

To Go Boldly: Trekking for Moral Courage

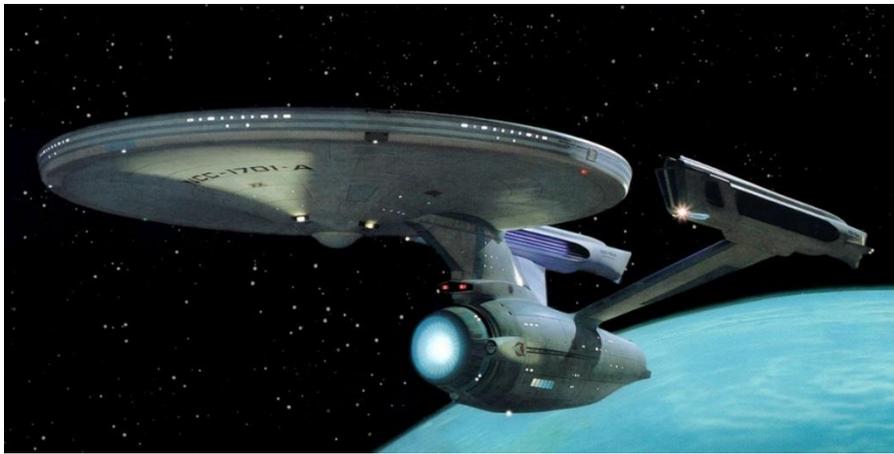
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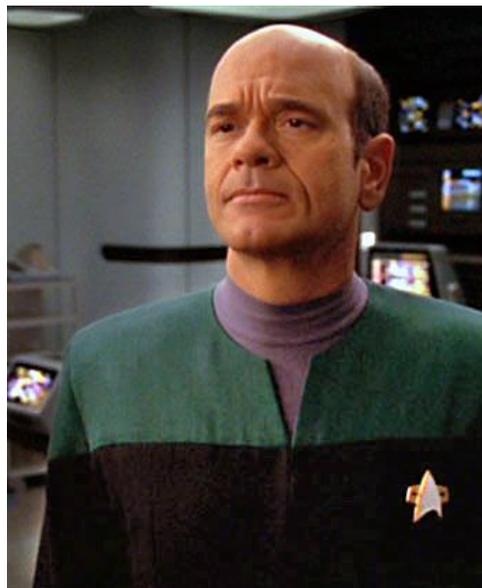
Oddly enough, when I think of practical ethics, my mind often goes to some of my favorite science fiction characters. These include Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the Doctor in *Star Trek Voyager*, and Quark in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. Of course, being a business ethics professor, I also think of other characters, such as Socrates, Immanuel Kant, and Adam Smith. Indeed, I view their ideas as roots of a tree that nourish the branches of knowledge that inform ethics in practice.

Back to space opera, starting with Data. As Trekkies know, he is a sentient android on the starship Enterprise, which is charged with exploring space in the 24th century. When the ship's crew faces dicey decisions, Data's positronic brain computes various ethical implications. Because his program has ethical subroutines, he demonstrates an awareness of right and wrong, with a respect for life being his overriding guide. All the while, Data strives to be human, even though his reasoning is impeccably logical by human standards.



What is the lesson of Data? To me, it is the importance of pausing before acting to run through a checklist of ethical implications. With practice, humans are able to do this in a remarkably short amount of time. Consider the archetype embodied in Data's twin brother, Lore. He has no such ethics program, and he wrecks destruction and misery for any species in his path.

Then there is the holographic Doctor in *Star Trek Voyager* who also aspires to be human. In one episode, he has a synaptic breakdown when faced with a choice not uncommon to his human counterparts: the unavoidable necessity of saving someone's life at the expense of another's. Since the Doctor's program includes the Hippocratic Oath to do no harm, he is unable to come to terms with this dilemma on his own. The captain of ship, Kathryn Janeway, eventually sequesters him in a room and lets his program run long enough that, presumably, new neural pathways are forged that allow him to "live" with the dilemma.



The lesson of the Doctor seems to be that although ethical reasoning involves a checklist of decision parameters, it cannot be reduced to a formula. It takes courage to face ethical dilemmas, especially since some imply win-lose outcomes. It is reasonable to think that humans have an advantage over androids and holograms in dealing with such problems. If humans pay attention, if we use our imagination, we have the capacity to anticipate ethical dilemmas and try to design ethical responses in advance. And we can learn from the experience. This is what goes

through my mind when I watch Data and the Doctor. No wonder their characters aspire to be human.

Finally we come to yet another 24th century character in Quark, a Ferengi alien on a space station in *Deep Space Nine*. He is obviously a caricature of a business person driven by profit only. Even so, because of his exposure to humans, he occasionally prioritizes people over profits, albeit grudgingly. However, the Ferengis as a species do nothing of the kind. In fact, one episode shows their custom of selling off parts of Ferengi corpses for profit. The lesson connected to Quark is obvious: a species driven by greed only is a nightmarish menace.



Back to earth. Those of us who teach business ethics want our students to understand the dangers of greed. We want them to develop the moral courage to face ethical dilemmas at work. At the same time, we hope that our students transcend a checklist mentality to help create ethical organizations that do not place an unfair burden on the lone individual who faces a dilemma.

This involves a collective effort to anticipate ethical dilemmas, design and implement solutions, and learn from the experience. In the parlance of this blog, we want our students to go beyond Data, the Doctor and, especially, Quark.

These aspirations are not otherworldly. They are part of a long tradition that should be known to business students. After all, many great economists were moral philosophers. Notably, Adam Smith, a proponent of the market system, wrote *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* before he penned *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776. In the second book, he elevated the role of commerce because of its potential to serve the greater good. In similar manner, scholars and practitioners have investigated the meaning of corporate social responsibility for decades. It is a time honored tradition, here on planet earth and in our College of Business Administration at Kansas State University!



