least until Rom takes over as Grand Nagus)? Is there a universal meaning of “justice” by which we as finite humans can judge the morality of the Q Continuum?

As a work of science fiction, *Star Trek* is able to raise *metaphysical* questions in a way ordinary TV dramas can’t: Should we consider Data or *Voyager*’s holographic Doctor as “persons”? What would

it take for an individual to recover her identity once she's lost it in a collective consciousness? Would it have made a real difference if Commander William Riker had died and Lieutenant Tom Riker had taken his place on the *Enterprise-D*? Does it make sense that more highly evolved beings won't have bodies that can move, touch, and feel? How can we know we're not living in a holodeck right now, and would it really matter to us if we were?

The attempt to provide answers to speculative inquiries like these has inspired not only millennia of *philosophical* wisdom, but also the emergence of various *religious* belief systems. Roddenberry, an avowed secular humanist, envisioned a future in which humanity no longer relied upon faith-based answers to unresolved metaphysical or moral questions. Still, religious beliefs and values are treated seriously as essential aspects of Klingon, Bajoran, and other alien cultures in *Trek*. Is human culture of the future better off having divested itself of such superstition, or is there something to be gained by gathering "a few laurel leaves"?

This book is an expression of our "continuing mission" to explore the philosophical frontier of Roddenberry's enduring legacy. As we celebrate a half-century of *Star Trek* on television and in cinema, and with the crew of the Abrams-verse *Enterprise* embarking on their five-year mission in *Star Trek Beyond*, we can confidently say this book won't be the final volume on *Star Trek and Philosophy*, for indeed "the human adventure is just beginning...."

Part I

ALPHA QUADRANT: HOME SYSTEMS

“The More Complex the Mind, the Greater the Need for the Simplicity of Play”

Jason T. Eberl

This chapter's title comes from “Shore Leave” (TOS), in which the *Enterprise* crew encounters an “amusement planet” designed by an advanced civilization—they return to this world in “Once Upon a Planet” (TAS). It may seem counterintuitive for highly intelligent beings to need a realm for fantasy entertainment. Some forms of play, however, may be not only beneficial but also *necessary* for intellectual, moral, and spiritual beings to *flourish*. Edifying play isn't aimed at mere pleasure seeking, but rather can lead each of us to a greater understanding of our own self, the world in which we live, and what reality, if any, may lie beyond this world. Along these lines, Josef Pieper (1904–1997) argues that beings capable of understanding the world around them, as well as inquiring into the deeper reality that may transcend the physical world, *must* seek intellectual, moral, and spiritual fulfillment through forms of play that take them out of their workaday lives. In a phrase reminiscent of my *Trek*-inspired title, Pieper says, “The more comprehensive the power of relating oneself to the world of objective being, so the more deeply anchored must be the ‘ballast’ in the inwardness of the subject.”¹ In other words, “Know thyself,” as the Oracle at Delphi proclaimed. Indeed, this idea was seized upon by Socrates as the starting point of all philosophy.

Pieper follows a philosophical tradition set down by Plato—who bears only a superficial relationship to “Plato's Stepchildren” (TOS)—Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas, all of whom could find some affinity with *Star Trek* and other sci-fi/fantasy adventures that tell a good morality tale or stretch the limits of human imagination. As

Aristotle points out, humans, as *rational* animals, aren't satisfied with mere pleasure seeking, but are driven to reflect upon the limitless possibilities of existence. Continuing that line of thought, Aquinas states, "The reason why the philosopher can be compared to the poet [or the sci-fi writer?] is that both are concerned with wonder."² Truly, a sense of wonder pervades *Trek*, in which the judicious use of visual effects and theatrical acting—just look at the endless crew reaction shots in *The Motion Picture* while the *Enterprise* flies through V'Ger—helps convey and inspire such wonder while "rebooting" wondrous mythological themes from Homer, Virgil, Dante, and others.

Aristotle notes that "we work in order to be at leisure."³ But Pieper adds that we need to break out of the economic cycle of *productivity* and *consumption* to fully access our sense of wonder and explore the "final frontier" of reality and consciousness. We need to allow ourselves the leisure necessary to *contemplate* the universe and our place within it. But leisure isn't simply "recharging our batteries." Rather, it's taking time to reflect upon those all-important questions of humanity, reflection that doesn't produce immediate, tangible goods that can be traded on the floor of the Ferengi stock exchange. Leisure is *not* idly twiddling one's thumbs; yet, Pieper finds there to be a "festive" element to human leisure that allows us to develop ourselves intellectually and culturally in a way that simple, pleasure-seeking *hedonism*—in the form, say, of Landru's "red hour"—fails to provide: "The leisure of man includes within itself a celebratory, approving, lingering gaze of the inner eye on the reality of creation."⁴ Leisure, in all its proper forms, is a necessary element that must be reintegrated into the modern concept of a "happy life." With that in mind, our mission will be to review Pieper's concept of leisure and consider how contemplating *Star Trek* can be a stimulating and edifying form of play.

Life Is Not for the Timid

The philosopher Robert Nozick (1938–2002) offered an ingenious thought experiment in which people would reject a method for getting as much pleasure as they'd ever want. Nozick asks us to consider an "experience machine" to which a person could be hooked up for an extended period of time or perhaps their entire life—think of the virtual reality of "The Thaw" (VOY) but without the creepy clown.⁵ During their time "in the machine," they'd experience nothing but pleasurable experiences that had been pre-programmed, all the

while being unaware that their experiences are artificially generated. Nozick thinks that rational persons would reject being plugged into the machine because we want to *do* certain things, not merely *have the experience* of doing them, and because we want to *be* a certain type of person. Nozick thus contends, "There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has long been in the tank."⁶ Ultimately, Nozick claims we also want to be in contact with a *deeper reality* than the artificially constructed world of the machine.

The problem with the idyllic enticement of the experience machine isn't that it's *ideal*, but rather that it's *idle*, presenting us with a mode of life that has lost its purpose. We have no unsatisfied desires, and there's no striving to change or to grow. In such a scenario, Q's ultimate verdict on humanity's guilt is all but assured and we suffer the "tedium of immortality."⁷ It's not that the experience machine would make us immortal, but we'd endure the same purposelessness of continued existence that led to the first suicide of a Q in "Death Wish" (VOY). Philosophers from Aristotle to Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) have argued that *change* is the fundamental engine that drives reality forward, and that purposeful change is necessary if rational beings are to better themselves intellectually, morally, or spiritually—without it, they might *live*, but wouldn't *flourish*.⁸

Many depictions of similar "experience machines" in sci-fi also lead to the allegorical conclusion that human beings aren't meant to live in such a purely hedonistic environment. Consider "This Side of Paradise" (TOS), in which a group of human colonists become infected by spores that render them completely happy, peaceful, and healthy (even healing old scars). The "dark side" of life on Omicron Ceti III is that the colonists are *stagnant*. They produce only the bare minimum they need to survive and maintain a comfortable status quo. Once the *Enterprise* crew frees the colonists from the spores' hold—after initially succumbing to the spores' effects themselves—Kirk wonders: "Maybe we weren't meant for paradise. Maybe we were meant to fight our way through. Struggle, claw our way up, scratch for every inch of the way. Maybe we can't stroll to the music of the lute, we must march to the sound of drums."⁹ There's more to life than mint juleps.

In what sort of activity should we engage? Humanity's "prime directive," particularly in Western societies as analyzed by Pieper, but increasingly in Eastern societies as well, seems to be "Work! Produce! Buy! Contribute!" But wait, this sounds suspiciously like the *Borg's* prime directive. The Borg certainly aren't idle: they're always working, producing, consuming, and all quite *efficiently*—no time is ever