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Star Trek: Into Darkness—Ethical Impartiality, Partiality, and the Need for a Male/Female Synthesis



Star Trek, in its various cinematic and television incarnations, has a well-known tendency to engage in philosophical issues, and the most recent installment to the franchise, *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (*ST:ID*), is no exception—in fact, in terms of dealing with ethical problems and theories, it is exemplary for its medium.¹ However, due to its relatively recent release, in-depth discussions of this film’s ethical themes have yet to appear in the philosophical literature—a lacuna this paper seeks to begin filling in.² While there are a number of concrete ethical concerns raised in this film that may be worthy of discussion (such as the moral correctness of retributive justice in general, and of meeting terrorism with violence in particular; the morality of the “Bush-Doctrine”; the permissibility of “drone-strikes”), I wish to focus on a persistent theoretical theme which I believe gets at the heart of the film’s ethical message.

In what follows, I argue that the overarching narrative of the film is driven by (and ultimately strives to resolve) tensions between the moral perspectives of Captain James T. Kirk (Christopher Pine) and his alien first-officer, Spock (Zachary Quinto). The conflicting moral perspectives of these two characters in many ways parallel the tensions between traditional “male” and “female” ethical perspectives, especially in terms of the advantages and disadvantages of impartiality and impartiality. For instance, if we adopt impartiality, it often seems unacceptable to favor those we have special relationships with, or even ourselves—but do we really think it is morally wrong for a parent to save his or her own child over strangers? On the other hand, if we adopt a system based around partiality, it becomes difficult to show why and when we might have moral duties to those

we do not care about. If both are to be part of our moral lives, but are mutually exclusive at any given time, then how, when, and why should we choose to emphasize one value over the other?

While the protagonists (Kirk and Spock) try to find some common ground through argument, the major antagonists in the film (Khan and Admiral Marcus), along with some other minor characters, can be seen as more extreme and/or clearly negative ethical portrayals along the partial-impartial continuum. This extends the problematization of each perspective's limitations beyond Kirk and Spock's relatively "reasonable," yet contrary, positions and actions. As a result, the characters themselves (along with the audience), are provided insight into the failings and dangers that are inherent in each perspective, and this encourages a reexamination of prior ethical commitments.

In the end, the film seems to suggest that a partial synthesis, or at least mutual respect, between these two conflicting perspectives (partiality and impartiality) is necessary to fashioning a complete ethical outlook—a need that many thinkers have acknowledged. However, exactly *how* to do so remains controversial and problematic, both in the film itself, and amongst ethical theorists. Should more traditional, impartial theories be recast to emphasize and/or allow for some degree of partiality? Or, do new "feminine" approaches offer substantial alternatives that make clinging to traditional "male" theories a mistake?

In any case, I believe that *Into Darkness* can serve to pedagogically provide concrete examples of where and how these perspectives can conflict, suggesting the need to think further about how we can synthesize these competing aspects of our moral lives, while readily acknowledging there is no easy solution to the tension. What seems undeniable is that with this film, pop culture is addressing the ethical tensions between partiality and impartiality, and delivering it to mass audiences, who remain largely unaware of such concerns amidst all the action and explosive special effects. My aim in what follows is to focus the reader's attention on scenes and dialogue that are particularly relevant to recognizing these themes in the film.

Spock and the Prime Directive vs. the Volcano.

In the opening act, Kirk, Spock, and the rest of the *Enterprise* crew are attempting to save the planet Nibiru from a "planet-killing" volcano that will wipe out all life, intelligent or otherwise.³ In particular, they wish to prevent the extinction of a group of indigenous life forms that are technologically "primitive,"

yet intelligent. *Prima facie*, since they possess the technological resources to aid this tribe at no great cost to themselves, saving them seems like the obvious moral response, much like Singer's "drowning child" analogy—if you *can* easily help save someone's life, you have a moral duty to do so.⁴

However, Singer's own caveat—that this duty may be discharged if one must sacrifice something morally significant to save others—arguably applies here. The entire crew is sworn to uphold an *absolute* normative principle, known as the "Prime Directive" (PD), which is supposed to trump all other values or considerations.⁵ Spock pointedly reminds Kirk of this commitment at the beginning of the film: "The Prime Directive clearly states that there can be no interference with the internal development of alien civilizations."⁶ The PD is designed to preclude cultural imperialism, insure respect for the autonomy of other civilizations, and avoid being responsible for any unintended negative consequences that might result from interference with others. The principle has further implications when dealing with "pre-warp" civilizations (those not capable of faster-than-light space travel), which cannot even be allowed to become aware of the existence of non-indigenous people or technology, lest it radically alter their development. Thus, intervention must be done covertly in this case, or not at all, or the PD will be violated.⁷

To accomplish this covert act, Kirk assigns himself "distraction-duty," infiltrates the local populace in disguise and steals an important religious relic (a scroll) from the village temple, drawing the villagers themselves, along with their attention, away from the volcano.⁸ In the meantime, Spock has been lowered into the volcano by a shuttle-craft, which was hidden by the volcano's ash cloud.⁹ However, the shuttle suffered engine failure due to the heat, stranding Spock inside the volcano, with his "volcano-freezing" device.

Having completed his distraction, Kirk abandons the sacred scroll to the natives, and returns to the ship.¹⁰ Upon coming aboard, he cuts off his chief engineers' complaints regarding the negative effects of keeping the ship underwater—the only thing he wants to know is, "Where's Spock?!"—a vital initial clue regarding Kirk's own priorities.¹¹ He is not particularly concerned about the status of his ship, or the rest of his crew, nor about the welfare of the natives, or whether they detected the ship's presence. Instead, Spock's welfare is primary over everything else in Kirk's mind.

The problem now is—can Spock be saved? Spock has set the anti-volcano

device to detonate on a timer, but it will kill Spock, as well as freezing the volcano. To stop the timer would result in the volcano erupting, killing Spock and the people of Nibiru. Another shuttlecraft will not work—time is running out, and heat-related mechanical failures are just as likely this time. Though there is long-distance teleportation in the Star Trek world, “beaming” Spock aboard the *Enterprise* from their current location is impossible, due to “magnetic interference.” It is speculated that *if* the *Enterprise* were directly above the volcano, the beaming sensors *might* be able to “lock on” and rescue Spock. However, the natives could hardly fail to notice the giant spaceship, clearly violating the Prime Directive. Kirk now faces his first on-screen dilemma: 1) He can uphold the values of the Federation (the P.D.), to which he is sworn, and sacrifice Spock; or, 2) he can violate the PD, risk the possible negative consequences to the Nibiru people, and endanger the *Enterprise* and her entire crew, all just to save one man.¹²

With time running out, a quick debate is held. Spock, based upon his unswerving commitment to the P.D., contends that he must be sacrificed.¹³ Kirk counters that “no one knows the rules better [than Spock], but there has to be an exception [to the PD]!” Spock is not willing to admit *any* exception, and then deploys some utilitarian sounding reasoning—“The needs of the many (the Nibiru people, the *Enterprise* crew) outweigh the needs of the few [in this case, “the one”—Spock].” Kirk counters, exclaiming “Spock, we are talking about your life!”—as if the particular circumstances (i.e. someone’s life being in danger) somehow negate the absolutism of an exception-less rule in Kirk’s mind. The last we hear from Spock is that “the rule cannot be broken...,” but the rest is lost to static. With ninety seconds to detonation, Kirk wonders aloud, “If Spock were here and I were there, what would he do?” After a deliberative pause, Dr. Leonard “Bones” McCoy provides the chilling answer—“He’d let you die.”¹⁴

Unsurprisingly, Kirk decides to break the rules and saves Spock. Rushing into the transporter chamber, Kirk excitedly asks “Spock, are you alright?” Spock, rather than being grateful and relieved, is appalled that Kirk made such a bad moral choice. Kirk dismisses the significance of his violation of the PD: “C’mon.. they saw us...big deal.” While those aboard the *Enterprise* remain ignorant of the actual consequences, the audience is clued in to how big of a deal this might be, as the natives are shown discarding their previously revered scroll, and worshipping an image of the *Enterprise* drawn in the dirt.¹⁵

Ultimately, who is right and who is wrong remains undetermined here,

leaving the audience to continue wrestling with the issues, and reflecting on the characters' own debates throughout the film. While Spock's rescue is certainly welcomed by those who care about him, his sacrifice may still have been morally required. The new religious orientation of the natives might seem relatively minor to some—"So what if the natives falsely worship some 'sky gods' in a ship, instead of their previous misguided beliefs regarding their sacred scroll? Spock was saved, and his life is more important than their religious beliefs!" On the other hand, being mindful of the major (often violent) consequences of conflicting religious beliefs, it is worth considering how this small tribe's unique experience might play out in their interactions with other tribes in the future. Spock comes off as rather cold and unfeeling, but his arguments and commitment to moral principles seem to be correct. Kirk allows emotion to trump reason, and cavalierly discards the most important rules as soon as they become inconvenient—yet he is loyal, and did not abandon his friend and crew member. It seems reasonable to praise and blame both characters, from multiple perspectives. To further examine the tension between these views, we should try to get clear on each character's perspective.

Spock v. Kirk: The Moral Perspectives

Spock, with his unswerving commitment to certain rules (i.e. the PD), initially seems to be an absolutist, perhaps even a deontologist or Kantian of some sort.¹⁶ This interpretation is further strengthened by the fact that another rule Spock follows absolutely is to never lie, an imperative which Kant himself famously advocated.¹⁷ Finally, one could understand some of Spock's dialogue as couched in the language of "duty"—especially when objecting that some course of action violates Starfleet regulations.

However, we cannot forget Spock's utilitarian-style reasoning in the volcano—"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."¹⁸ Spock explicitly makes utilitarian references elsewhere in the film as well, and there is no evidence of anything like a "Categorical Imperative" grounding his decisions—only consequentialist thinking.¹⁹ Thus, to achieve consistency in Spock's ethical perspective, he is best interpreted as a strict "rule-utilitarian"—one who already has his system of rules well worked-out, with the PD being one of them.²⁰

No one will accuse Kirk of "rule-worship," however—he plays fast and loose with "the rules," thinking of them as mere guidelines, to which any number of exceptions might apply. Kirk is unwilling to sacrifice Spock's life for the sake of obeying *any* abstract rule, especially when he thinks the likely consequences of

violating them to be as relatively minor as allowing a small group of “primitive” natives to see a starship for a few minutes. Here we might sympathetically wonder along with Kirk—will the consequences of allowing the Enterprise to be sighted, even if serious and far reaching, be, on balance, negative? Is intervention always wrong, as the PD seems to imply? In this case, without intervening with the volcano, there would not have been any natives left—the entire civilization would have been wiped out, many likely suffering slow and painful deaths. This suggests that the consequences of revealing Starfleet’s existence to a few local natives would have to have extensive and pervasive negative impacts on that society in order to outweigh the utter annihilation that full compliance with the Prime Directive would have resulted in. The negative risks of discovery seem quite small in comparison to the certain negative outcomes of inaction.

Furthermore, who knows how harmful their original beliefs might have been, or turned out to be, in comparison to the new ones? If such reasoning were to be attributed to Kirk—that he was truly interested in securing what seemed to be best outcome given the circumstances, along with a rejection of any rules that would not lead to realizing the best consequences under the given circumstances—one might be tempted to consider Kirk to be an Act-Utilitarian. This would explain the stark contrast between their viewpoints, while also accounting for Kirk’s incessant critique of Spock’s absolutist, “rule-worship.”²¹

While this perspective seems initially plausible, it does not seem to adequately account for all the evidence in the film. Not only does Kirk fail to explicitly invoke consequentialist reasoning (he simply dismisses the consequences, whatever they are, as unimportant in relation to saving Spock’s life), Kirk doesn’t seem to employ *any* abstract ethical principles. In fact, he tends to reject them wholesale, as providing inadequate guidelines for morally correct action. As Admiral Pike will soon point out (and Kirk agrees), from Kirk’s point of view, “the rules” (i.e. moral principles) “don’t apply” whenever he disagrees with them, and some rules should be obligatory “for other people,” but not for him.²² Furthermore, to settle on an act-utilitarian interpretation for Kirk would require denying how strongly he is portrayed as *caring for* Spock in a special way, far beyond his care for strangers (e.g. the Nibiru people) or most of the others under his command. Kirk simply doesn’t seem to possess the requisite impartiality to be a utilitarian—at least, not a *good* one.

However, the rejection of abstract principles, combined with an emphasis on

partiality and caring about concrete individuals in concrete situations, does suggest a new theoretical interpretation—that Kirk is most closely aligned with the feminist “ethics of care,” and represents the need for partiality in our ethical lives. This interpretative view may be initially surprising, as Kirk’s character has not been portrayed in very “feminist” ways, either in this film or traditionally.²³ However, I believe we already have sufficient evidence for this interpretation based upon my discussion of the Nibiru scene, and close examination of scenes from later in the film will only make this conclusion more convincing.²⁴

With this understanding of Kirk, Spock’s rule-utilitarianism can also begin to be seen as serving a larger, theoretical function in the film’s overarching message—it stands in as a proxy for traditional “male” ethical views, and their call for abstract principles and impartiality. Thus, the ethical tension between Kirk and Spock is not merely a clash between the “ethics of care” vs. “rule-utilitarianism,” but involves larger tensions of “male” vs. “female” perspectives, the abstract vs. the concrete, and partiality vs. impartiality. As the plot continues to unfold, the tension between these oppositions develops further, and the advantages and disadvantages of each become more apparent.

The Advantages of Partiality and Caring over Impartiality

Spock’s perspective is first directly criticized by Kirk in a meeting with Admiral Pike.²⁵ Spock has followed one of the rules he believes to be absolute—in this case, the rule that prohibits lying—and told the truth about the Nibiru incident in his official report. Kirk, on the other hand, chose to cover-up his violation of the PD in his report, and he now faces serious charges of misconduct.²⁶ Here, Kirk points out that Spock should have told him he planned to tell the whole truth, rather than unexpectedly “throwing him under the bus.”²⁷ Kirk’s criticism is that in adhering to these exceptionless rules, Spock not only fails to inform Kirk of his intentions to do something that might negatively affect Kirk’s career, he fails to even consider how the action might affect Kirk. One of the primary demands of an ethics of care is that one must consider how one’s own actions could affect others, regardless of what rules or abstract principles require us to do.

This pattern of reasoning can be easily understood by considering Amy’s response in the famous “Heinz Dilemma.” Under this hypothetical scenario, Heinz’s wife is near death, but can be saved by a drug possessed only by a price-gouging pharmacist. Heinz cannot possibly afford the drug at the moment, and the pharmacist has refused partial payment, or installments over time. So the question

is whether it would be ethically acceptable to steal the drug to save his wife's life. Male-patterned responses, represented by Jake, tend to rely on abstract principles. For instance, a human life is more important than profits, so it is okay to steal the drug and deny the pharmacist his profit to save a life. Amy, on the other hand, focuses on relationships and compromises through discussion. She suggests considering other solutions to stealing (i.e. borrowing the money, getting a loan), in addition to the possible negative impacts of stealing (Heinz might save his wife, but he could go to jail, and he would no longer be able to care for her). In the end, Amy wants everyone to sit down and talk things through, to find a solution for everyone. She does not invoke principles of justice, or utilize consequentialist reasoning.²⁸

One might initially remain unconvinced that Kirk's criticism of Spock is a sound criticism of utilitarianism—surely the consequences that need to be considered in the utilitarian calculus should include how others will be affected by any action, and Spock could have considered these consequences and still (rightly) chosen as he did. However, this is not necessarily the case from a rule-utilitarianism perspective, and could still be a reasonable criticism of that view in particular—i.e., that the adherence to rules without regard for particular circumstances can result in less-than-optimal outcomes. In any case, this objection still misses the point illustrated by the Heinz Dilemma, and the larger theoretical tension between “male” and “female” perspectives that appears to be at work here.

Stereotypically “Male” thinking (such as “Jake's” response in the Heinz Dilemma) tends to appeal to abstract principles, such as justice, to guide our actions, without considering the concrete circumstances and any special relationships that might be affected. This “male” mode of thought seems to be what Kirk is objecting to—that you don't betray those who you love, especially not when they have made sacrifices to help you, no matter what abstract principles might demand (i.e. not lying, in this case). This criticism is further developed in the next two scenes to be discussed, which also focus on the Nibiru dilemma.

First, having been tasked with hunting down (and taking out via “drone-strike”) the film's primary antagonist, “super-villain” Khan, Spock and Kirk get into a heated discussion on their way to the *Enterprise* over whether it is morally acceptable to kill Khan without a trial.²⁹ Spock points out how doing so would violate the rules—both Starfleet regulations, and the rules of morality. Kirk, emotionally distraught at the loss of his mentor Admiral Pike to Khan's attack,

defends himself by arguing he is correct now, just as he was on Nibiru—no matter what the rules might suggest: “Regulations aside, pulling your ass out of the volcano was morally right...” When told to calm down by Dr. McCoy, Kirk replies with a scathing, but telling, *ad hominem*—“I’m not going to take ethics lessons from a robot!”³⁰ The message here is clear: Spock’s unfeeling logic, his “inhuman” dedication to reason, prevents him from being an acceptable source of moral guidance for Kirk now, and confirms what Kirk found wrong with his perspective on Nibiru—Spock entirely lacked compassion and feeling. For Spock, morality is determined by a cold calculus of utility and probability.

A few scenes later, Uhura, Spock’s romantic partner, gets a chance to tell him exactly why she is angry with his actions on Nibiru.³¹ She says she would be happy to explain her perspective, if Spock would only *listen* to her, and work it out through conversation—both of which are defining traits commonly associated with the ethics of care. Uhura is suggesting here that Spock lacks these traits entirely.³² Like Kirk’s “robot” criticism, Uhura accuses Spock of being *unfeeling*; that he did not *care* about dying in the volcano, or how his death would affect *her*. Spock did not consider their relationship, the “*us*” that exists between them. In short, Spock “didn’t *feel* anything; [he] didn’t care,”—and that is why both she and Kirk are upset with him (to which Kirk assents).

Spock is thus portrayed as adopting the abstractly principled, strictly impartial, traditionally “male” ethical perspective—according to which no one counts for more than another, regardless of who benefits and who suffers. It is vital to note that Spock alone holds this viewpoint throughout the film, and he is literally “alien,” or non-human—a person capable of ignoring his emotional reactions and attachments. The critique that Spock’s perspective is inhuman (or even “robotic”) is essentially an attack on the traditional “male” ethical perspective, and its “inhuman” demand that we treat everyone, in all situations, with complete impartiality. Not only does the “male” perspective fail to make sense of, or take seriously, our deep personal relationships, it suggests doing so is immoral. This is one of the most valuable criticisms the ethics of care tradition has given us, and *Into Darkness* represents this rather abstract critique in a fictional (yet concrete and relatable) scenario for our consideration.

Criticisms of Kirk’s Perspective: The Limits of Partiality.

So far, we have discussed Spock’s view—there are some principles which do not admit of any exception, and it is wrong to violate them, regardless of the

circumstances (in Spock's particular case, because utility will best be maximized overall by constantly adhering to these principles). However, Spock's arguments don't seem to gain much traction with Kirk initially, and the rest of the *Enterprise* crew is clearly on Kirk's side. Other than noting that they have fundamentally different starting points on morality, Spock does not explicitly say what is wrong with Kirk's perspective, but it seems clear that he believes that Kirk's overly emotional, "gut-responses" are unreliable guides for moral action; and the film's portrayal of Kirk's rather carefree and even immature attitude, in contrast with Spock's struggle to patiently win him over by calm argumentation, gets this across. To get a deeper sense of the weaknesses to Kirk's position, it is helpful to examine what Kirk's mentor, Admiral Pike, had to say.

In the scene where Spock refused to lie on his official report of Kirk's violation of the PD, Pike explicitly addresses Kirk's failings, listing at length all the things that make him a "real pain."³³ These include: lying on an official report, violating a dozen Starfleet regulations, and recklessly endangering those under his command. Pike points out that Kirk thinks he is infallible, and doesn't "have an ounce of humility"—he doesn't listen to *anybody* but himself. He (Kirk) thinks the rules do not apply to him, and so he violates them whenever he disagrees with them. Pike summarizes his case: "You don't comply with the rules, you don't take responsibility for *anything*, and you don't respect the [captain's] chair. You know why? Because you are not ready for it."³⁴ For all of these reasons, Kirk is demoted, losing command of the *Enterprise*.

These failings seem more related to what it takes to be a good captain of a starship, rather than a good moral agent. How then can Pike's attacks be seen as criticisms of Kirk's ethics of care perspective? I think there are three ways: 1) Kirk's reliance on his emotions fails to be a reliable guide to ethical reasoning, 2) There are dangers inherent in rejecting impartiality for partiality in Kirk's theoretical perspective, and 3) Kirk's ego prevents him from being a mature thinker who recognizes the value of the opinions of others. I address these in their respective order below.

First, are emotions reliable guides to making ethical decisions? It is generally admitted that they are not, as some of the most violent, repressive, and exclusionary behaviors in our history have been based upon such emotional appeals, and almost no one thinks practices like slavery should be reinstated, no matter how anyone may "feel" about other "races." This may initially seem unfair to Kirk, in that

he just wants to save his friend from certain death, and is not advocating any “barbaric” institutions. However, Kirk’s immediate response to Khan’s killing of Admiral Pike is to seek vengeance, and such retributive impulses have led us to adopt practices that, upon calm reflection, often seem to be morally indefensible.³⁵

Pike’s criticism of Kirk seems to place him in what Kohlberg called the “third stage of moral development”—where what is morally correct is understood by the agent in terms of “cultivating one’s relationships and performing the duties of one’s social roles.”³⁶ Kirk may have mastered the social role of friendship, but fails in almost every other category of ethical responsibility. Pike avers that acting in such a way is insufficient for moral decision-making, given Kirk’s level of responsibility as Captain of a starship. Kirk has no good *reasons* to justify his decisions to break the rules—it is what he *wants* to do, because it *feels* right.³⁷ Furthermore, as Pike points out, Kirk fails to realize how poor of a moral guide his intuitions and “gut-feelings” are, thinking he is justified by “blind luck”—concluding that, since nothing (too) bad has happened as an outcome of his decisions (i.e., no one has died), he must be correct, while everyone else is wrong. The inductive error in this is evident, and Kirk appears to be a wildcard that cannot be trusted with responsibility, a person likely to violate a norm if it suits his interests or feelings. This does not make for an adequate approach to morality in general, and Pike seems correct to conclude that Kirk’s sense of morality is too immature to command, since emotional impulses are his primary guide.

The point is not, of course, whether a proponent of the theory should accept these criticisms—Kohlberg’s “stages” are not necessarily indicative of one’s ethical maturity. However, the insight that these stages indicate different approaches, and that one approach may not be suited for all aspects of life, is relevant. Overall, the point is that the film raises concerns that parallel criticisms of the ethics of care in the philosophical literature on the subject, and hence can serve as a basic pedagogical tool.

Closely related to the charge of “ethical immaturity” is that of unprincipled partiality. One of the common theoretical worries about specifying an ethics of care is that there is a significant lack of normative guidance beyond *caring*. What determines caring in terms of benefits or harms, and what even counts as harms and benefits, are questions that remain unanswered? How do we handle conflicts of caring, such as weighing our obligations to Spock versus the Nibiru people? How extensive is the scope of our commitment to caring—would it even include

the Nibiru people at all? If we are to care about everyone equally, then the entire thrust of the feminist reform is lost. If caring is extremely partial (for instance, only covering family and close friends), then it seems we have no duties to anyone we do not choose to care about.

For instance, if we adopt Noddings' view, according to which we can only care for those with whom we have a personal, one-on-one relationship, we find ourselves with the opposite problem from what traditional "male" ethics have been chastised for—moral duty would become unacceptably narrow, rather than unacceptably broad.³⁸ While the ethics of care may be advantageous in taking seriously our private commitments, it faces challenges in the opposite direction—our public and social commitments. Furthermore, if an ethics of care is to abandon all universalization and abstraction to the theoretical level, as these are among the perceived problems with the "male" views, it is hard to see how it could coherently qualify as a substantial normative theory, one which stands as a real alternative to more traditional models. Thus, for many, an ethics of care is best seen as a supplement to some broader theory.

With this in mind, the general thrust of Pike's criticisms become more relevant. By *caring* too much, by focusing only on his role as a friend and letting these emotions rule him, Kirk fails to respect institutions and norms that are greater than himself (e.g. Starfleet regulations he is sworn to uphold). His caring is (at least initially) completely un-tempered by the demands of justice and duty, and the need to consider the consequences of his actions beyond his group of intimates. If Kirk is to responsibly command a starship, in often dangerous situations, and represent larger institutions like Starfleet, does he not have a duty to think more broadly than his immediate circle of friends and family? We later learn that Kirk identifies his crew with his "family"—but he hardly seems to care as much about the hundreds of other crew members as he does his intimate circle of main characters.³⁹ Even if one were to grant that respecting one's duties to others, and to institutions beyond one's immediate circle of intimates is *consistent* with an ethics of care, it is difficult to see how such a "theory" could recommend or require such duties. An ethics of care, without regard to further principles, thus seems far too limited to be the whole of morality.

Finally, Pike clearly hits home in noting that Kirk doesn't *listen* to anyone but himself. This failing actually makes him a poor representative of the ethics of care, as one of the key elements to the perspective is to focus on other's needs,

perspectives, feelings, etc., and to resolve conflicts through discussion and compromise.⁴⁰ Just as Uhura will later chastise Spock for failing in this area, Kirk suffers in it as well.⁴¹ Other than pointing out that Kirk's failure here means his own ethics of care perspective is lacking adequate development, this point then collapses into the "moral immaturity" criticism—thinking oneself to already have all the right answers on such difficult issues. On this account, both Kirk and Spock can be criticized on grounds of "ethical immaturity."

More Worrisome Examples of Strict Impartiality and Strict Partiality at Work:

One might think Pike's analysis of Kirk is rather harsh—after all, Kirk was simply trying to save his best friend and first-officer's life, and Kirk does tend to try to do the *right* thing. However, the film develops even more worrisome examples for both Kirk and Spock's perspectives, suggesting that each may recommend clearly immoral actions (and perhaps trying to suggest that these problems could be eliminated if each perspective was tempered by the other, though how this might work remains difficult to say).

Immediately following Kirk's meeting with Pike, a Starfleet officer named Thomas Harewood (Noel Clark), employed at a top-secret weapons development lab, is bribed to destroy the facility in an act of suicide-bombing.⁴² The bribe?—Khan offers to (and does), save the man's young daughter from a terminal illness. In arguably the most powerful scene in the film, the explosion is shown at a distance, with the camera backing into the window of an upper-story residence, and then zooming in close on a picture of Harewood's daughter—there can be no doubt the audience is intended to pay close attention to the motivations behind this bombing.⁴³ Harewood was willing to do something that could be noble—sacrifice his own life for others, much like Spock in the volcano, and Kirk saving the *Enterprise* later in the film. However, Harewood was also willing to directly end the lives of many others, and to do so because he valued one life over many others—the opposite of what Spock and Kirk seek to do.⁴⁴

At some point, admittedly, we have to say that the ethics of care perspective has been abandoned, and one is simply acting immorally, even if someone acts from motives of partiality, as the ethics of care recommends. The problem is that, as a "normative theory," the ethics of care in-itself doesn't seem to offer any clear guidance on where to draw the line. Even if the demand to care is universalized, so it includes others, at least to some degree, the defining emphasis on partiality

the inner tension of caring more for certain persons than for those others—so what, if anything, is off-limits in preferencing these special relationships? Can we harm or even kill others to save those we are partial to, if necessary? What principle or characteristic of the ethics of care prevents this? One might suggest the characteristic trait of compromise through discussion would be sufficient. However, Harewood's daughter is terminal, and no other known medicine can help her—there is no negotiation with a price-gouging pharmacist to be had, and no other authority can save his daughter, other than the psychopath blackmailing him. What about the “feminine” perspective that we should consider how our actions will affect others? Well, that may help some, but since we are supposed to prefer those we care about in this analysis, it still seems reasonable for Harewood's daughter to win out over the others, even after such consideration. It is hard to see what aspect of the ethics of care could forbid Harewood's response, especially given the ethics of care's “anti-theory,” “anti-principled” approach. This is what I mean by “unprincipled” partiality—partiality that doesn't have any clear bounds and defined restrictions, such as “not harming others in the process of caring for your own.”

Harewood's case seems aimed at getting the audience involved in thinking about these questions—Kirk and the rest of the *Enterprise* crew only know that Khan somehow “forced” Harewood to bomb the facility. Khan, however, presents an even more extreme case of problematic partiality, one which Kirk himself must confront, as if looking at a darker reflection of himself—at what he might become if he doesn't reconsider his own moral perspective.

Khan is a 300-year old genetically engineered “super-human,” who was set adrift in space in cryostasis, for engaging in war-crimes, along with 72 of his genetically altered “kin” (his own “crew,” or “family”). He was awakened from his cryostasis by Admiral Marcus, and forced to build advanced weaponry for Starfleet, with the threat of his crew being killed as his “incentive.” Over the course of the film, Khan commits numerous acts of violence, such as: blackmailing Harewood to bomb the research facility; killing Admiral Pike and other top-brass at Starfleet, wiping out a platoon of Klingon warriors, killing Admiral Marcus by crushing his skull with his bare-hands, and finally, attempting to destroy the *Enterprise* and everyone onboard. Seeming to care nothing for those who get in his way and suffer from his violent actions, one is tempted to write Khan off as simply immoral; or perhaps, at most, an egoist, one who only cares for others as

far as they promote his own interests.

However, this would be as big of a mistake as thinking Kirk is an act-utilitarian. Khan explicitly emphasizes that he genuinely *cares* about his crew, and he risks his own self-interests for them, which is inconsistent with egoism. Fearing for his crews' lives is the only reason he ever helped Admiral Marcus in the first place. In fact, from his perspective, everything he has done is justified *because* of his deep commitment to the well-being of his crew, over everyone and everything else. Khan is willing to use whatever means necessary to either: 1) save his crews' lives (and expand their domination over "inferior" beings), or 2) exact cruel vengeance upon those whom he believes have killed those he loves (which he *falsely* believes to be the case twice in the film).⁴⁵

While Kirk's ethics of care may serve as a critique to the traditionally "male" oriented ethical approaches like Utilitarianism, Khan serves as the ultimate warning of how completely unprincipled partiality can go horribly wrong. While being held in the brig, we learn that Kirk and Khan are a lot alike: both care very deeply for their crew, or "family." Both are willing to go to great lengths (they both explicitly say they would "do *anything*")—to protect them.⁴⁶ Once again, if all we care about is those close to us, and we lack any other principles of justice, or any benevolent concern for others, are we not in danger limiting ethics to close personal relationships alone? If so, it seems hard to say what would not be permitted. Kirk realizes how similar Khan's perspective is to his own—a troubling similarity the audience also cannot help but notice, and wonder what makes them different.

Admiral Marcus, on the other hand, may present a worrisome challenge to both Spock's impartial consequentialism and Kirk's partial caring. Marcus is the supreme commander of Starfleet, a space-navy originally focused on exploration, but possessing a militaristic element as well. Starfleet is the only major power protecting the Federation of Planets, and the billions of lives of its members, from any aggressive species. Marcus is dogmatically convinced that war with the Klingons—a militaristic alien race—is imminent and unavoidable, and will result in horrific consequences for the peoples of the Federation. Thus, in order to minimize the negative consequences of this unavoidable state of affairs, Marcus is willing to use anyone and everything as a means to accomplish his ends of militarizing Starfleet and preemptively crippling the Klingon war machine. Naturally, part of accomplishing these ends includes covering up all of his questionable and illegal

activities (e.g. Khan's existence and the advanced weaponry he helped create), so that he can remain in power, and his enemies not discover his secrets.

Marcus sends Kirk to take out Khan by firing new long-range torpedoes at the Klingon homeworld, contriving for the *Enterprise's* engines to fail on the edge of Klingon space, so they would be caught and blamed, and war ensue. Upon learning that Kirk has instead captured and talked to Khan, Marcus proceeds to fire on the *Enterprise*, fully intending to kill everyone aboard, just to preserve his secret. Marcus' impartial consequentialism is evident in that he is willing to sacrifice anyone (or at least nearly so) in pursuit of the "greater good"—winning the imminent war with the Klingons. I think this aspect of Marcus' character is what the audience is supposed to focus on—how seemingly good principles, such as the "maximizing utility," can be quite problematic, given certain background assumptions, reducing people to abstract numbers, mere means, in accomplishing one's end.

However, it must be admitted that Marcus shows *some* partiality. First, he is clearly partial to the citizens of the Federation over those in the Klingon Empire. Here, however, he might just be guilty of old-fashioned racism. On the other hand, he refrains from destroying the *Enterprise* when he learns his daughter is onboard, at least long enough to "beam" her off. Yet, given Marcus' dogmatic certainty that he is the only thing saving the Federation from certain destruction, it is not at all evident that, had he possessed no easy way to save his daughter, he would not have readily sacrificed her as well.

From either perspective, Marcus is problematic. Either: 1) Marcus is supposed to be an impartial consequentialist, willing to sacrifice anyone for the "greater good," or 2) he is a monster of partiality, the ultimate "us v. them" thinker, who is willing to preemptively attack and kill another species *en masse*—people who have not yet been aggressive—based upon nothing but his fervent belief that someday soon they will be.

Kirk & Spock: A "Male/Female" Synthesis?

Both Spock and Kirk begin as dogmatic extremists at polar opposites in this film. Through explicit dialogue and character portrayals challenging each view, the film has suggested both might ultimately fail on their own. However, both seem to become more flexible, and less dogmatic about the correctness of their own perspective, as the film progresses. In the end, a synthesis seems to develop between their views, and it is suggested that only by adopting the other's

perspective—or at least respecting and learning from it—can they hope to become adequate moral agents.

When Kirk's journey towards respecting Spock's perspective begins is clearly portrayed. Though Kirk was not initially swayed by Spock's arguments that killing Khan with a long-range drone strike would be immoral, when the *Enterprise* is *en route*, he announces to the crew (looking pointedly at Spock right before-hand) that their mission is to *capture* Khan, and return him to Earth for trial. Spock applauds the decision, assuring Kirk that he has chosen rightly.⁴⁷

That Spock has begun to learn from Kirk is most clearly portrayed much later in the film. Once Khan's super-human powers have become evident, and suspicions over how truly dangerous he might be have arisen, Spock seeks advice from the only person who might have successfully dealt with Khan before: his older-self, "Spock-Prime," from an alternate timeline.⁴⁸ Spock-Prime and Spock have agreed that the former should never share information that might significantly affect the natural development of the latter's life. This is again at least partially due to worries over unforeseeable negative consequences, but explicitly so that new Spock can autonomously determine his own path through life.⁴⁹ In initiating this contact, and asking Spock-Prime for aid, Spock is showing that he is willing to break some rules, and risk some negative consequences to himself, in the interests of protecting those he cares about. He is also acting in typical Kirk-fashion, thinking outside-the-box, in order to turn a "no-win" scenario into a "win."⁵⁰ Spock-Prime's willingness to break his own vow and provide information to new-Spock suggests how the Spock character originally turned out—as one willing to break rules/vows for the interests of the greater good, and to care for those he loves.⁵¹ This hints at how new-Spock may be moving along a similar path, making exceptions to rules if called for by the circumstances, and embracing a moral maturity that weds caring to cold logic.⁵²

The move towards synthesis becomes more evident when the next series of scenes are considered together. The *Enterprise* has been severely damaged by battles with Marcus and Khan; in order to save the ship from complete destruction, Spock agrees to give Khan the torpedoes he wants (because his crew had been hidden inside of them) in exchange for Kirk's life. Wary of trickery, Khan points out that he will know if the torpedoes are not "his". Spock, speaking the literal truth, assures him that the torpedoes are indeed "his"—while failing to mention that Khan's crew has been removed, and the torpedoes set to remote-detonate.

Using what Khan wanted against him, Spock detonates the torpedoes, crippling Khan's warship. However, the final volley from Khan's ship has damaged the *Enterprise's* engines, causing it to plummet towards Earth. Kirk enters into an irradiated chamber to fix the engines, and suffers a lethal exposure, sacrificing himself in a way analogous to Spock's attempted sacrifice on Nibiru (and to his actual "death" in the original *Wrath of Khan*).

Speaking through a transparent partition, they tell each other that they saved the ship by doing what the other would have done.⁵³ This is plausible. Kirk could have used "the needs of the many..." reasoning to justify sacrificing himself to save the *Enterprise*. In fact, in the scene from the *Wrath of Khan* this scene is mimicking, where Spock dies instead, Spock explicitly does use such reasoning to explain his own sacrifice. Similarly, while Spock did not technically lie, he used the literal truth to intentionally mislead Khan, a "bending" of the rules that Kirk would certainly agree with, just as he thought saving the Nibiru people without being seen was "technically" not a violation of the PD.

However, both actions were also consistent with their prior views. Kirk could sacrifice himself to save the *Enterprise* on the grounds of saving those he cares most about, and Spock has already admitted he "embraces technicality" to Admiral Pike, regarding the Nibiru incident.⁵⁴ Furthermore, neither character seems to have completely switched perspectives. So, how are we to understand this?

The solution seems to be that they have both become less rigid in their views, and approached a synthesis between "male" and "female" reasoning—they have learned to make the "Gestalt switch," as Gilligan would have it, and see moral issues from both perspectives (Gilligan 1982). Spock has learned that strict impartiality is not always the best, and that friendship and caring is also valuable. That Spock's deception of Khan could have been consistently performed from a strictly logical and utilitarian perspective does not matter—Spock thought the way Kirk does, and acted to save his crew and friends, not because the principle of utility dictated it.⁵⁵ Similarly, Kirk has realized that he must commit himself to ideals and institutions beyond himself and his loved ones, or risk becoming like Khan. While Kirk could have saved the ship based upon his emotional attachments to its crew, he saw the wisdom of being guided by the principle of utility in this case. Both realize that they have not lost something in adopting the opposing perspective, but rather that they have each gained a great deal, and become more

complete.

Of course, many problems remain in fashioning such a synthesis, such as how to create an acceptable meta-principle determining when to use one perspective over the other. However, there is no convincing argument for this in the academic literature, so it is not surprising that the film fails to offer an answer here. The general point is that *Into Darkness* parallels what the literature suggests might be done in ethics—that “male” and “female” perspectives should be considered to be complementary, rather than opposing, alternatives. That the writers admittedly didn’t quite pull this off as clearly and cleanly as we might like also indicates how far we have to go in terms of making this conjunction in our theorizing.⁵⁶

Jeremy DeLong

Notes

- 1 Abrams, J. J. (Director & Producer). May 16, 2013. *Star Trek Into Darkness*. United States: Paramount Pictures. While the official title of the film notoriously excludes the colon between ‘Star Trek’ and ‘Into Darkness,’ I will consistently include it, as a matter of preferred style.
- 2 The popular philosophy blog, *Plato on Pop*, provides the best ethical review so far, briefly arguing that the primary contemporary ethical theories—Utilitarianism, Kantianism, Feminist Ethics and Virtue Ethics—are all on display, and often conflict in realistic ways. While a good primer, there is far more to say about the particular, situational ethical conflicts and theoretical representations in the film, as well as what appears to be the overall ethical message of the film. Johnson, David Kyle (5/18/2013). “The Ethics of Star Trek: Into Darkness—How Can Ethics Shed Light on the Moral Decisions of the Enterprise Crew?” *Plato on Pop: Philosophy and Pop Culture*. Retrieved from: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/plato-pop/201305/the-ethics-star-trek-darkness>
- 3 (01:00-09:53). All parenthetical time references below will refer to this film, in minutes from the beginning. The name “Nibiru” may have been chosen well, as it apparently refers to a prophetically-predicted cataclysmic encounter between the Earth and some other large planetary body in the future.
- 4 Peter Singer (1972). “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1), 229-243.
- 5 The PD is *the* guiding principle for all Starfleet vessels and crews, with Starfleet being the exploratory/military arm of an interplanetary governing body, known as the “Federation of Planets.” By “absolutist,” I mean a rule that admits of no exceptions.
- 6 (02:10-02:20). This guiding principle at first glance seems to be a “Kantian-type” rule designed to prevent any interference with the autonomy of alien civilizations outside of the Federation—in essence, a futuristic version of a prohibition against cultural imperialism. However, it can also be consistently affirmed by rule-utilitarianism, and this interpretation would better explain Spock’s particular commitment to it, taking into account his consequentialist attitudes and commitment to maximizing utility.
- 7 While the film begins with the decision already having been made to help the people of Nibiru, we can assume based upon later discussion that Spock finds this covert interference technically in keeping with the PD, and that Kirk might have been willing to help, even if the PD were violated outright. It will later be clarified by Admiral Pike that Starfleet is technically only allowed to *observe* pre-warp civilizations, so even stopping the volcano covertly, without being observed, is actually a violation of the PD, and arguing otherwise requires appealing to a

“technicality” in the language—the “spirit” of the rule is not to interfere *at all* with the “natural development” of other civilizations, cultures, or worlds. An anonymous reviewer has helpfully suggested that the PD might be favorably compared to the medical oath to “First do no harm,” or even the “precautionary principle.” These may indeed be helpful analogies when the relevant issue is whether harm might be caused by interference. However, the PD cannot be *entirely* based upon the desire to avoid harms when operating under uncertainty, as the precautionary principle dictates—there is no uncertainty regarding the harm that will ensue if the volcano is allowed to erupt, and yet interference is still considered a violation of the PD by Admiral Pike and the top-brass at Starfleet. In terms of situations like the volcano incident, it is probably more helpful to think of the PD in terms of an absolute, institutional principle of “non-interference,” based upon a lack of jurisdiction. If planets and their peoples are members of the Federation, and thus willingly under Starfleet’s protection, interference is justified. Non-member planets, and planets whose peoples are too technologically “primitive” to enter into any membership as relative equals, are outside of the jurisdiction of Starfleet, and interference is not allowed. The principle certainly has moral grounds behind it, but that does not necessarily exhaust the reasoning for its acceptance. Also, this understanding allows us to understand why even Spock, who is completely committed to the PD on moral grounds, would be willing to engage in its “violation” in this case—he is not violating the moral grounds, but the “jurisdictional” bounds. One might think of this in terms of a police officer outside their normal jurisdiction, who is not willing to stand by and let a violent crime be committed, and thus takes action beyond the scope of their legal entitlement.

- 8 Note that one could already begin asking moral questions here, between principles (“do not steal”) and consequentialist reasoning (“but stealing resulted in greater well-being”)—was Kirk justified in stealing the scroll, since it resulted in saving the natives’ lives, who would have been killed by the ejecta of the volcano destroying their temple.
- 9 The shuttle was supposedly hidden by the volcanic smoke plume, and Kirk’s distraction, from native view.
- 10 Mysteriously and absurdly hiding below the ocean...
- 11 (5:30-5:35)
- 12 As far as the Nibiru people are concerned, seeing the *Enterprise* could significantly change their outlook on the world, particularly religiously, as the film suggests (09:35-09:50). This could even have violent consequences later, especially if this one tribe has an experience of “gods from the sky” that other tribes do not share. With respect to the *Enterprise* and her crew, the chief engineer Scotty argues that the *Enterprise* could be in great danger if the volcano erupted while flying over it.
- 13 Spock clearly seems willing to interfere with the volcanic eruption as long as they do so unobserved by the Nibiru people, a distinction which will later be referred to by Pike as a mere “technicality,” but still a violation of the PD. Since the film begins with the decision already having been made to stop the volcano, we cannot be sure if Spock had reservations beforehand. For more consideration of the “technicality” and Spock and Kirk’s violation of the PD in this way, refer back to fn. 7.
- 14 (06:25-07:30)
- 15 (09:10-09:50)
- 16 The PD could be a non-anthropocentric, non-individualized reformulation of Kant’s 2nd formulation of the Categorical Imperative
- 17 Spock’s adherence to this rule is explicitly discussed throughout the film. It is first introduced in a meeting between Kirk, Spock, and Admiral Pike, where Kirk learns that Spock told the truth about Nibiru in his official report, leading to Kirk being (temporarily) demoted (12:55-16:36). Kirk and Spock rehash their disagreement over always telling the truth before the meeting at the Daystrom Institute, where they learn about Khan’s terrorist bombing (22:00-22:55). Spock later chastises Dr. Carol Marcus, who has lied about her identity to get on-board the *Enterprise* (42:00-42:30). Finally, Spock’s claim not to ever lie serves as an important plot device—it is by strictly and technically keeping to the rule that he results in deceiving Khan and saving the *Enterprise* (98:00-99:00).

- 18 (07:05-07:07)
- 19 In particular, “A sentient being’s optimal chance at maximizing their utility is a long and prosperous life.” (46:59-47:04)
- 20 On a pedagogical level, this scene at the very least offers some opportunity for considering the problems with absolutism, and the worry that rule-utilitarians will fall under similar “rule-worship.”
- 21 In particular, see the conversation between Kirk and Spock at time index (22:15-23:00).
- 22 (14:58-15:40)
- 23 The character James T. Kirk has been historically portrayed as an infamous womanizer, who engages in clearly sexist actions towards women—at least those he does not have a valued working relationship with (i.e. Uhura). In this film alone, consider the scenes where Kirk wakes up with twin alien girls in his bed when he is called to Starfleet Headquarters (12:40-12:55), or even worse, his pompous leering and suggestive “Hey ladies...Jim Kirk!” at two female cadets as he walks by them on the way to the aforementioned headquarters (13:17-13:20).
- 24 Most tellingly is that Kirk wants Spock to understand why he saved him on Nibiru. Initially asking him before the meeting at the Daystrom Meeting (22:00-22:55) if he understood, Spock does not have an opportunity to give an answer here (and likely doesn’t know the right answer at this time). Near the end of the film, however, when Kirk is suffering from imminently lethal radiation poisoning, he asks Spock again. Spock finally understands, and gives the answer: “Because you are my friend” (107:45-111:48). Kirk does not save Spock because some abstract principle required it of him morally—he saved him and risked his career because he *cared* about him. Also, I am not alone in this interpretation of Kirk’s moral perspective—Johnson (2013) also argues that Kirk’s defense here seems best understood from an ethics of care perspective.
- 25 (13:20-14:00)
- 26 (12:55-16:36)
- 27 Johnson (2013) also picks out this particular scene to suggest an “ethics of care” interpretation of Kirk. Kirk also refers to Spock’s filing of a truthful report as “stabbing him in the back” at (22:45-22:50).
- 28 Lawrence Kohlberg (1981). *The Philosophy of Moral Development. Vol. I: Essays on Moral Development*. New York: Harper and Row.
- 29 (33:30-35:00)
- 30 (34:15-34:17)
- 31 (46:15-48:00) It is quite a relief that the filmmakers included this scene with Uhura, putting some of the strongest advocacy of an ethics of care perspective into a female spokesperson, and I would be remiss if I did not include it as well. Overall, however, the film portrays the ethics of care as a *human* perspective, not a specifically *female* one; in many ways, this may be a more accurate way to think of it, as Carol Gilligan’s research and analogy of Gestalt-switching tends to suggest—emphasis and frequency are *feminine*, but availability is common to across gender. Carol Gilligan, “In a Different Voice,” *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 4th Ed., Ed. Pojman (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth,2002) 682-8.
- 32 This is further supported when Spock attempts to end the conversation by expressing a preference to discuss the matter in private, she retorts “you would prefer not to *discuss* this at all.”
- 33 (12:55-16:36)
- 34 (16:15-16:30)
- 35 In fact, upon capturing Khan, while he is being held at gunpoint defenseless, Kirk proceeds to pummel Khan incessantly. Clearly he is out of control in his desire for vengeance. (55:00-56:30)
- 36 Kohlberg; quoted from Rachels. James Rachels & Stuart Rachels (2012). *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (7th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- 37 Rachels 147.
- 38 Noddings, Nel (1984). *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkley: University of California Press. Rachels 153-4.
- 39 (68:06-72:30). This is especially evident with all the infamously disposable “red shirts” that are sent on so many “away missions,” and always die.

- 40 Consider the often cited example of “Amy” and her response to the “Heinz Dilemma.” Rachels, 148.
- 41 Fortunately, after listening to Spock go on at length regarding the immorality of using a “drone-attack” to kill Khan without a trial (which also includes an implicit criticism of Kirk getting carried away by his emotions and failing to uphold key principle and ideals), Kirk’s character starts to grow, and he does finally listen to Spock, deciding to capture Khan instead of launching torpedoes from afar.
- 42 This character goes unnamed in the film as released, but is played by Noel Clarke, and named Thomas Harewood on Imbd. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1408101/?ref_=nv_sr_1
- 43 (19:10-19:25)
- 44 The lives of 42 people, in total. (23:40-23:48).
- 45 It is admittedly possible to think Khan is lying about actually caring about his crew, or consistently with egoism—that he only “cares” about them as far as they help advance his own interests. However, given the persistent theme of morally justified actions based upon personal relationships and caring throughout the film, I find this interpretation quite unlikely.
- 46 This is phrase is later repeated by both Kirk and Khan. Kirk begs Marcus to let his crew live at, saying he will “do anything you want” (79:12-79:45), very soon after Khan has asked him if he would not do anything to save his family. When Kirk needs to align with Khan against their common enemy (Marcus), Kirk reminds Khan that he said he would do *anything* to save his crew/family. (82:05-84:05)
- 47 (40:10-41:30)
- 48 To understand this sci-fi twist, one really must watch J. J. Abrams. *Star Trek*. Paramount (2009). In brief, there was an original timeline (the original Star Trek series and films) and an elderly Spock (Spock-Prime) from that reality was pulled back in time, in an event that irrevocably altered the past. Spock-Prime and the original crew encountered Khan early in their space-faring (The episode “Space Seed” in the Original Series—Season 1, Episode 22, 1967), and then fought him to the death in a parallel manner to this film in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, Paramount (1982), of which this film is essentially a remake. Spock initiates the communication with Spock-Prime at (91:05-91:22), and continues the discussion at (92:03-92:58)
- 49 One might think of this as a “Temporal Prime Directive,” though on a more personal basis.
- 50 The obvious example of Kirk doing this is the supposedly unwinnable “Kobayashi-Maru” scenario that all Starfleet cadets must “pass” in order to graduate. Kirk is famous for reprogramming the scenario, so that it could be won. Cf. *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, and *Star Trek* (2009) for more discussion of this in the films.
- 51 It should be noted that Spock-Prime does not share all of the details, however, leaving new Spock’s autonomy and future open. Though Spock-Prime admits that Khan was “the most dangerous adversary the Enterprise ever faced,” and admits that they were able to defeat Khan “at great cost,” he omits that the “great cost” was Spock-Primes’ own life, dying in the engine chamber of radiation poisoning, as Kirk’s death mirrors in this film.
- 52 Spock’s move from cold, distant logic to a being capable of embracing relationships and friendships is the character theme of the original series of films after Spock’s “reincarnation” in *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*, Paramount (1984), through *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, Paramount (1991). Though Spock can only deal with pure logic at first, and cannot even handle metaphorical references (let alone friendship), by the last film, he advises his student (Valeris) that, “logic is the beginning of wisdom...not the end.” New-Spock seems to be tracking a similar course in this film.
- 53 (107:45-111:48)
- 54 (14:20-14:30)
- 55 Spock finally understands why Kirk chose to save him on Nibiru—because Spock was his friend.
- 56 Irwin and Johnson’s review suggests considering this scene from the perspective of virtue ethics. Since an ethics of care is most commonly thought to best complement virtue ethics, there might be some value to this approach. However, this doesn’t fit the dialogue as well, with

Kirk referring to his logical motivation, and Spock hardly seems likely to abandon his utilitarian perspective for an ethics of virtue...