

Pragmatism and Meaning: Assessing the Message of *Star Trek: The Original Series*

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Abstract

The original *Star Trek* television series purported to depict a future in which such evils as sexism and racism do not exist, and intelligent beings from numerous planets live in a condition of peace and mutual benefit. As many scholars have observed, from a standpoint of contemporary theoretical analysis, *Star Trek: The Original Series* contains many elements that are inimical to the utopia it claims to depict and thus undermine its supposed message. A different perspective may be gained by drawing on the American pragmatist movement, in which the value of an idea is judged by its effectiveness, how it 'cashes out' in terms of its impact in real life. Thus, the meaning and value of *Star Trek: TOS* can be assessed by observing its effects on its audience. This perspective coordinates well with Taylor's discussion of the necessary conditions for the realization of a protreptic moral order in the social imaginary, as well as a pragmatist understanding of audience engagement and education.

Keywords: Star Trek, IDIC, American Pragmatism, William James, Charles Peirce, John Dewey, Richard Rorty, Lamarque & Olsen, Charles Taylor, the social imaginary, fan communities.

Introduction

The release of the *Star Trek* "reboot" movie invites a re-examination of *Star Trek: The Original Series*. Compared to the shiny new re-envisioning, the original series appears more dated than ever, and the charges of sexism and racism lodged against it by critics, even more obviously true. The new *Star Trek*, however, would not now be possible if the old had not occurred exactly the way it did, 1960s cultural baggage and all, and the criticisms that are now made of the original series are in fact evidence that its intended message succeeded after all.

Conflicting Views on *Star Trek: The Original Series*

The popular view of *Star Trek: The Original Series* holds that it promotes a vision of a utopian future free from all forms of prejudice. References to this interpretation can be found within many fan-produced texts. For example, in a fan report of a *Star Trek* convention held in 1973, the author explained the reason for the gathering: 'To honor the television show that stressed the future of Man as a *positive*—not *negative*—thing.' (*Annual* 84-85, authors' emphasis). A later fan publication describes the audience appeal of *Star Trek: TOS* in terms of 'the message that delights in one's own nature does not mean denigration of those who are different.' (Lazio 7)

Scholars who study fan response to *Star Trek* have also observed that its viewers embrace the utopian ideals that the series claimed to depict. Darcee McLaren observes that 'fandom emphasizes harmony and equality between all races and genders, the elimination of a class system, and respect for other cultures and beliefs.' (McLaren 235) As it is understood in the fan community, 'the vision of *Star Trek* is a positive view of the future of humanity in which there is no poverty or crime and everyone lives together in peace.' (McLaren 233). Fans most commonly use the concept of IDIC, Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, a Vulcan philosophy briefly described in one episode of *Star Trek: TOS*, to represent the ideal of a future without prejudice. IDIC is understood as going beyond mere tolerance of difference. Jennifer Porter observes, 'For many fans, IDIC has been internalized to the point where the concept has become... a "root paradigm" of *Star Trek* fandom. IDIC is seen as central to the philosophy of *Star Trek*, and as encapsulating Roddenberry's vision... IDIC does not symbolize the goal of homogenizing differences for these fans, however, but symbolizes instead the ideal of celebrating them.' (Porter 295)

In *The Ethics of Star Trek*, however, Judith Barad observes that despite the program's 'unbridled optimism for humanity's ethical progress ... the attitudes, politics, and culture depicted in each series and film have always reflected the mores of contemporary society.' (Barad xi) Critical works such as Daniel Bernardi's *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future*, Jay Goulding's *Empire, Aliens and Conquest: A Critique of American Ideology in Star Trek and Other Science Fiction Adventures*, and the anthology *Enterprise Zones* argue that *Star Trek* not only depicts, but condones and even promotes contemporary biases. In *Deep Space, Sacred Time: Star Trek in the American Mythos*, Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen characterize contemporaneous scholarship of *Star Trek* thus: 'it is virtually a foregone conclusion that rigorous analysis will reveal a dreary landscape of patriarchal oppression, punctuated perhaps by eruptions of homophobia and/or homoeroticism.' (Wagner and Lundeen 225)

It would be tempting to frame this disagreement simply as a clash between naïve fans and cynical academics, but the reality is much more complex. Fans often exhibit a sophisticated

awareness of *Star Trek's* cultural baggage. In describing how fans embrace the ideals they glean from the text, McLaren observes that these fans are nonetheless aware of the jingoistic pro-American rhetoric within the text. (McLaren 235) Sue Short states that fans routinely debate the ideological conflicts within the series, asserting that 'shared enthusiasm does not necessarily constitute blind adoration or unthinking acceptance.' (Short 174) The first *Star Trek* fanzine, *Spockanalia*, engaged critically with the philosophy projected by *Star Trek: TOS* while it was still on the air, arguing that the ceremonial trappings of the Vulcan ritual depicted in the episode 'Amok Time' raise issues of class and privilege that conflict with earlier descriptions of Vulcan society as based purely on logic. (Langsam 11) Shoshanna Green, Cynthia Jenkins, and Henry Jenkins, 'acafans' whose own careers blur the boundaries between fans and academics, argue vigorously for the value of fan readings:

Fan criticism does differ from academic criticism in significant ways: the subjective and impassioned engagement with the material, the rejection of specialized technical language and theoretical authority, and the tendency to focus on personal rather than institutional explanations. Yet a refusal to acknowledge that alternative modes of criticism might produce valuable insights seems the worst kind of academic elitism. (Green, Jenkins and Jenkins 13)

Just as fans demonstrate an awareness of *Star Trek's* limitations, so too do academics affirm the utopian ideals that appear to be embedded in the text. Among the academics who attempt to defend *Star Trek* from its detractors are Wagner and Lundeen, who observe that a number of academic criticisms are poorly-founded, either by using ambiguous terms uncritically or by misrepresenting the *Star Trek* text.¹ It is noteworthy, however, that Wagner and Lundeen do not take issue with the theories or approaches taken by other scholars; by pointing to overlooked evidence or misuse of terms that would produce a different result if applied correctly to the original arguments, they make it clear that their disagreement is with conclusions rather than methods.

More recent theorists approach the text from new perspectives that provide more support for fan interpretations of the series. Robert Kozinets, who studies consumers of commercially-produced *Star Trek* merchandise, argues that audiences dynamically construct a variety of meanings from mass media products, yet observes that 'all consumption meanings are not created equal.' (Kozinets 84) He identifies the dominant meaning constructed by *Star Trek* viewers and consumers as one of 'egalitarianism, hope, and utopianism.' (Kozinets 83) Indeed, he states, *Star Trek* is constructed by its audience 'as an expression of real universal ethics . . . and as a generalized prediction of the real future.' (Kozinets 84) While this meaning is still regarded by Kozinets as one among many, he argues

that fans privilege this interpretation as the result of a variety of intersecting social and institutional forces and practices.

Lincoln Geraghty and Justin Everett approach the text of *Star Trek: TOS* in ways that appear to offer a resolution of the conflict between divergent interpretations. While Geraghty observes that ‘*Star Trek’s* utopian message of diversity and peace continues to be one with which millions of its fans engage,’ (Geraghty 2007, 91) he also suggests, following Barthes’ analysis of narrative, that *Star Trek* is an open text that lends itself to multiple interpretations (Geraghty 2007, 117). Everett suggests that the various forms of *Star Trek* comprise a megatext jointly created by Paramount and the fans (Everett 195), in which different participants are able to construct different messages. While these approaches leave room for the difference of opinion observed in the interpretation of *Star Trek: TOS*, they frustrate any attempt to explain why one particular interpretation comes up again and again among widely disparate audience members.

The philosophical movement known as pragmatism offers a robust interpretive framework that assigns meaning and value based on tangible, real-life results. A pragmatist framework is able to account for the undeniable discrepancies between the message that *Star Trek’s* creators claim to have intended and the flawed creation that was actually produced. In addition, pragmatism can enrich our understanding of how utopian ideals embedded in a visual narrative can transform the social imaginary toward the realization of a new moral order.

The Perspective of Pragmatism

From a pragmatist perspective, the problem with earlier academic criticisms and defenses of *Star Trek* such as those found in *Deep Space, Sacred Time* is that they are all entrenched in the same frustrating cognitive framework. Debating the precise meaning of ambiguous terms or stipulating variant interpretations of texts is a philosophical dead end, according to pragmatism, because of the problematic nature of language itself. The philosopher Richard Rorty, a contemporary pragmatist, has no patience for such arguments. ‘Any argument to the effect that our familiar use of a familiar term is incoherent, or empty, or confused, or vague, or “merely metaphorical” is bound to be inconclusive and question-begging. For such use is, after all, the paradigm of coherent, meaningful, literal speech.’ (Rorty 112) He argues that a more appropriate response to such a situation is one that is holistic and pragmatic, and he suggests that a new approach would ‘say things like “try thinking of it this way” – or more specifically, “try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions.”’ (112)

The approach advocated by pragmatism identifies the true meaning of an idea by observing its effects. Charles S. Peirce, one of the founders of the pragmatist movement, argues that our belief in any idea should be understood simply as a ‘rule for action’ and that ‘different

beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise.’ (Peirce 80) H.S. Thayer, a scholar of pragmatism, describes the process of assessing the meaning of an idea: ‘Roughly, the method to be followed is to ascertain and formulate the distinct empirical consequences that result from using, experimenting with, or acting upon a given idea in given circumstances. The resulting consequences, if any, are to be interpreted as indicative of the meaning, if any, of the idea under consideration.’ (Thayer, 21)

The determination of the meaning and value of an idea thus rests on the effective, practical advantages of accepting the idea and acting on it. William James offers a succinct explanation in the voice of pragmatism itself: “‘Grant an idea or belief to be true,” it [pragmatism] says, “what concrete difference will its being true make in any one’s actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?’” (James 133)

There is disagreement between Peirce and James concerning the precise consequences to be examined in determining the meaning of an idea. While Peirce stresses the conceivable logical consequences of accepting an idea, James shifts the emphasis to the actual, experienced consequences. As a result, ‘Peirce’s recommendation to study the logical consequences of concepts, under certain prescribed conditions, became converted [by James] into an evaluation of the moral, psychological, and social effects of ideas.’ (Thayer 22) From the pragmatist perspective, therefore, the content of *Star Trek* is best evaluated by observing its actual effect on society. How then is the message of *Star Trek* actualized in reality?

The Practical Effects of *Star Trek*

Studies of *Star Trek*’s real-life effects often focus on its most devoted fans and provide definite evidence of positive results. Jennifer Porter argues that fans endeavor to construct their own fan community as a ‘model of the egalitarian ideal portrayed within the *Star Trek* television series.’ (Porter 254) Henry Jenkins cites the self-referential folk songs written and sung by fans as expressing ‘fans’ recognition that fandom offers not so much an escape from reality as an alternative reality whose values may be more humane and democratic than those held by mundane society.’ (Jenkins 1995, 280) According to Michael Jindra, fans engage in this constructive activity because they believe that ‘following *Star Trek* precepts such as IDIC... can enable us to attain the kind of world portrayed in the various *Star Trek* installments’. (Jindra 222) Darcee McLaren argues that ‘Fandom is consciously oriented toward making the world a better place, toward making the future depicted in *Star Trek* come into being.’ (McLaren 238)

Recent scholarship has also come to examine more broadly the effects of *Star Trek* on society at large. Lincoln Geraghty explores the effects of *Star Trek* on the lives of its

audience, explicitly focusing on a wider array of viewers rather than the relatively small group of highly active fans usually studied by academics. Geraghty finds that these viewers 'use and adapt notions of utopia, community and self-improvement' to help them face challenges and become better people at the individual level (Geraghty 2007, 89); they are also 'interested participants in social change' (Geraghty 2007, 93) who share the goal of helping to 'make Roddeberry's utopia a reality.' (Geraghty 2007, 123)

Jeff Greenwald, in his work *Future Perfect: How Star Trek Conquered Planet Earth*, takes an even wider view, traveling the world to interview a wide variety of people at different levels of engagement with *Star Trek* to observe its effects on their lives. Greenwald formulates the vision of *Star Trek* in terms of its global appeal, explaining that '*Star Trek* is absolutely inclusive . . . It is a vision so compelling that *Star Trek* is watched, season after season, by members of nearly every race, religion, and nationality in the world.' (Greenwald 4) Greenwald finds evidence of *Star Trek's* positive effects on society in the many cultures that he visits; as one of his German hosts explains, 'It shows me how to understand other cultures; how to solve my own problems in a way of peace and not always with aggressive methods.' (Greenwald 69)

The work of these scholars resonates with the perspective of pragmatism. The construction of fan communities described by Porter, Jenkins, and Jindra demonstrates that fans express their understanding of *Star Trek* not only in words, but in actions. Geraghty's assessment of *Star Trek* in terms of 'how they [fans] use it in their daily lives' (Geraghty 2007, 12) is especially consistent with James's emphasis on the difference that a given idea makes in any individual's actual life. Geraghty's statement that 'the belief in helping oneself and changing for the better is inexorably linked to *Star Trek's* inbuilt narrative of self-improvement' (Geraghty 2007, 118) would become an even stronger claim in the context of pragmatism: the only sense in which *Star Trek* can legitimately lay claim to an 'inbuilt narrative of self-improvement' is the fact that the members of its audience *do* help themselves and *do* change for the better. Especially important, and especially consistent with pragmatism, is his claim that the activities of the fan community obviate the limitations of the utopian vision as portrayed in the series. (Geraghty 2008, 12) Greenwald's journey of exploration arrives at similar results, and he documents additional concrete results of *Star Trek's* progressive vision, including the work of rocket scientists and engineers inspired by its forward-looking view of scientific progress tempered with wisdom.

From the perspective of pragmatism, the content of a message is defined in terms of its practical results. Because the practical results of the series reflect its utopian idealism rather than its flawed execution, the true message of *Star Trek* is the one that has been actualized in the improvement of individual fans' lives, in the creation of utopian fannish communities, and in its contribution to the social and scientific progress that has been made in the past thirty years.

Nonetheless, the presence of these flaws cannot be ignored. To understand their role in the reception and construction of the meaning of *Star Trek: TOS*, it will be helpful to examine the series from the perspective of the social imaginary and audience engagement.

***Star Trek* and The Social Imaginary**

The ‘social imaginary,’ a sociological concept that can be traced to the theories of Jacques Lacan and Cornelius Castoriadis and that has been developed more recently by Benedict Anderson and Charles Taylor (Strauss 322), refers to ‘that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.’ (Taylor 2007, 172) Taylor, a contemporary philosopher, argues that the social imaginary ‘is not a set of “ideas”; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society.’ (Taylor 2003, 4) Taylor’s insistence on the embeddedness of the social imaginary in concrete practices and actions as opposed to abstract ideas and theories demonstrates his roots in the pragmatist tradition.²

Taylor argues for the inclusion of ‘moral order’ as an integral component of the social imaginary. A moral order may be understood hermeneutically, as a normative standard that underlies and helps us to legitimize our present institutions and practices, but it can also be understood prescriptively: ‘a moral order can stand in another relation to reality, as one not yet realized, but demanding to be integrally carried out.’ (Taylor 2003, 7) According to Anne Marie Dalton and Henry Simmons, who apply Taylor’s explication of the social imaginary to progress in environmental awareness and practices, ‘the term [social imaginary] carries the notion that societies develop as a result of the application of imagined futures.’ (Dalton and Simmons 3) Without such an imagined future, efforts toward the integration of progressive norms into the social imaginary will fail: ‘There also must be a sense . . . of what makes these norms realizable. This too, is an essential part of the context of action.’ (Taylor 2003, 28)

Applying this model of the social imaginary to the kind of utopian progress fostered by *Star Trek*, we can recognize *Star Trek: TOS* as an imagined future that not only ‘demands to be integrally carried out,’ but also provides the means to visualize how this new moral order is realizable. Geraghty argues that ‘*Star Trek*’s ability to inspire peoples’ innermost desires stems from its perception of reality; fans would not be inspired by it if they did not believe it to be a real version of things to come.’ (Geraghty 2007, 14) Thirty years earlier, a fan-produced *Star Trek* newsletter offered these strikingly similar words: ‘*Star Trek* is a hope—a dream. It is these dreams that formulate the progress of man. Take away that dream and there is no progress.’ (*Annual* 5)

In order to succeed in spreading its utopian message, however, *Star Trek: TOS* had to engage its audience. Understanding the manner in which *Star Trek* was able to involve its audience

imaginatively will help to explain the discrepancies between the utopian message of *Star Trek* and the way in which the message was conveyed to the American television-viewing public of the 1960s.

***Star Trek* and Audience Engagement**

Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, whose discussion of fiction as a rule-governed practice is strongly influenced by pragmatism, hypothesize that the readers' ability to imagine for themselves the world depicted in the fiction is an important component of an audience's experience of a work. They state that 'an integral part of responding to fiction involves a reader's imaginative supplementation of the explicit content of the fictive utterances.' (Lamarque and Olsen 89) Furthermore, an essential element of this imaginative supplementation includes the audience's ability to imagine themselves participating in the world that is depicted: 'In adopting the internal perspective of the fictive stance readers project themselves into imaginary "worlds" and observe them, as it were, subjectively from the point of view of an observer or participant.' (Lamarque and Olsen 153)

This description of how an audience engages with a text has strong affinities with pragmatist theories of education. In discussing the necessity for educational material to be of interest to its audience, the pragmatist John Dewey observes that 'to be interested is to be absorbed in, wrapped up in, carried away.' (Dewey 148) He also discusses the etymology of the term 'interest,' observing that its roots suggest 'what is between' (the Latin verb *interesse* literally means 'to be between'). Educational material should therefore be understood as standing between the present status of its audience and the ultimate goals of instruction. (Dewey 149) Thus, in order for *Star Trek: TOS* to enable its audience to imagine a better future, it had to present a world in which audiences could imagine themselves participating; it had to stand between where the audience was at the time, and where the writers wanted society to go.

The necessity of occupying a narrative space that stands between the flawed present and an ideal future limited the extent to which *Star Trek: TOS* was able to dramatize a utopian society. For example, Gene Roddenberry originally attempted to present a more gender-progressive version of *Star Trek*. The original pilot, 'The Cage,' featured a female first officer who commanded the ship while the male captain was planetside. In his introduction to the first DVD release of 'The Cage,' Roddenberry reveals that the women in the test audience exhibited hostility toward the female first officer with reactions such as, 'Who does she think she is?' (Chapter 1 Commentary) The message that women can command as well as men was a message that the audience was not ready or able to hear, at least not directly; they could not imagine themselves participating in a world where that would happen.

What might have happened if *Star Trek: TOS* had truly depicted the utopian ideals of equality that Roddenberry wanted to portray? The *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* episode 'Far

Beyond the Stars' explores this very question. The titular space station of the series is populated by a wide variety of alien races portrayed by a remarkably diverse cast including not only blacks and whites, but actors of Asian and Middle Eastern heritage. In the episode 'Far Beyond the Stars', Benjamin Sisko, the African-American captain of the space station, experiences life for a time as a science fiction writer in the United States of the 1950s. In this persona, he writes a series of stories based on his visions of a future in which people of different races co-exist peacefully as equals. These stories, recognizable as stories about Deep Space Nine itself, do not succeed in reaching a 1950s audience. His white editor simply cannot believe that anyone would want to read a story with a black hero. His black girlfriend claims that the world as it will be hundreds of years from now doesn't concern her. Finally, his young black friend Jimmy comments bitterly, 'The only reason they would let us up there [in space] is if they need someone to shine their shoes.' To use Taylor's language, Sisko's representation of an ideal future cannot transform the social imaginary because people cannot picture for themselves how it can be realized.

As Dewey observes, when material 'lacks connection with purposes and present power: or ... if the connection be there, it is not perceived,' it cannot engage its audience. (Dewey 150) In order to show its audience a path from the present to the future, *Star Trek: TOS* could not fall into the trap depicted in 'Far Beyond the Stars'; it could not go, however boldly, so far that its viewers could not follow. It did—in fact, it had to—include elements that were inconsistent with its utopian aspirations in order to connect with its audience.

Conclusion

The use of a pragmatist theoretical framework makes it possible to judge among the competing interpretations of *Star Trek: TOS* as well as to explain the undeniably non-progressive elements that appear to undermine its message. *Star Trek: TOS* offers a vision of the future that has effected change in society toward utopian ideals. The limitations and flaws noted by many scholars were a necessary component of its effectiveness: *Star Trek's* message succeeded *because of* them, not *despite* them. Working within, and working to transform, the social imaginary of the United States in the 1960s, *Star Trek: TOS* had to present a world in which its audience could imagine themselves participating, and thus could not venture too far ahead. Yet its audience moved beyond the world that *Star Trek* actually presented to start building the world that *Star Trek* claimed to present.³ It is a measure of the success of *Star Trek's* message that contemporary viewers now recognize the limitations of its presentation.

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Notes

¹ For example, they hold that Leah R. Vande Berg's essay 'Liminality: Worf as Metonymic Signifier of Racial, Cultural, and National Differences', which accuses *Star Trek: The Next Generation* of racism in its portrayal of Worf's assimilation to approved Federation values, conflates two senses of racism, cultural assimilation and racial essentialism, in an incompatible way (Wagner & Lundeen 167); they also point out that Goulding's analysis of the episode 'The Cloud Minders' as supporting American capitalism in *Empire, Aliens and Conquest* omits significant events in the episode that would undermine his reading (225).

² Further identification of the social imaginary with the pragmatist philosophical tradition can be seen in Fernando Andacht's linking of Castoriadis' articulation of the significative power of the social imaginary with Peirce's model of semiosis. (Andacht, 2000)

³ The movie *GalaxyQuest* (1999) demonstrated this point in a manner both hilarious and touching. The cast members of an old science-fiction show encounter genuine aliens from a civilization which has based itself entirely on the program's values. Their leader proudly tells one of the actors, 'Your courage, loyalty and friendship were an inspiration to our entire race.' Flashbacks and references show that the program was cheesy, illogical, and cliché-ridden, and that the cast members, especially the egotistical star and the resentful sidekick, are highly flawed. Yet the civilization that based itself on the vision that the series 'GalaxyQuest' tried to portray is admirable, and the cast members become better people for trying to live up to the ideals of the characters they portrayed.