Victor Grech

Star Trek's Picard: Humanity's Conscience

Introduction

Star Trek is a rolling and seemingly endless adventure, a continual reaffirmation of the Campbellian monomyth, a

> universe in which Captains Kirk, Picard, Janeway, Sisko, and Archer are still one with Jason, Odysseus, Sinbad, Columbus, Cook, Ahab, Armstrong, and every other sea- or spacefarer, real or fictional, that has ever left (or will ever leave) the comfort and safety of home port in search of what's lurking "out there" and waiting to be discovered. (Pilkington 54)

Several captains have led in *Star Trek* but arguably none have been imbued with more integrity and authority than Captain Jean-Luc Picard, the epitome of a twenty-fourth century Starfleet captain in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG) and related films.

A brief listing of Picard's accomplishments includes: defending humanity against the judgment of the seemingly omnipotent beings that inhabit the Q Continuum, preventing treacherous Romulans from installing a puppet government in the Klingon Empire, preventing an entire species from being forcibly relocated, defeating the implacable cyborg Borg collective, saving Earth from annihilation by his own clone, saving humanity, saving the galaxy, and saving the universe. Picard is arguably a symbol, a synecdoche for the *Star Trek gesamtkunstwerk* and for the entire genre.

Reading Picard's most important statements demonstrates his thirst for knowledge, truth, and new opportunities; his role as upholder of justice in resolute pursuit of duty; his leadership skills; his manifest humanism; his place as a friend and a compassionate man, the captain-philosopher, appreciator of the arts and harbinger of a brighter and superior future. Picard is not only the voice and conscience of the Federation and humanity, but "the bearer of Starfleet's conscience and an exemplar of moral autonomy" (Eberl and Decker 141), and therefore an ideal role model.

Picard's deontological leanings reify him as a moral paragon, a role model whose decisions and actions resonate with our individual desire to do the right thing, emphasizing the "ultimately liberating feature of *Star Trek*'s mythos . . . its emphasis on the growth of understanding. . . . Gene Roddenberry's belief in humanity's potential for self-transcendence" (Lundeen and Wagner 215).

In all of these ways, it will be demonstrated that Picard's handling of the ship has certainly made "sure history never forgets the name, Enterprise" (Carson, "Yesterday's Enterprise").

Seeking knowledge, truth and new opportunities

The familiar opening soliloquy of each *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode, delivered by Picard, reflects the Aristotelean notion that the more we know, the more we know that there are things that we do not know. Hence the desire "to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before!"

In addition, the search for veracity is Galilean, irrespective of the consequences:

> The first duty of every Starfleet officer is to the truth, whether it is scientific truth or historical truth or personal truth. It is the guiding principle on which Starfleet is based. (Scheerer, "The First Duty")

This quest for knowledge may require tolerance and fortitude, even in the face of linguistic and cultural barriers when dealing with alien species. "In my experience, communication is a matter of patience, imagination. I would like to believe these are qualities we have in sufficient measure" (Kolbe, "Darmok").

Moreover, Picard exhorts us to to seize precious opportunities as they arise: "[l]ive now. Make now always the most precious time. Now will never come again" (Lauritson, "The Inner Light").

Upholder of justice and pursuit of duty

Picard is, again and again, set as "the wise man. He rules the Enterprise with a sagely wisdom" (Ghosh 63). Picard carries out actions irrespective of consequences, because he "thought it was the right thing to do" (Lynch, "A Matter of Time").

Picard also believes in justice, preferably in trial by jury of one's peers, since "the courtroom is a crucible. In it we burn away irrelevancies until we are left with a pure product, the truth for all time" (Scheerer, "The Measure of a Man").

Picard scoffs at the usual excuses that are employed for the sake of tyrannical convenience: "'[m]atter of internal security,' the age old cry of the oppressor" (Bole, "The Hunted"). Indeed, when an inquiry degenerates into a witch hunt on board the *Enterprise*, with overtones of a drumhead, he defends his crew, with escalating levels of emphasis: "Admiral, what you're doing here is unethical. It's immoral. I'll fight it" (Frakes, "Drumhead").

Picard holds fast to a Kantian deontological course of action, opposing any actions that benefit many at the expense of one individual since "no being is so important that he can usurp the rights of another" (Landau, "The Schizoid Man").

Picard also deontologically defends the minority, such as the species known as "the Ba'ku," when Starfleet, under the direct instructions of the Federation, deviates from basic principles and plans the forced relocation of these six hundred individuals who constitute an entire species. "We are betraying the principles upon which the Federation was founded. . . . How many people does it take . . . before it becomes wrong? A thousand? Fifty thousand? A million?" (Frakes, *Star Trek: Insurrection*).

Moreover, Picard is a prime upholder of Starfleet's General Order Number One, the "principle of non-interference" (Bole, "Redemption"), which categorically states that "we have no right to interfere in the natural evolution of alien worlds" (Lynch, "A Matter of Time"), and more generally, "[i]t is not our mission to impose Federation or Earth values on any others in the galaxy" (Phelps, "Symbiosis"), eschewing any paternalistic stances toward less technologically or culturally developed races.

Picard's deontological leanings are so ingrained that even when the crews' memories are partially erased, and the ship's new false orders require an attack on a purported enemy base with a crew of fifteen thousand, he balks when he finds the base poorly defended and calls off the attack, correctly suspecting a conspiracy and declaring "I do not fire on defenseless people" (Landau, "Conundrum").

Leadership and Patient Implacability

Picard's leadership has been the subject of books of management and decision-making exercises, since the "underlying themes and messages are not so different from the real-life situations and circumstances each of us encounter daily" (Wess, xii). Indeed Picard's role "is based on myths of masculine gods that pose the male as warrior leader, guide, and savior—an active agent in the making of culture" (Balinisteanu 401).

While fostering peace and diplomatic relations with alien species and groups, the "the coolly paternal" Captain (Cranny-Francis 249) represents Starfleet's attitude of self-defense when under attack or in captivity.

Picard optimistically insists that "[t]here is a way out of every box, a solution to every puzzle, it's just a matter of finding it" (Frakes, "Attached"), adamantly claiming that "[t]hings are only impossible until they're not," (Manners, "When The Bough Breaks"). Furthermore, Picard is fully cognizant of the possibility of defeat despite all one's best efforts, noting that "it is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not a weakness. That is life" (Scheerer, "Peak Performance").

Picard also scorns compromise with any form of evil, quoting Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound," "A great poet once said, 'all spirits are enslaved that serve things evil'" (Scanlan, "Skin of Evil").

This includes his belief that "there are times . . . when men of good conscience cannot blindly follow orders," (Frakes, "The Offspring"). Thus, the commands of a superior officer should not be used as an

excuse to unthinkingly carry out orders that may trample on the rights of individuals or minorities.

Human Limitations

He too however, is human, with his own flaws and weaknesses but "there are times when it is necessary for a captain to give the appearance of confidence" (Frakes, "Attached"). Indeed, he acknowledges the fact that "[e]xcessive honesty can be disastrous particularly in a commander. . . . Knowing your limitations is one thing. Advertising them to a crew can damage your credibility as a leader" (Bole, "The Ensigns Of Command").

Picard himself is riven by his personal experience of being assimilated by the Borg, a hive organization comprised of cyborgs wherein individuality is lost in subservience to a Marcusian collective. He had been "transformed through technological prosthetics that stifle his *élan vital*" (Balinisteanu 398) and even after being recovered, he deeply regrets this, breaking down in front of his brother and confessing

> They took everything I was; they used me to kill and to destroy and I couldn't stop them, I should have been able to stop them, I tried, I tried so hard. But I wasn't strong enough, I wasn't good enough. (Landau, "Family")

Scriptwriter and producer Michael Piller remarked that this was a deliberate stroke,

> the indestructible captain, untouchable, above all risk and danger, and suddenly, . . . he is a man who's been raped by the Borg and has to deal emotionally with huge consequences. You see the first needle going into his forehead, and a single tear rolling down his cheek. And after that, Picard was more complex, never the same. ("Mission Overview")

Years later, when faced with the almost inevitable prospect of losing the *Enterprise*, he initially insists on the impossible task of defending the ship, at great cost in lives, and storms at Lily Sloane (a civilian) with vehement *Fuhrerprinzip* (Boisvert 28):

> No! . . . I will not sacrifice the Enterprise. We've made too many compromises already. Too many retreats. They invade our space and we fall back. They assimilate entire worlds, and we fall back. Not again! The line must be drawn here . . . this far, no further! And I will make them pay for what they've done. (Frakes, *Star Trek: First Contact*)

Lily quietly compares him to Melville's Ahab and this becomes a "turning point in his self-understanding and in the fate of humanity" (Lundeen and Wagner 209). Picard realizes the near-inevitability of defeat and he orders the crew to abandon ship, only to have the situation saved by Data, his android second-in-command.

Humanism

Picard is as humanist in his outlook, as was his creator, Gene Roddenberry. The captain concedes that "[w]e can't protect ourselves against the unknown" (Lynch, "Unnatural Selection"). However, he is provoked when Q, an immortal and omnipotent being, insists that humanity is unprepared for the adversaries it has yet to meet. And when Q accuses Picard of arrogance and smugness, Picard retorts:

> How can we be prepared for that which we do not know? But I do know that we are ready to encounter it. . . . Yes. Absolutely. That's why we're out here. . . . Not smugness, not arrogance. But we are resolute, we are determined, and your help is not required. (Bowman, "Q Who?")

This is fortunately tempered by the gracious acceptance of reality and defeat, and the willingness to humiliate himself. Thus when the *Enterprise* is almost defeated by a single Borg cube, he begs Q to

> [e]nd this. . . . If we all die, here, now, you will not be able to gloat. You wanted to frighten us. We're frightened. You wanted to show us that we were inadequate. For the moment, I grant that. You wanted me to say I need you. I need you!

Picard later admits that his initial posture was faulty, musing that "perhaps what we most needed was a kick in our complacency to prepare us for what lies ahead."

A good friend and a compassionate man

Picard freely acknowledges his friendship with his crew, and while officiating at the marriage of his first officer and the ship's counselor/psychologist, he publicly avows "[y]ou have helped me recognize the better parts of myself. You are my family" (Frakes, *First Contact*). This extends to support for his friends and crew as the resident "paterfamilias" (Rheindorf), even in the setting of difficult decisions: "whatever decision you make, we will support it" (Scheerer, "Inheritance").

Encouragement is also afforded by reminding others that self-worth is essential, and that "you have to measure your successes and your failures within, not by anything I or anyone else might think" (Vejar, "Coming Of Age").

Picard's compassion is most evident when he witnesses and telepathically experiences the mental degeneration of a noted statesman, and with *weltschmerz* notes

> It's ironic, isn't it? All this magnificent technology and we find ourselves still susceptible to the ravages of old age. The loss of dignity, the slow betrayal of our bodies by forces we cannot master.

He empathizes totally with the statesman "[i]t's quite difficult. The anguish of the man, the despair pouring out of him, all those feelings, the regrets. I can't stop them. . . . . I can't" (Landau, "Sarek").

Picard also orates eloquently to Shinzon, his own chronologically younger clone who intends to destroy Earth

> The potential to make yourself a better man, and that is what it is to be human. To make yourself more than you are. . . . You still have a choice! Make the right one now!" (Baird, *Star Trek: Nemesis*).

As Robert Rogers says, this demonstrates that "[w]hen an author portrays a protagonist as seeing his double, it is . . . a result of his sense of the division to which the human mind in conflict with itself is susceptible" (29).

Philosopher

Picard is also a philosopher, who has faith in his beliefs and their potentialities, extending these beliefs even to the non-sentient ship's computer. When the latter spontaneously produces a sentient being as an emergent phenomenon, he observes that

> [t]he intelligence that was formed on the *Enterprise* didn't just come out of the ship's systems. It came from . . . our mission records, personal logs, holodeck programs, our fantasies. Now, if our experiences with the *Enterprise* have been honorable, can't we trust that the sum of those experiences will be the same? (Bole, "Emergence")

He also acknowledges the preordainment of ageing, observing "the quest for youth . . . so futile. Age and wisdom have their graces too" (Bowman, "Too Short A Season"), along with the observation that "one of the most important things in a person's life is to feel useful" (Singer, "Relics"). The captain also concedes the ultimate inevitability of death as "a companion who goes with us on the journey—reminds us to cherish every moment because they'll never come again. What we leave behind is not as important as how we've lived" (Carson, *Star Trek: Generations*).

Moreover, Picard also utters one of the very few references by Federation citizens to religion within the canon. When asked "what is death," he answers,

> Some see it as a changing into an indestructible form, forever unchanging. They believe that the purpose of the entire universe is to then maintain that form in an Earth-like garden which will give delight and pleasure through all eternity. On the other hand, there are those who hold to the idea of our blinking into nothingness, with all our experiences, hopes, and dreams merely a delusion.

This attempt to sit on the fence is foiled by the next question when he is asked what it is that he actually believes, leading to something unique in the canon, an acknowledgment of the possibility that existence and consciousness may extend beyond death:

> Considering the marvelous complexity of our universe, its clockwork perfection, its balances of this against that, matter, energy, gravitation, time, dimension, I believe that our existence must be more than either of these philosophies. That what we are goes beyond Euclidian and other practical measuring systems and that our existence is part of a reality beyond what we understand now as reality. (Kolbe, "Where Silence Has Lease")

In this way, Picard displays a Levi-Straussian dyadism,

> the basic opposition . . . : emotion vs. logic. . . . Picard manifests both human emotions and, where necessary, cold logic . . . reminiscent of the role played by the supreme god Odin in Norse mythology, perhaps even more so than that played by the more ambivalent Zeus among his fellow Olympians. (Pilkington 52–53)

Appreciator of the arts

Picard also appreciates the arts, liberally quoting Shakespeare, attending plays and concerts on the *Enterprise*, listening to music, reading books, playing a recorder, and painting.

Harbinger

Above all else, Picard is a harbinger of brighter and better prospects for our species, wishing us a warm "[w]elcome to the twenty-fourth century" (Conway, "The Neutral Zone"). The Trekian future is almost devoid of criminal behavior as in this future, we (humanity) "have learned to detect the seeds of criminal behavior. Capital punishment, in our world, is no longer considered a justifiable deterrent" (Conway, "Justice"). Moreover, petty revenge is frowned upon as "[i]n my century we don't succumb to revenge. We have a more evolved sensibility" (Frakes, *Star Trek: First Contact*). The future is also devoid of scrabbling after material wealth since

> [t]he economics of the future are somewhat different . . . money doesn't exist in the twenty-fourth century. . . . The acquisition of wealth is no longer the driving force in our lives. . . . We work to better ourselves . . . and the rest of humanity. (Frakes, *Star Trek: First Contact*)

Picard also sums up the Epicurean approach to life by citizens of the Federation with their "balanced approach towards life. Never too much, never too little" (Bole, "Liaisons"). However, his optimistic outlook is tempered by the historical realization that "no one can deny that the seed of violence remains within each of us. We must recognize that, because that violence is capable of consuming each of us" (Wiemer, "Violations"), acknowledging our Jungian collective shadow.

Discussion

The character of Captain Jean Luc Picard was portrayed by Patrick Stewart, an accomplished thespian (Schrager 23), who was knighted in 2010 (Rohter). With Stewart, "the *Enterprise* crew was now in the hands of a very British character, fond of quoting Shakespeare and enjoying a cup of Earl Grey tea" (Rheindorf). He brought appropriate gravitas in his role as captain of Starfleet's flagship.

It is abundantly clear that "Picard is the warrior and the leader *par excellence*, a powerful father figure" (Balinisteanu 407) who acts deontologically. Picard (and the United Federation of Planets and Starfleet he represents) tends to pursue the Kantian categorical imperative with its two essential precepts: that one should act only according to that maxim by which one can also will that it would become a universal law, and that one should treat humanity never simply as a means, but always as an end. To the unenlightened, Picard may superficially appear to emulate a "self-righteous do-gooder" (Lynch, "Q-less") since this approach is at odds with Benthamite consequentialism, which holds that the proper course of action is the one that maximizes the overall wellbeing of the masses, irrespective of the outcome for the individual.

Picard practices a hands-off approach, delegating staff to collect information. In this way, he is able "to gather and use data better than any other *Star Trek* captain" (Kimmerly and Webb 13). The captain embodies

> great leadership and management in action. He built an extraordinary crew by trusting, listening, and empowering them to collect and analyze information into organizational knowledge. (Blanken 2)

Once a course of action was determined, often by consensus, he would instruct the crew to "make it so." Thus, the decision-making on board the *Enterprise* is "mediated by the all-wise father-figure" (Pilkington 52).

Picard has been purported to symbolize "the rational, learned white male who is the proper, rational custodian of Dead White Male literature—who can effectively quote from it and glean its insights" (Greven 137). This permitted *Star Trek* to sacrifice him as an icon of humanity, by being assimilated by the Borg who, "by virtue of their ability to erase and to assimilate subjectivity, distinctiveness, and individuality into their collective 'hive' mind, . . . became the ultimate enemy of *Star Trek*'s vision of humanity" (Rheindorf). Assimilation involves the embedding of technological artifacts by "literally and physically penetrating, invading the body" (Rheindorf), a surrogate for the invasion that humanity would have suffered at the hands of the Borg.

Thus, "*Star Trek* reduces this epic struggle to a single white male body" with the "white Anglo-American male . . . made to stand in for all of 'humanity'" (Rheindorf). Picard is naturally rescued by his crew, and thereby, "the process of cyborgization temporarily blurs certain boundaries in order to finally reinforce the socio-cultural authority of the white male body" (Rheindorf), with Picard, the hero with the thousand-strong *Enterprise* manifest, successfully defeating the Borg and leading the ship to new adventures (Frakes, *First Contact*).

His outlook on life is wonderfully buoyant, with his declamation at the end of the last episode: "nothing wild, and the sky's the limit" (Kolbe, "All Good Things"). This optimism offers solace in the promise of a brighter and better future, with Picard as harbinger for this future. Indeed, when returning back to the twenty-fourth century from a time shortly after a third world war, he requests that the crew "lay in a course for the twenty-fourth century. I suspect our future is there waiting for us" (Frakes, *First Contact*), one wherein humanity has enlightened and transcended itself and explores its playground, the entire galaxy, with wonders still to be discovered, echoing our very real aspirations about life and future missions: "I'm sure most will be much more interesting. Let's see what's out there. Engage" (Corey, "Encounter at Farpoint"). ✂

Victor Grech lives in Tal-Qroqq, Malta.

Bibliography

***Star Trek: The Next Generation* Episodes**

"All Good Things . . . ." Dir. Winrich Kolbe. May 1994.
"Attached." Dir. Jonathan Frakes. November 1993.
"Coming of Age." Dir. Mike Vejar. March 1988.
"Conundrum." Dir. Les Landau. February 1992.
"Darmok." Dir. Winrich Kolbe. September 1991.
"Drumhead, The." Dir. Jonathan Frakes. April 1991.
"Emergence." Dir. Cliff Bole. May 1994.
"Encounter at Farpoint." Dir. Allen Corey. September 1987.
"Ensigns of Command, The." Dir. Cliff Bole. October 1989.
"Family." Dir. Les Landau. October 1990.
"First Duty, The." Dir. Paul Lynch. March 1992.
"Hunted, The." Dir. Cliff Bole. January 1990.
"Inheritance." Dir. Robert Scheerer. November 1993.
"Inner Light, The." Dir. Peter Lauritson. June 1992.
"Justice." Dir. James L. Conway. November 1987.
"Liaisons." Dir. Cliff Bole. September 1993.
"Matter of Time, A." Dir. Paul Lynch. November 1991.
"Measure of a Man, The." Dir. Scheerer Robert. February 1989.
"Neutral Zone, The." Dir. James L. Conway. May 1988.

"Offspring, The." Dir. Jonathan Frakes. March 1990.
"Peak Performance." Dir. Robert Scheerer. July 1989.
"Q Who." Dir. Rob Bowman. May 1989.
"Redemption." Dir. Cliff Bole. June 1991.
"Relics." Dir. Alexander Singer. October 1992.
"Sarek." Dir. Les Landau. May 1990.
"Schizoid Man, The." Dir. Les Landau. January 1989.
"Skin of Evil." Dir. Joseph L. Scanlan. April 1988.
"Symbiosis." Dir. Win Phelps. April 1988.
"Too Short a Season." Dir. Rob Bowman. February 1988.
"Unnatural Selection." Dir. Paul Lynch. January 1989.
"Violations." Dir. Robert Wiemer. February 1992.
"When the Bough Breaks." Dir. Kim Manners. February 1988.
"Where Silence Has Lease." Dir. Winrich Kolbe. November 1988.
"Wounded, The." Dir. Chip Chalmers. January 1991.
"Yesterday's Enterprise." Dir. David Carson. February 1990.

***Star Trek: The Next Generation* films**

Star Trek: First Contact. Dir. Jonathan Frakes. Paramount. 1996.
Star Trek: Generations. Dir. David Carson. Paramount. 1994.
Star Trek: Insurrection. Dir. Jonathan Frakes. Paramount. 1998.
Star Trek: Nemesis. Dir. Stuart Baird. Paramount Pictures, 2002.

Other Works Cited

Balinisteanu, Tudor. "The Cyborg Goddess: Social Myths of Women as Goddesses of Technologized Otherworlds." *Feminist Studies* 33.2 (2007).
Blanken, Rhea. "Future Lessons From Future Leaders." *Association Trends* 1534 (2006).
Boisvert, Bill. "In the Arts. Warped drives." *In These Times*. 9 December 1996.
Cranny-Francis, Anne. "Different Identities, Different Voices: Possibilities and Pleasures in Some of Jean Lorrah's *Star Trek* Novels." *Science-Fiction Studies* 24 (1997).
Eberl, Jason T. and Kevin S. Decker. *Star Trek and Philosophy: The Wrath of Kant*. Chicago: Open Court, 2008.
Greven, David. *Gender and Sexuality in Star Trek: Allegories of Desire in the Television Series and Films*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland Press, 2009.
Kimmerly, Paul and David R. Webb, "Leadership, The Final Frontier: Lessons From the Captains of *Star Trek*." C*rossTalk: The Journal of Defense Software Engineering* October (2006).
Lundeen, Jan and Jon Wagner. *Deep Space and Sacred Time: Star Trek in the American Mythos*. Westport: Praegher, 1998.
Pallab, Ghosh. "Klingons on the Starship Bow." *New Scientist* 117.1605.
Pilkington, Ace G. "*Star Trek*: American Dream, Myth and Reality". Ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell. *Star Trek as Myth. Essays on Symbol and Archetype at the Final Frontier*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010.
Piller, Michael. "Mission Overview." *The Next Generation* Season 4 DVD. Special Features.
"Q-Less." Dir. Paul Lynch. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. Paramount. February 1993.
Rheindorf, Markus. "'The Line Must be Drawn Here': The Body as the Final Frontier in Science Fiction Films of the 1990s." *Reconstruction* 7.3.
Roberts, Wess and Bill Ross. *Star Trek: Make It So: Leadership Lessons from Star Trek: The Next Generation*. New York: Pocket Books, 1995.
Rogers, Robert. *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970.
Rohter, Larry. "Knighthood For Stewart." *New York Times* [New York]. 2 January 2010.
Schrager, Adam. *The Finest Crew in the Fleet: The Next Generation's Cast On Screen and Off*. New York: Wolf Valley Books, 1997.

I would like to thank and acknowledge Christina Luckings's transcriptions of the *Star Trek* episodes, available at <www.chakoteya.net>.