

# **The Needs of the Many and the Few**



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I would like to dedicate this thesis to Nina, Chase, and Beatrix

## Abstract

This dissertation presents a unique exploration of Buddhist philosophy portrayed in two iconic films from the *Star Trek* franchise: *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (*TWOK*) and *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (*TSFS*). Through a detailed analysis spanning five chapters, the study delves into how these films embody and reflect various aspects of Buddhist thought, including concepts of karma, interconnectedness, and Right Livelihood.

The first chapter introduces the thesis, outlining the central questions, methodological approach, and the significance of this exploration. The subsequent two chapters are dedicated to *TWOK* and *TSFS*, respectively. Each chapter provides a comprehensive outline of the respective film, followed by an in-depth analysis of its incorporation of Buddhist philosophy. The fourth chapter broadens the discussion, interlinking both movies' themes and philosophical insights, offering a cohesive understanding of their combined narrative arc.

The concluding chapter synthesizes the insights from this analysis, summarizing key findings and their implications. It also proposes directions for future research, highlighting the potential applicability of this study's analytical framework across different fields and narrative forms. This dissertation contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between popular culture, specifically science fiction, and Buddhist philosophy, presenting a novel perspective on the ethical and philosophical dimensions of the *Star Trek* universe.

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# List of Sutta Translations

- AN *The numerical discourses of the Buddha: A complete translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (B. Bodhi, Trans.). (2012). Wisdom Publications.
- AV *The Flower Ornament scripture: A translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (T. Cleary, Trans.). (1993). Shambhala Publications.
- Dhp *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's path of wisdom* (A. Buddharakkhita, Trans.). (2008). Buddhist Publication Society.
- DN *The long discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (M. Walshe, Trans.). (1995). Wisdom Publications.
- Iti *So it was said* (B. Sujato, Trans.). (2020). SuttaCentral.
- MN *The middle length discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* (B. Bodhi and B. Ñāṇamoli, Trans.). (1995). Wisdom Publications.
- SG *Treasury of the true dharma eye: Zen master Dōgen's Shobo Genzo* (K. Tanahashi, Trans.). (2013). Shambhala.
- SN *The connected discourses of the Buddha: A plain translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (B. Bodhi, Trans.). (2000). Wisdom Publications.
- Snp *Mettā: The philosophy and practice of universal love* (Ā. Buddharakkhita, Trans.). (1989). Buddhist Publication Society.
- Ud *Udana and the Itivuttaka: Two classics from the Pāli canon* (J. Ireland, Trans.). (2007). Buddhist Publication Society.
- VI *The teaching of Vimalakīrti: Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (R. A. F. Thurman, Trans.). (2017). 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Religions are notoriously difficult to define (Guthrie, 1996). Still, one of the core elements common to the most popular religions and philosophies on Earth are ethical and moral strictures that guide the practice of adherents. Buddhism, broadly straddling the line between religion and philosophy, complicates the definition of religion (Southwold, 1978). However, the fact that Buddhist practices lead to ethical and moral frameworks is clear, which is sufficient to ask what the ethical and moral frameworks will produce. How these frameworks teach practitioners to treat each other and nonpractioners is valuable from multiple perspectives. Unfortunately, the variety of evolved Buddhist practices makes it impossible to create a monolithic view of how Buddhism may react to a given situation.

Zen Buddhism presents a unique opportunity to understand ethics in Buddhism. Zen is arguably the most common form of Buddhism in the West and is extremely simple in its form compared to more ornate and complex forms that exist. Zen's ethical structure begins with Dōgen, who did not distinguish Zen and other forms of Buddhism (Fox, 1971). In this regard, Zen practices were viewed as what Buddhism was meant to be by Dōgen and his followers. In addition, Zen's moral outcomes are essential because of the influence of Zen in Japanese culture, as well as closely related Buddhist forms like Chan in China and Sōn in Korea.

This dissertation will consider philosophical questions about Buddhism explored through popular culture. Throughout two films, the *Star Trek* franchise asked critical ethical questions about minority rights, personal responsibility, the good of society, and how personal relationships affect ethical decisions. Through the dramatic device of extreme circumstances, *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (*TWOK*) looked at the utilitarian mandate that the needs of the many outweigh those of the few. Dramatic circumstance brings the question back in the following film, *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (*TSFS*). How these questions are asked and answered tells the viewer more about decision-making and ethics than was perhaps intended. Science

fiction has long been used as a medium for exploring the human condition (Hermann, 2018), leading us to conclude that intent is only so important to the discussion.

## 1.1 Star Trek as Ethical Narrative

The *Star Trek* universe consists of 11 television series and 13 films produced since 1964, plus hundreds of books, comic books, and other media.<sup>1</sup> The franchise has primarily focused on an essentially utopian society (Kozinets, 2001), engaging in a peaceful exploration of the galaxy. This includes meeting various alien cultures, some new, some seen before, and often based on different aspects of culture here on Earth. By extrapolating society into something slightly less familiar, *Star Trek* has long served as a mirror for society (Rabitsch, 2018), and has explored ethical issues since the initial unaired pilot, “The Cage.”

Gene Roddenberry created *Star Trek* and gave a moral compass to the show. That compass is benign mainly and represents humanity as compassionate, positivistic, and generally humanistic (Reiter, 2016). This is shown to be driven by the largely post-consumer society shown on the screen. Roddenberry recognized the power of *Star Trek* in telling important stories, having said “The power you have is in a show like STAR TREK, which is considered by many to be a frothy little action-adventure—unimportant, unbelievable and yet watched by a lot of people. You just slip ideas into it. . .” (Gregory, 2000b, p. 25). To that end, Roddenberry used *Star Trek* to tell parables about racism, war, existential threats, and other social questions at the time.

In the two films analyzed here, and often in other media, three primary characters are shown as moral archetypes. First, James T. Kirk, an officer with the rank of admiral, generally follows a more deontological or duty-based ethical framework, particularly when it comes to his responsibility to his crew and the principles of the Federation. His decision-making often aligns with a set of guiding principles rather than purely utilitarian calculations. In contrast, Spock, carrying the rank of captain, often adopts a utilitarian approach as part of his philosophy of pure logic. Finally, Dr. Leonard H. McCoy is usually grounded in immediate emotional and physiological well-being, sometimes challenging Kirk and Spock to consider the human element in their decisions.

Given the amount of media and thematic breadth covered by *Star Trek*, it is unsurprising that many ethical and philosophical works have been based on the show, including some dedicated to narrower aspects. Some highlights include Hughes and Lantos (2001) and Grech (2020), who both consider medical and health ethics through the show. Bulleid (2022) uses *Star Trek* to understand animal ethics. Chaires and Chilton (2003) edited a volume on legal ethics within

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<sup>1</sup>Count current as of 1 October 2023. Also, while *Star Trek* premiered on television on 8 September 1966, production began in late 1964 (Henderson, 1994).

the show. Many other examples look at metaphysics, identity, and philosophy generally. Many examples have specifically alluded to a Buddhist-like mentality that can be attributed to the character of Spock. However, no examples exist of a straightforward Buddhist analysis of *Star Trek*.

*TWOK* and *TSFS* are two particularly strong targets for ethical analysis in *Star Trek*. In *TWOK*, the characters experience dilemmas with the consequences of life or death, and the outcomes are contingent on the characters' decisions. In other places, characters make simple decisions that have more considerable consequences. *TSFS* extends this ethical discussion by introducing new moral complexities that question friendship, loyalty, and communal responsibility.

In the *TWOK* climax, the character of Spock sacrifices himself to save his shipmates. His friend and commanding officer, Captain Kirk, sees him before he dies. In their final meeting, Spock states, "The needs of the many outweigh. . ." Kirk finishes his statement with, "the needs of the few," having been told this by Spock at the start of the film when a much less critical question was posed. This sentiment is also the core of utilitarianism and consequentialism, two frameworks of Western ethics (Sheskin et al., 2018). The film presents this decision as selfless and altruistic, and the character is given a hero's funeral to close out the movie.

In the following film, *TSFS*, Spock's friends, including Kirk, make a series of sacrifices to bring their friend back to life, using the internal logic of the science fiction world. When complete and revived, Spock asks Kirk about this, and Kirk responds, "Because the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many," in front of Spock's friends who have come together and participated in his resurrection. This is taken as a rejection of utilitarianism (Okapal, 2016) with key human traits, especially friendship and compassion, overcoming the utilitarian mandate. This is also interesting because Spock's character is known for his calm and logical thinking, whereas his human friends are known for allowing their emotions to cloud their decisions. The logical character followed the utilitarian approach, and the emotional humans did not, highlighting the value of human thinking.

This dissertation will reconsider this assessment. Though the full depth of the consequences of saving their friend would not be felt until the next film in the series, *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home (TVH)*, it is self-evident from the films that, at all decision points, a strictly utilitarian decisional framework prevailed. This is because the information known and unknown to the characters at the time of each decision gives them the ability to make a risk-weighted decision, recognizing that risk is the combination of the outcome and probability. On the balance of those risks, the decision each character took at each time was sensible and reflects a utilitarian or consequentialist approach. That is, the decisions were justifiable.

Formally stated, the research question this dissertation will ask and answer is, "Under a Zen Buddhist ethical code, how would a person measure and weigh risk when considering decisions



in extreme circumstances?” Considering the question of how to respond to ethical questions may be relatively straightforward. Adding the consideration of risk, the measurement, and the analysis of possible outcomes complicate the question. Risk-weighted decision-making is an important element of economic analysis, and sociological aspects will play into the analysis. Understanding the risk-weighted aspect of ethical decision-making gives the reader the power to imagine a more practical application of ethics by grounding the decisions in a real-world scenario rather than in an abstraction free of complications.

## 1.2 Introduction to Zen Buddhism

Originating in China as a distinct sect within Mahayana Buddhism, Zen Buddhism later found fertile ground for development in countries like Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Unique among Buddhist traditions, Zen emphasizes the practice of *zazen*, or seated meditation, as well as the use of *kōans*, which are enigmatic questions or statements that aid in deepening one’s understanding and practice. The primary aim of Zen is to foster a direct, experiential realization of truth, which in turn informs ethical behavior. This ethical framework resembles other religion’s ethical frameworks, though the specifics may differ along with the historical background surrounding those specifics.

Ethical guidance in Zen, as in other Buddhist traditions, is provided by the Noble Eightfold Path consisting of:

- Right View,
- Right Resolve,
- Right Speech,
- Right Action,
- Right Livelihood,
- Right Effort,
- Right Mindfulness, and
- Right Concentration.

Each component of the Eightfold Path serves as an ethical compass, directing moral decision-making. These components are often broken into three subdivisions focusing on internal knowledge, or wisdom, moral mandates, and mediative practice.

Right View and Right Resolve, the wisdom division, function as the intellectual foundation for ethical behavior. Right View establishes the recognition that actions produce consequences,

a notion underpinned by the principle of conditioned arising (Makransky, 2003). Right Resolve acts as the volitional complement to Right View, inspiring actions aligned with the understanding of causal ethics (Fuller, 2004, pp. 42–47).

The moral mandates of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood offer practical guidelines for day-to-day conduct, advocating for truthfulness, non-harmfulness, and responsible living. These components substantiate Right Resolve, encouraging individuals to align their speech, actions, and professional life with their ethical understanding (Marques, 2012). Though only three statements, the moral mandates comprise a broadly applicable set of circumstances.

Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration focus on cultivating the inner discipline needed for ethical living through mediative practice. These elements serve as the adhesive that integrates Right View and Right Resolve into a cohesive practice and serve as a constant reminder on the application of the other folds in the Noble Eightfold Path in the practitioner's life.

In addition to the Eightfold Path, Zen Buddhism also promotes the Five Precepts as a fundamental moral framework: refrain from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and the consumption of intoxicants (Kohn, 1994). These precepts are often considered the baseline ethical standard for lay practitioners and are thought to contribute to positive behaviors ranging from personal mental well-being (Ariyabuddhiphongs & Jaiwong, 2010) to global peace (Vajira, 2019).

Finally, Zen ethical practice is shaped by the concepts of karma, *anattā*, and *saṃsāra*. Karma is an ethical motivator, establishing that actions result in corresponding consequences (Lancaster, 2013). The principle of *anattā*, or non-self, emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings. *Saṃsāra*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, provides a cosmological context that underscores the long-term ethical implications of one's actions (Loy, 1983).

Like all religious traditions, Zen Buddhism provides a moral and ethical framework for practitioners that can provide a harmonious and peaceful existence for all. Collectively, the Five Precepts, the Eightfold Path, and the concepts of karma, *anattā*, and *saṃsāra* provide a comprehensive and accessible ethical framework that is both straightforward and adaptable for practitioners at all levels. In addition, the ethical framework itself transcends time and space being applicable worldwide, even after more than two millennia.

While dealing with personal ethics in the context of friendship, we can extrapolate Zen ethics in this case to address broader questions. The most important of those questions are those surrounding human rights (Sevilla, 2010). That application moves us from the realm of individual decision-making into the realm of economics, public policy, and government action. While this may seem like a large step, Eastern philosophies have been applied to government action for millennia. Daoism has long been associated with smaller and less

involved government (Lai, 2007). On the other hand, Confucianism has long been connected to more extensive and more involved governments (Greer & Lim, 1998). Accordingly, it is not unreasonable to create a Zen-based system for good governance based on applying Zen ethics to questions of the relationship of individuals to each other.

### 1.3 Roadmap of this Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The initial chapter serves as an introduction, establishing the central question, methodological approach, and the rationale behind this exploration. The second chapter delves into 'Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan' (*TWOK*), providing a detailed outline of the film and examining instances of Buddhist philosophy within its narrative. Similarly, the third chapter focuses on 'Star Trek III: The Search for Spock' (*TSFS*), offering an outline accompanied by an analysis of Buddhist elements present in the film.

The fourth chapter expands the scope, engaging in a comprehensive discussion that interconnects and analyzes the broader themes and philosophical implications of both movies. The fifth and final chapter presents a conclusion that synthesizes the findings of this study. It also suggests avenues for future research, exploring how the analytical framework employed here could be applied to various fields and other narrative contexts.

There are some risks associated with this dissertation. First and foremost is the possibility of encountering multiple divergent conclusions in the ethical analysis, or perhaps no conclusion at all (Whitehill, 1987). For instance, not all claimed practitioners of a single philosophy are assured of coming to identical conclusions. Different phrasings and thinking could lead to different answers. Another substantial risk comes from a potential failure by the author to apply Zen ethics consistently. Both of these can be mitigated by narrowing the potential avenues for ethical analysis and closing analytical pathways to consideration. We may use a smaller field of ethical and moral principles to perform the analysis. Fortunately, the information about *Star Trek*, the famous cultural framing for the analysis, is widely available and analyzed from other sources and standpoints. Therefore, there are reference points across ideological spectra for comparison.

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more extensive and more involved governments (Greer & Lim, 1998). Accordingly, it is not unreasonable to create a Zen-based system for good governance based on the application of Zen ethics to questions of the relationship of individuals to each other.

Through this analysis, we will better understand the application of Buddhist ethics to real-world decision-making through the useful lens of a well-known and beloved film franchise and hopefully learn to live better and treat others better. Further, the analysis of risk-weighted questions makes aspects of this dissertation applicable to general ethics, economics, public policy, and numerous other fields. This can also lead to frameworks for engaging in *Realpolitik* among Western and East Asian nations. Regardless of the application, the analysis will better understand our decisions and how they affect our friends and ourselves.

In summary, the *Star Trek* universe presents a captivating ethical narrative that has entertained millions and provoked thoughtful engagement with ethical and moral dilemmas. While the franchise has been analyzed through various ethical lenses, it offers an as-yet untapped reservoir for Zen Buddhist ethical analysis, promising new insights into its complex moral universe.

# Chapter 2

## A Buddhist Analysis of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*

*Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (*TWOK*) was released in 1982, with a screenplay by Harve Bennett and Jack B. Sowards and direction by Nicholas Meyer (Schultes, 2016). The film inadvertently sets up a three-part series that explores broad philosophical issues on the relationship between self and society. Two critical decisions affecting the course of action in *TWOK* are justified ethically. Both times, the decider is Spock, who invokes the same logic to justify his actions, “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.” This fundamentally utilitarian logic has been criticized on many levels (Littmann, 2016).

This chapter will analyze those decisions from multiple angles. First, this chapter presents a plot synopsis detailing the two ethically-based decisions and places them into the greater context of events. Second, this chapter will provide a high-level overview of Buddhist principles that are touched upon in the film. The third section will discuss key Buddhist themes. Finally, this chapter will close with a discussion of consequences and karma.

### 2.1 Plot Synopsis

*TWOK* continues the story within the *Star Trek*-universe and specifically follows-up on the 1967 episode “Space Seed.” In this episode, the USS *Enterprise*, led by Captain James T. Kirk,<sup>1</sup> encounters a ship of humans in suspended animation. These individuals, led by Khan Noonien Sing,<sup>2</sup> are released from suspension by the *Enterprise* crew. Following a Khan-led attempt to capture the *Enterprise*, Khan and his people are left on an uninhabited planet to create whatever society they choose.

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<sup>1</sup>Played by William Shatner

<sup>2</sup>Played by Ricardo Montalbán.

In *TWOK*, the story picks up 18 years after the events of “Space Seed.” At this time, Kirk has been promoted to admiral, and his former first officer, Spock,<sup>3</sup> has been promoted to captain of the *Enterprise*. Spock is an alien known as Vulcan, a species known for their superior logical reasoning and lack of emotion. During a training mission and routine inspection of the *Enterprise* by Kirk, Khan escapes his planet, takes control of a starship called the USS *Reliant*, and leads an attack on Regula I, a scientific research facility. Khan steals from Regula I the Genesis Device, which can rapidly turn a planet unsuitable for life into an inhabitable planet but destroys everything in its path, including existing life.

Upon losing contact with Regula I, the *Enterprise* is tasked with the investigation. Spock immediately offers command of the *Enterprise* to Kirk, who initially refuses it. Spock reminds him of the circumstances and that logic mandates his actions, saying, “[L]ogic clearly dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.” Kirk adds, “Or the one.” This logical premise is a central theme in the movie.

During the movie’s climax, a battle between the *Enterprise* and *Reliant* rages and Khan attempts to detonate the Genesis Device while both ships are in the Mutara Nebula. The *Enterprise* cannot escape due to a loss of power and will be destroyed by the detonation. Without comment and unnoticed, Spock leaves the bridge of the *Enterprise* and goes toward the engineering section. There, he is told a glass-walled chamber contains enough radiation to kill anyone who enters it, but that is necessary to restore power. Spock restores power, and the *Enterprise* escapes. Kirk rushes to engineering upon realizing Spock’s absence. There, Spock is dying and says through the glass, “Don’t grieve, Admiral. It is logical. The needs of the many outweigh. . .” Kirk finishes for him, “The needs of the few.” Spock adds, “Or the one.” Shortly after that, Spock dies and is given a space funeral, where the body is ejected from the *Enterprise* and lands on the planet created by the detonation, the Genesis Planet.

## 2.2 Buddhist Principles in Play

The Five Precepts of Buddhism serve as an intricate framework for ethical exploration in *TWOK*. Among these ethical tenets, the first principle, which advocates respect and non-harm to all living beings, manifests in various ways throughout the film. Khan Noonien Singh, the film’s primary antagonist, flagrantly violates this doctrine by engaging in multiple acts of violence that result in loss of life. Conversely, the climactic ignition of the Genesis Device offers a nuanced ethical dilemma: it simultaneously annihilates and generates life forms, raising existential questions about the sanctity and creation of life.

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<sup>3</sup>Played by Leonard Nimoy.

Within the intricate ethical landscape of the film, Right Action and Right Intent—central elements of the Noble Eightfold Path—emerge as focal points. Sariputta elucidates Right Action as “Abstention from killing, abstention from stealing, abstention from illicit sexual indulgence,” while describing Right Intent as “[t]he resolve for renunciation, for freedom from ill will, for harmlessness” (MN 141). Beyond these foundational tenets, the concept expands to embrace a broader sense of justice, as exemplified in the Flower Ornament Sutra. Vajrapani discusses the benevolent motivations and actions of enlightening beings, emphasizing the Mahayana and Zen emphasis on universal goodwill (AV 26):

The enlightening beings also become free from malevolence and anger; they are kind to all beings, desirous of their welfare, sympathetic, solicitous, loving, protective of all, attentive to what is good for them. Giving up everything of the nature of the blemish of anger, resentment, and unfriendliness, opposition, and attack inflamed by ill will and hostility, the enlightening beings are to reflect on what is beneficial, considering what is called for by kindness for the welfare and happiness of all beings.

The essence of these principles transcends mere respect for life, encompassing the holistic well-being of all sentient beings. The narrative extends an ethical imperative to avoid causing physical harm and foster a positive emotional and social environment. The film casts this overarching moral vision into sharp relief through the ethical conundrums faced by its characters, notably Captain Kirk.

Khan serves as another ethical touchstone, evoking parallels with the literary character Ahab from Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (Melville, 1851). This alignment has been previously explored in scholarly discussions (Kelley, 2007; Modarres & Bayer, 2017; Hinds, 1997), drawing connections between the novel and Zen ethical paradigms (Herman, 2014, pp. 82–83):

Ishmael refers to the ocean as “all-contributed and all-receptive,” a phrase which bears a remarkable similarity to Dogen Zenji’s term “Self-Receiving and Self-Employing Awareness.” In the “Jijyu Zanmai” section of *Bendowa*, he writes about the benefits of virtuous activity—that all of one’s actions extend outward to affect the entire universe, and the universe “resonates back to you and helps you inconceivably.” Thus, our actions of body, speech and mind can be said to operate much as Newton’s Third Law of Motion: the energy we put out into the world, this is precisely what we get back. In Ahab’s case, a vicious circle is created. . .

In this interpretation, space-like Melville’s ocean—is a karmic expanse that reflects the actions of individuals. Khan, whose malevolent deeds lead to his isolation on Ceti Alpha V,

embodies this principle. His vengeful quest culminates in a karmic closure, as his actions backfire through the activation of the Genesis device, leading to his demise.

Another defining characteristic of Zen is the dual focus on compassion and wisdom and their interconnectedness (Southwold, 1978; Mosig, 1989). Vimalakīrti addresses this connection when asked where his family, servants, and others were, begins by describing his mother as the “transcendence of wisdom” and daughters as compassion (VI 7):

Of the true bodhisattvas,  
The mother is the transcendence of wisdom,  
The father is the skill in liberative technique;  
The leaders are born of such parents.

Their wife is the joy in the Dharma,  
Love and compassion are their daughters,  
The Dharma and the truth are their sons,  
And their home is deep thought on the meaning of voidness.

The joy of life and the power of meditation are the rest of the family, but this shows that Vimalakīrti finds wisdom and compassion among the most critical aspects of being. Compassion and wisdom lead to empathy, understanding, and altruistic action in Zen. Thus, it springs both understanding of natural reality and making morally just choices.

During the initial inspection of the ship, Kirk meets a young trainee, Peter Preston,<sup>4</sup> an engineer’s mate. He is on his first training voyage, which we understand he approaches with both excitement and trepidation. He also approaches his work with a sense of duty. Following Khan’s first attack on the *Enterprise*, Preston is gravely injured. He is described as having “stayed at his post when the trainees ran.” Kirk encounters Preston on his deathbed, leading to this conversation:

Preston: Is the word given, Admiral?  
Kirk: The word is given. . . Warp speed.  
Preston: Aye.

This scene ends with Preston’s death. Preston’s duty to his shipmates, to help protect them from harm, and sacrifice embody compassion. We also learn that Preston is the chief engineer’s nephew. In the context of social roles and relationships, personal duties, and responsibilities

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<sup>4</sup>Played by Ike Eisenmann.



can be seen as expressions of these broader ethical principles. For example, in the Buddha's teachings, parents' responsibilities toward children and vice versa are discussed (DN 31). The Buddha also spoke to kings and rulers about their duties toward their subjects, emphasizing the importance of ruling justly and compassionately (DN 5, 26), and we see that in Kirk's compassion in comforting the dying man by giving the order requested.

Wisdom and compassion, however, do not always go hand in hand. The events of "Space Seed" that presage this film demonstrate Kirk's compassion and possibly a lack of wisdom. Rather than executing Khan and his crew, or imprisoning them indefinitely, gives them a world where they could thrive. This is an expression of compassion because it allows for the possibility of redemption and self-determination for Khan and his people.

However, the question of wisdom is more complicated in an administrative context (Fitz-Patrick, 2005). Wisdom involves compassion and a deep understanding of the consequences of one's actions. Leaving Khan on a habitable planet without oversight lacks wisdom for several reasons. Firstly, the potential for Khan to use the planet as a base for future malevolent actions was not adequately considered. Secondly, there was a failure to assess the ethical and karmic implications adequately. The planet's subsequent environmental collapse and the suffering it caused Khan and his followers show that the action had significant unintended consequences (Habito, 2014).

The decision can be seen as particularly unwise when considering the Zen principle of interconnectedness. In Buddhism, all actions have consequences that ripple through the world. By not considering the long-term implications of leaving Khan on Ceti Alpha V, Kirk failed to acknowledge this interconnectedness, leading to significant suffering later.

## 2.3 Key Buddhist Themes

In the landscape of the film, certain pivotal moments stand out as ethical crucibles. These are not just turning points in the storyline; they serve as windows into the moral frameworks guiding the characters. These moments provide an arena for the clash of principles, responsibilities, and the human condition. This section aims to dissect these key ethical dilemmas, elevating the analysis beyond mere storytelling elements.

For instance, Spock's character is defined as the pinnacle of emotionless logic and rationality (Sorensen, 1991). Accordingly, we expect the character to do the most rational thing in any particular circumstance. At the film's climax, as described before, Spock sacrifices himself to save the rest of the ship, justifying this sacrifice to Kirk: "The needs of the many outweigh [the needs of the few]." While this is a critical statement, the underlying logic is more important. Typically viewed as a utilitarian statement, Spock's sacrifice conforms to a deontological

perspective, from a principle of the duty one has toward others, especially in a disaster setting (Kane-Urrabazo, 2007).

It also conforms to virtue ethics as we can see Spock's courage and wisdom in the sacrifice (Papouli, 2019). And this is the underlying character alignment the Spock character had shown up until that point. The driving factors in the decision were courage and wisdom, drawn from pure rationality and logic. He understood he could withstand the radiation longer than anyone else and did not ask permission to take on the task. Instead, he made the decision and carried it out without regard to the consequences to himself and only concerning the consequences to others.

Though Vulcan religion has been compared to Zen Buddhism (Worland, 1988), it also resembles Daoism, which is natural given the syncretism between Buddhism and Daoism that led to Chan Buddhism and its progeny (Guang, 2013). However, Spock's actions draw specifically from Buddhist principles in this case. First, we note that Right Action is displayed in his sacrifice. We might normally consider Right Action and Right Intent as prohibitions against harming others. However, extending that prohibition to the notion that Right Action and Right Intent mandate taking action to prevent harm when one can do so is trivial. Sacrificing oneself to save others is likely to be the ultimate act of *mettā* (Snp 1.8):

Just as with her own life  
A mother shields from hurt  
Her own son, her only child,  
Let all-embracing thoughts  
For all beings be yours.

And in this *mettā*, we see Spock's compassion for his shipmates. As seen when Cunda had an audience with the Buddha (AN 10.176),

Here, someone, having abandoned the destruction of life, abstains from the destruction of life. With the rod and weapon laid aside, conscientious and kindly, he dwells compassionately toward all living beings.

The compassion is shown to its fullest, and the action is one of pure love from a character defined by emotionlessness. Through frameworks such as deontological ethics, utilitarianism, and Zen Buddhism, we explored the rich tapestry of moral considerations that influenced his decision. While from a deontological perspective, Spock's action aligns with a duty-based morality; his choice also resonates with Zen Buddhist principles of compassion and wisdom.

Another area of thematic questions surrounds dual-use technologies. Dual-use technology is technology, inventions, software, and research that can have both military and civilian

applications (Forge, 2010). The term is often used in modern research communities, and the Genesis device is an example of that in *TWOK*. The device takes matter and “reorganizes” it into a planet with a functional biosphere. Importantly, it can start from any building blocks the device is introduced during a search for a completely and totally lifeless planet to test on. Turning a totally barren rock into a potentially inhabitable world would benefit potential settlers who are looking for worlds to colonize.

Because of the way the device reorganizes matter, it would destroy a habitable or inhabited world as it builds its new biosphere. In this regard, the Genesis device can be considered a weapon, which is discussed at length in the films. If the device were applied to a planet with cities and a population, these would not be destroyed as though bombed out. The existence of any previous life would be erased entirely. Creating this type of dual-use technology raises important ethical questions that mirror many of the questions we see today.

While chemical and nuclear weapons were unknown at the time of the Buddha, dual-use technology already existed. Forging could make weapons or could make plows. Knowing the Right Intent for doing anything, and therefore, using anything is explained in the opening of the Dhammapada (Dhp 1.1).

Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts suffering follows him like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox.

More than this, the Genesis device is an almost perfect metaphor for impermanence and the rebirth cycle. *Samsāra*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, is characterized by impermanence, *annica*, and suffering, *dukkha*. In this cycle, matter and energy are not destroyed but constantly in flux and transformation. The Genesis device, which reorganizes matter to create new life, can be seen as a technological instantiation of this cycle, capable of both creation and destruction.

Furthermore, the device’s ability to create a paradise-like planet could symbolize *nibbāna*—a state beyond suffering and the ceaseless cycle of rebirth. Just as attaining *nibbāna* is considered by Buddhists to be the cessation of the *samsāra* cycle, the Genesis device promises an end to barren, lifeless conditions on a planetary scale, offering new beginnings. However, those new beginnings must be taken care of like any other resource, lest the cycle begin again. The Buddha comments on this transition at Anāthapiṇḍika (Ud 8.3):

There is, bhikkhus, a not-born, a not-brought-to-being, a not-made, a not-conditioned. If, bhikkhus, there were no not-born, not- brought-to-being, not-made, not-conditioned, no escape would be discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, conditioned. But since there is a not-born, a not-brought-to-being, a not-made, a

not-conditioned, therefore an escape is discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, conditioned.

This seems to echo the ethos of the Genesis device, which promises to transform barren celestial bodies into paradisaical ecosystems free from hardship, conflict, and scarcity, essentially enabling the planet to attain a state akin to *nibbāna*. Intriguingly, although the name Genesis suggests Judeo-Christian origins, the device's underlying concept aligns more closely with Buddhist philosophy than with Hebrew tradition.

## 2.4 Consequences and Karma

Kirk experiences loss in several forms during this film. The first of these comes from meeting his estranged son. While we know that Kirk “stayed away” per the request of Carol Marcus, which does not relieve Kirk of both his duty and desires as a father to support his child. In this case, Right Action may seem to contradict itself. That is, a parent is forced to ask if the Right Action to honor Carol Marcus's request, or is the Right Action to commit to raising his son directly. The Buddha addresses the importance of parental roles in raising children (DN 31), along with the associated social roles, and clarifies that a parent's primary duty is to the child.

There's an associated responsibility to one's crewmates as well, as part of the Six Directions (DN 31):

There are five ways in which a man should minister to his friends and companions as the northern direction: by gifts, by kindly words, by looking after their welfare, by treating them like himself, and

While part of a framework about the way one supports and is supported by a community, it shows specifically that others matter and the risk to the *Enterprise* would trigger Kirk's sense that he must protect his ship, and therefore his crew, from danger. This is heightened during the death of Preston, as discussed earlier. Finally, and most significantly, Kirk would be deeply affected by the loss of Spock.

Within the narrative of *TWOK*, karma manifests as the repercussions of Kirk's past actions. We have discussed before how the relationship between Kirk and Khan, at this point, is based on Kirk's exile of Khan and his people on Ceti Alpha V. In that act, Kirk chose not to bring Khan to justice for his actions against the *Enterprise*. Kirk's actions come back to attack him. However, the exile itself aligns with Kirk's general ethos and situational ethics. As a result, Khan's return means more than retribution for Khan and his people; it is emblematic of all the times Kirk bent the rules to achieve what he believed was a better outcome.

Kirk's journey throughout *TWOK* also demonstrates the concept of *annica*, impermanence. The death of Spock, the near loss of the *Enterprise*, and the loss of the *Reliant* are obvious allusions to loss. But impermanence also allows for the creation of new things, which is seen through Kirk's new relationship with his son and the creation of the Genesis planet. Zen Buddhism reminds us that the acceptance of impermanence is core to overcoming suffering, as the Zen practices of *zazen* and *kōan* practice both focus on impermanence. Kirk experiences the changes we all go through, and the film serves as a reminder of the impermanence of everything from lives to planets. Dōgen refers alludes to this, saying (SG 23):

Impermanence expounds, practices, and realizes impermanence; all this is impermanence. Manifesting a [buddha] body and expounding dharma with the Buddha body—this is Buddha nature. Further, it is to manifest a tall dharma body and to manifest a short dharma body. Constantly being a sage is impermanence. Constantly being an ordinary person is impermanence.

No matter Kirk's actions, impermanence will be the root of what happens around him.

The emotional anguish that permeates Kirk's experiences in the film encapsulates the Zen concept of *dukkha*. As he grapples with loss and the ripples of past actions, the story illustrates the pervasive nature of suffering. However, Zen posits that through suffering, one can journey toward enlightenment by acknowledging the source of *dukkha* and transcending it. The film subtly probes whether Kirk's hardships are a path to profound personal growth, as he learns to navigate grief, responsibility, and the consequences of his choices, potentially steering him toward a more profound understanding of the self and the universe.

In facing these personal losses, the Zen principles of compassion, *karuṇā*, and detachment offer a distinct ethical perspective. While Zen espouses deep compassion for all beings, it also teaches detachment from the ego and the material world. Through this lens, Kirk's attachment to his crew, son, and ship could be seen as points of personal growth if he embraces detachment and compassion without clinging. The narrative doesn't just challenge Kirk to accept loss; it invites him to find an equilibrium between caring deeply for others and not being defined by these attachments. This equilibrium is crucial in Zen practice, as it leads to equanimity, allowing one to act with wisdom and compassion in the face of life's inescapable vicissitudes.

Spock's influence on the *Star Trek* universe is likely immeasurable. He provides a counterpoint to other characters, and his deterministic reasoning is always predictable. He serves as a moral exemplar for, at least, a purely logical morality. Moreover, his character's half-human and half-Vulcan biology leaves him out of place among both cultures. Consequently, his struggle with identity and his role in society further provide a beacon for viewers to sense themselves in the story.

Because of this, Spock's death hits the viewer particularly hard. The character is relatable and instantly recognizable in any context because of his ever so slightly alien appearance, exemplified by the pointed ears and slightly green-tinged skin. Spock's sacrifice has become a model of altruism and, as in life, represents the fundamental ethos of the series: rationality.

Spock's choice to face death for the salvation of his friends is a testament to *Prajñā*, the clear-sighted wisdom that recognizes reality's more profound truths. His wisdom reveals an understanding that life and death are not mutually exclusive but are interrelated parts of a greater whole. In deciding from such a profound level of awareness, Spock reflects on aspects of the Bodhisattva ideal—letting go of his attachment to life for the welfare of his companions. This act is a quieter, yet still resonant, echo of the principles valued in Zen philosophy.

Narratively, Spock's death sets in motion the events of *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock (TSFS)*. Accordingly, we see both dependent origination and karma within Buddhism in these consequences. By embracing the inevitability of his demise for the salvation of others, Spock's self-sacrifice becomes an echo of the karmic cycle. These aspects will be discussed in the next chapter.

# Chapter 3

## A Buddhist Analysis of *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*

*Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (*TSFS*) was released in 1984, directed by Leonard Nimoy with a screenplay by Harve Bennett, serves as the middle installment in an unintentional trilogy that probes deeply into ethical dilemmas concerning individuality and communal responsibilities. In contrast to its predecessor, the pivotal decisions in this film are dispersed among various characters, including Kirk and McCoy, who are driven by the quest to honor and preserve Spock's legacy. Yet, the ethical compass of the film is still very much aligned with Spock's utilitarian principle: "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few," although this axiom is tested and nuanced in new ways.

This chapter will analyze those decisions from multiple angles. First, this chapter presents a plot synopsis detailing the two ethically-based decisions and places them into the greater context of events. Second, this chapter will provide a high-level overview of Buddhist principles that are touched upon in the film. The third section will discuss key Buddhist themes. Finally, this chapter will close with a discussion of consequences and karma.

### 3.1 Plot Synopsis

*TSFS* continues the narrative within the Star Trek universe and serves as a direct sequel to *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (*TWOK*). The film begins with the USS *Enterprise*, captained by Admiral James Kirk, returning to Earth following the cataclysmic events involving Khan Noonien Singh and the Genesis device. Kirk is grappling with losing his closest friend, Spock, who sacrificed his life to save the ship and its crew.

The film introduces a new set of challenges as the crew learns that Spock's consciousness, or *katra*, has been transferred to McCoy. McCoy begins to exhibit strange behaviors, seemingly channeling Spock at times, and finds himself in legal trouble due to his attempts to charter a ship to the Genesis Planet, where Spock's body had landed post-funeral. Meanwhile, Sarek, Spock's father, visits Kirk and informs him of the Vulcan ritual to reunite Spock's *katra* and body, necessitating a journey to the Genesis Planet.

Ignoring Starfleet orders, Kirk and his crew decide to hijack the now nearly decommissioned USS *Enterprise* to retrieve Spock's body from the Genesis Planet. Simultaneously, a Klingon ship led by Commander Kruge is also *en route* to the Genesis Planet, having learned of the planet-creating Genesis Device and wishing to weaponize it.

Upon arriving, Kirk and his crew find that the Genesis Planet is unstable, a flaw resulting from the hasty manner in which the Genesis Device had been activated. They also discover that Spock's body has been regenerated by the planet and aged to a young adult, though he is without his consciousness, which is trapped in McCoy. A skirmish ensues with the Klingons, during which the *Enterprise* is crippled, and Kirk's son, David, is killed on the planet. Knowing that the ship cannot survive another battle, Kirk activates the ship's self-destruct sequence. The crew abandons ship just before it explodes, taking a Klingon boarding party with it.

Kirk and his team, now on the planet, manage to overpower the remaining Klingons. They take control of the Klingon ship and use it to carry Spock and McCoy back to Vulcan. There, in a ritual called the *Fal-tor-pan*, Spock's *katra* is successfully transferred from McCoy back to its rightful body. The film's ending scene features a resurrected but still disoriented Spock slowly recognizes Kirk and the others, and expressing gratitude, suggesting that not only has his life been restored but so has his friendship with Kirk.

## 3.2 Buddhist Principles in Play

Opening with the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Livelihood extends beyond choosing a non-harmful job to encompass actions that benefit all beings. It advocates living in a way that aligns one's personal values with the collective good, ensuring ethical and compassionate living in all actions, big and small.

In *TSFS*, this principle is vividly illustrated when Kirk and his crew defy Starfleet's orders to rescue Spock. This act embodies Right Livelihood by prioritizing moral integrity over rigid rule-following. Their decision, driven by compassion and loyalty, demonstrates the essence of Right Livelihood: ethical integrity that transcends occupational obligations. This is implicitly acknowledged by Kirk during the theft of the *Enterprise* when he says to his crew, "Gentlemen, your work today has been outstanding and I intend to recommend you all for promotion. . . in



whatever fleet we end up serving.” Here, Kirk reminds everyone that what they have done is putting their careers at risk; but all have prioritized their friend’s well-being, even in death.

Kirk’s internal conflict between his duty to Starfleet and loyalty to his friend highlights the film’s exploration of ethical conduct. His decisions, especially the choice to save Spock, are analyzed through Buddhist concepts of right action and compassion, adding depth to his character’s ethical journey. The importance of friends and their role in following the Noble Eightfold path is described by the Buddha, who said, “And here’s another way to understand how good friends are the whole of the spiritual life” (SN 3.18).

The film adeptly portrays the tension between personal and collective duty, notably in the crew’s unanimous decision to support Kirk’s rescue mission. This narrative choice reflects the complex balance between individual desires and community well-being, resonating with Buddhist teachings on the interconnected nature of existence and the importance of ethical decision-making in both personal and professional spheres.

Right Livelihood, a fundamental aspect of the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path, represents the ethical dimension of our professional and personal lives. It is not merely about choosing a job that avoids causing harm; it extends to engaging in work and actions that actively contribute to the welfare and well-being of all. This principle dictates that one’s means of earning a living should be legally and morally blameless and beneficial to the larger community. In the broader scope of Buddhist ethics, Right Livelihood transcends the confines of occupation, encompassing every action and decision that shapes our lives. It is an invitation to live in a way that harmonizes one’s personal values with the collective good, ensuring that our daily activities, from the most mundane to the most significant, are aligned with the path of ethical and compassionate living.

In *TSFS* several pivotal scenes poignantly embody the principle of Right Livelihood. A notable instance is when Kirk and his crew choose to disobey Starfleet’s orders to rescue Spock, a decision fraught with moral and ethical complexities. While jeopardizing their careers, this act exemplifies Right Livelihood by prioritizing compassion and loyalty over rigid adherence to rules. The crew’s decision reflects a deep commitment to actions that, while professionally risky, are morally and ethically sound, adhering to the Buddhist tenet of minimizing harm and promoting the greater good. Their choice to act in accordance with their conscience, despite potential professional repercussions, demonstrates the essence of Right Livelihood, where ethical integrity transcends occupational obligations, resonating with the Buddhist pursuit of a harmonious and beneficial way of life.

In *TSFS* the narrative momentum is significantly propelled by the characters’ adherence to or divergence from their professional and ethical standards, reflecting the principle of Right Livelihood. The crew’s choices, particularly in defying Starfleet directives, advance the plot and

mark pivotal points in their personal development, underscoring the profound impact of ethical decision-making. These moments vividly illustrate the interconnectedness of actions and their broader repercussions, echoing Zen teachings on the cascading effects of our choices. Through its narrative and character arcs, the film prompts viewers to reflect on the complexities inherent in ethical decisions, both in professional and personal spheres. It serves as a compelling narrative framework, encouraging audiences to consider how adherence to principles like Right Livelihood can profoundly influence one's path and impact the larger tapestry of life.

*TSFS* delves into the intricate themes of moral duty and responsibility, concepts that hold significant weight in both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. The narrative weaves these ideas into its core, challenging characters to navigate the labyrinth of ethical conduct and responsibility towards others. This exploration is not just a narrative device but a reflection of the profound philosophical underpinnings found in Buddhism, which emphasizes ethical behavior and the responsibility individuals have towards each other. The film poses critical questions about the nature of Right Action and the complexities inherent in moral obligations, engaging the audience in a deeper contemplation of what it means to act ethically in a universe often defined by moral ambiguity.

### 3.3 Key Buddhist Themes

Dr. Leonard McCoy's journey in *TSFS* provides challenges to interpret because of the complexity of the discussion of self and not-self. McCoy will end up providing a muddled take on the doctrine, but one that is worth considering because it forces the viewer to ask questions about the relationship between self, identity, and experience, as well as how these interact to form the not-self described by the Buddha.

The doctrine of not-self, or *anattā*, has a special place in this film. *Anattā* is the idea that there is no self, as is typically understood. That is, no permanent being makes up our static and unchanging identity. *Anattā* itself arises directly from the idea of impermanence. That which we are in any given instant is impermanent and will change from moment to moment, changed, for better and worse, but the circumstances of each moment (SN 22.59):

“Therefore, bhikkhus, any kind of form whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all form should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

“Any kind of feeling whatsoever... Any kind of perception whatsoever... Any kind of volitional formations whatsoever... Any kind of consciousness whatsoever,

whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all consciousness should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

Accordingly, the self that exists in that instant ceases to exist while a new self forms for the next.

We see a tension between self and not-self throughout this film by the existence of Spock. As noted before, just before his sacrifice, in the previous film, Spock touches an unconscious McCoy’s face and says only, “Remember.” Spock’s alien species can perform something called a mind-meld (Gregory, 2000a), a way to transfer directly from one mind to another. It is unclear exactly what happened until *TSFS* when McCoy begins acting strangely. He breaks into Spock’s quarters, speaks like him, and tries to barter his way to the Genesis planet. McCoy and Spock seem to be sharing a body and fighting for control over it, as Spock transferred his *katra*, or living spirit, to McCoy just before his death.

This dual identity simultaneously captures the essence of not-self and rejects it, both in some subtle ways. The idea that Spock could move his *katra* to McCoy suggests that the idea of self is real and even tangible. But Spock did not cease to be within Spock’s body. Spock’s body continues with the repairs, and Spock’s living spirit is there when Kirk encounters him before his death. Spock’s words most clearly demonstrate this, “I am—and always shall be—your friend. . .” It is unclear whether or not Spock’s mind meld resulted in his *katra* splitting or whether the connection continued to his physical death.

On the other hand, this dual identity shows us the not-self is also real. McCoy’s experience of having two selves within him plays out in numerous ways, and he fully experiences having both. He knows something has happened, and the struggle of the two selves does not result in a battle where one succeeds, and one fails. Instead, McCoy becomes an amalgam of both and with the capabilities, knowledge, and instincts of both. This is shown when McCoy attempts to perform a “Vulcan neck-pinch,” another alien skill that delivers an instant knockout to someone, but fails. Spock’s instinct was there, but McCoy lacked the capability. This is also shown when McCoy mumbles things about Vulcan he would not have otherwise known, but also knows how to perform as a physician. Neither self exists, and only the new self, a not-self, continues as their successor.

Both selves, Spock and McCoy, have merged. But the interpretation of this is open and unclear. The most straightforward interpretation is that the not-selves have ceased to be, and a new not-self has arisen. However, for this interpretation to work, the self must exist to be transferred. The question is further muddled by transferring Spock’s *katra* back to his body. If the selves are distinct, then they can be disentangled from the merged entity and that process happens. However, these dual successors are also not-selves. Spock has memories of what

happened after the mind-meld. McCoy would have witnessed those events, and therefore by the Spock-McCoy hybrid, which then split between the two. The not-self of Spock continued in the merged entity and was then disentangled not as it was, but changed from the dual existence. These changes are further explored throughout Spock's appearances in subsequent movies and television shows.

This also changes McCoy, though with fewer subsequent appearances to explore this. However, McCoy alludes to this during *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home (TVH)* and talks to Spock as though they were more than friends, but rather as though their shared history transcends what we can experience as humans. This is explicitly stated near the film's climax when McCoy refers to Spock's body, saying, "His mind's a void. It seems... that I've got all his marbles."

It is worth noting that the merged entity of Spock-McCoy could not continue and wished to be disentangled. This is an implicit acknowledgment of the not-self by the character, who knows it cannot continue its current self and must be restored, whatever that entails. If the self wished to sustain itself, this desire would not be present in the hybrid. However, for an alternative view of this experience, the *Star Trek: Voyager (VOY)* episode "Tuvix" explores another merged entity, where one contribution is again Vulcan, to show a different hybrid that explicitly did not wish to be disentangled but rather continued as the merged entity.

But McCoy's comment about his mind being empty serves as another metaphor. At this point, the viewer has witnessed the discovery of Spock as a small child, and observed his rapid aging, due to a plot device of unstable protomatter used in the Genesis device. Spock has never been shown to be anything other than an empty shell ruled by primitive processes, like an animal. McCoy's comment conjures the image of shoshin, normally translated as "beginner's mind."

In Zen Buddhism, the concept of shoshin stands as a cornerstone, articulated by Shunryu Suzuki, not merely as practice but as an Suzuki, 1970, p. 23 essential state of openness, a mind unburdened by preconceptions and prejudices, ready to perceive each moment and experience as if for the first time. This notion finds a parallel in the narrative of *TSFS*, through the character of Spock, who undergoes a dramatic rebirth. The film presents an opportunity to examine this character in a state that resembles a beginner's mind, offering a fresh perspective on a character hitherto constrained by logic and knowledge. It invites an exploration of how a mind, wiped clean of its learned biases and understandings navigates a familiar and alien world, echoing the Zen pursuit of seeing the world anew.

Spock's experience highlights the Zen teaching of rediscovery, akin to the lessons in the "Mumonkan" koans, where familiar realitiesMalet, 1900 are encountered with a new perspective, unmarred by habitual thought patterns. Therefore, Spock's journey is about

reacquiring knowledge and experiencing the universe from a fundamentally different vantage point. This process offers profound insights into the nature of learning and perception.

Spock's journey, serves as a lesson for the audience. It encourages embracing a beginner's mind daily, suggesting that openness to new experiences and perspectives can lead to rich and transformative insights. While rooted in Zen, this mindset extends beyond spiritual practice into lifelong learning and adaptability. Contemporary interpretations of Zen principles advocate for this approach, emphasizing its value in fostering personal growth, creativity, and a deeper engagement with the world around us. Spock's experience thus transcends the boundaries of fiction.

In a pivotal scene in *TSFS* the *Enterprise*, an enduring symbol of unity, exploration, and the spirit of human endeavor, meets its demise. This moment is not just the destruction of a spacecraft but the dismantling of a beloved icon that has traversed the stars and been the backdrop for countless adventures and discoveries. Its loss transcends material destruction, symbolizing the end of an era and the beginning of a new chapter in the *Star Trek* saga.

Through the lens of Buddhist philosophy, the destruction of the *Enterprise* can be viewed as an embodiment of the concept of impermanence. This event underscores the transient nature of all things, no matter how seemingly enduring or significant. The scene invites reflection on attachment to material entities and the inevitable reality of change, resonating deeply with the Buddhist teaching that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent.

But the loss was not accidental. Captain Kirk's decision exemplifies the intricate balance between detachment and compassion. The act of destroying the *Enterprise* is a practice in letting go of deep-seated attachments, a core tenet of Zen Buddhism. Like the mother here (Snp 1.8),

Just as a mother at the risk of life  
loves and protects her child, her only child,  
so one should cultivate this boundless love  
to all that live in the whole universe

Kirk and his crew take the ultimate risk for the boundless love of their friend. The destruction of the *Enterprise* in *TSFS* reverberates profoundly, impacting the storied starship's legacy and its crew's morale. From a Buddhist standpoint, this event is a stark illustration of *annica*, impermanence, and the natural cycle of loss and renewal that permeates existence. In its dissolution, the *Enterprise*, a beacon of exploration and human achievement, embodies the transient nature of all things, a core tenet of Buddhist philosophy. These events embody the Buddha's saying on attachment (Iti 69):

One who has destroyed attachment  
Along with hate and ignorance  
Has crossed this ocean  
With its sharks and demons,  
Its fearful waves so hard to cross.

He has surmounted every tie,  
Left Death behind,  
Become free from clinging,  
Forsaken suffering and renewal of being.  
Vanished, he cannot be defined, I say—  
He has bewildered the King of Death.

By destroying the ship, something Kirk and his crew hold very dear, they clear a path for renewal, shown in the following installment when they are given a new ship of the same name.

### 3.4 Consequences and Karma

There are two karmic arcs in *TSFS*. The first is Spock’s karmic arc, which has been discussed extensively here. This is straightforward and Spock is rewarded for his sacrifice for his friends and crew with a return from the certainty of death. While it is clear that Spock himself precipitated the actions that allowed for his rebirth, the rebirth itself is easily seen as a karmic victory. However, Kirk’s karmic arc is far more complex and troubling.

Captain Kirk faces critical decisions in *TSFS*, including defying Starfleet, risking his career for Spock, and destroying the *Enterprise*. These choices, deviating from standard command protocol, reflect his commitment to personal ethics and crew loyalty. In a Buddhist context, Kirk’s journey illustrates interconnectedness and karma, showing how decisions impact his character and future. Though ethically driven, Kirk’s actions lead to mixed outcomes, embodying the karmic principle of cause and effect. The Buddha delivers this in a powerful statement teaching the role of karmic justice (AN 5.56):

A woman or a man, a householder or one gone forth, should often reflect thus: “I am the owner of my kamma, the heir of my kamma; I have kamma as my origin, kamma as my relative, kamma as my resort; I will be the heir of whatever kamma, good or bad, that I do.”

Kirk's journey in *TSFS* mirrors the Buddhist understanding of karma, where each decision and action represents a seed sown for future experiences. His actions, driven by deep moral convictions, embody the karmic cycle of cause and effect. They highlight the intricate web of consequences that stem from our choices, underscoring the importance of ethical decision-making and the profound impact such decisions have on our lives and those around us. Kirk's narrative arc in the film thus becomes a compelling exploration of the karmic consequences of our actions, offering a nuanced perspective on the ethical complexities faced by individuals in positions of leadership.

The film portrays these decisions as having a profound impact on subsequent events. Kirk's choices lead to both desirable outcomes, such as the successful rescue of Spock, and challenging consequences, including the loss of his ship and facing inquiry for his actions. This dichotomy reflects the karmic idea that while ethical actions can lead to positive results, they may also bring unintended challenges and complexities.

Kirk's narrative arc in *TSFS* can thus be seen as a metaphor for the Buddhist path of transformation. His experiences reflect the Buddhist perspective that trials and tribulations are not merely hardships to be endured but valuable opportunities for spiritual and personal growth. Through his journey, the film presents a compelling narrative of how adversity can lead to profound personal transformation, offering insights into the potential for positive change even in the most challenging circumstances.

In *TSFS*, the *Enterprise* crew, led by Captain Kirk, exemplifies collective ethical responsibility through their joint decision-making, particularly in their unanimous choice to disobey Starfleet's commands for a higher moral cause, Spock's rescue. This pivotal decision is not taken lightly; it is the culmination of a shared sense of duty and loyalty that each crew member feels towards their comrade and the principles they uphold.

This act of collective decision-making echoes Buddhist teachings on communal harmony and interdependence. Buddhism emphasizes the Sangha's importance in ethical considerations, advocating for decisions that benefit the collective and foster unity. The crew's choices in the film reflect this ethos, as their actions transcend individual desires or fears, highlighting a shared moral compass that guides them.

The dynamics of this group's decision-making process are vital to the film's narrative. Each crew member, from Kirk to Scotty, contributes uniquely to the group's ethical stance. Their perspectives, while diverse, converge to form a unified ethical front, showcasing the strength and complexity of collaborative decision-making. This narrative thread in *TSFS* enhances the story's depth and serves as a testament to the power of collective ethical action in achieving more significant moral objectives.

In *TSFS*, the *Enterprise* crew's unity and solidarity are vividly displayed as they confront a series of ethical challenges. A prime example of this cohesion is their collective decision to support Captain Kirk's risky but morally driven plan to save Spock. This united front is a strategic alliance and a deeper bond forged through shared values and mutual respect. Their solidarity is a testament to the crew's solid interpersonal relationships and commitment to a standard ethical code.

This sense of unity significantly influences the outcomes of their collective decisions. Drawing upon the Buddhist concept of Sangha, the film illustrates how the collective strength and moral fortitude of a unified group can be instrumental in overcoming complex ethical dilemmas. The crew's togetherness exemplifies the power of community in navigating moral ambiguity and making challenging decisions.

Moreover, the film delves into the emotional and psychological impact these decisions have on each crew member. The solidarity they exhibit comes with its emotional weight as the crew grapples with the consequences of their actions as a unified entity. The support they offer each other provides emotional resilience, but it also emphasizes the responsibility each bears for the group's collective choices. This narrative aspect highlights the psychological complexities of ethical decision-making within a close-knit community, resonating with the Buddhist understanding of interdependence and shared fate within a community.

In *TSFS* the nuances of leadership, fellowship, and collaborative ethics are intricately portrayed, with Captain Kirk's leadership style playing a pivotal role. Kirk's approach to leadership is characterized not just by command and decision-making authority but also by fostering a deep sense of fellowship and collaborative spirit among his crew. His respect for each crew member's expertise and opinions and his unwavering moral compass cultivate an environment where collaborative ethics thrive.

This camaraderie and mutual respect are central to how the crew navigates their shared mission. Their actions are guided by a collective purpose and an acute awareness of the greater good, reflecting the Zen principle of acting with mindfulness and intentionality. This collective approach to ethical challenges showcases the strength and wisdom that can emerge from the collaborative effort, underscoring the importance of diverse perspectives and unity in decision-making.

The narrative of *TSFS* thus offers a compelling exploration of the power and ethics of collaboration in achieving common goals. It echoes Buddhist ideals that emphasize the value of Sangha and collective wisdom in ethical action. The film celebrates the achievements of working together and highlights the moral and ethical strength inherent in a united approach to complex challenges.



# Chapter 4

## Comparative Analysis

### 4.1 Common Themes

The *Star Trek* franchise, renowned for exploring ethical dilemmas and philosophical quandaries, reaches profound depths in both *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan (TWOK)* and *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock (TSFS)*. These films present a tapestry of moral complexities, intertwining sacrifice, loyalty, and duty themes. Central to their narratives are the recurring moral dilemmas the characters face, particularly Kirk, Spock, and McCoy, whose decisions are critical to the unfolding stories.

These ethical themes do more than propel the plot; they contribute significantly to the broader ethical landscape of the *Star Trek* universe. They invite viewers to ponder the immediate consequences of actions and their far-reaching implications. Using a Buddhist lens to analyze these actions adds a new dimension to discussing these decisions. It can be used to help understand both decision-making and the socio-ethical context in which the decisions are made. Through this lens, these films' moral and philosophical challenges gain new depth, resonating with audiences seeking entertainment and thoughtful, ethical discussion.

In *TWOK* and *TSFS*, Spock's actions epitomize the principles of utilitarian ethics, captured most memorably in his assertion, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." This philosophy, central to utilitarian thought, is vividly illustrated through Spock's selfless decisions, particularly his ultimate sacrifice in *TWOK*. His choice to save the USS *Enterprise* and its crew at the cost of his own life embodies the essence of placing collective welfare above personal gain. These moments highlight the moral strengths of utilitarian ethics.. While noble in pursuing the greatest good, the utilitarian ideal often presents difficult choices that involve significant personal sacrifices. Spock's actions, therefore, serve as a profound exploration of these ethical tensions.

The repercussions of Spock's sacrifice extend beyond the immediate narrative, profoundly affecting the crew and rippling through the subsequent film. His decision engenders a range of emotional and moral responses from his comrades, particularly Captain Kirk, who grapples with the loss of his friend and the heavy burden of command responsibility. This narrative arc underlines the ethical conundrum faced by leaders and individuals in positions of responsibility: how to balance the well-being of the many with the rights and lives of the few. Spock's sacrifices, thus, provide a compelling lens to examine the moral dilemmas and emotional weight of utilitarian ethics in complex, real-world scenarios.

The climactic destruction of the *Enterprise* in *TSFS* represents more than the loss of a starship; it embodies a profound lesson in the Buddhist principle of non-attachment and the impermanence of all things. The *Enterprise*, more than just a vessel, had become a symbol of home, adventure, and the collective spirit of its crew. Its annihilation, therefore, goes beyond physical loss, striking at the heart of the crew's identity and attachments, even affecting the viewers who had invested themselves in the *Star Trek* universe.

This event challenges the characters and the audience to confront the transient nature of existence, a core tenet of Buddhist philosophy. The loss of the *Enterprise* becomes a powerful metaphor for the process of letting go. The loss illustrates the inherent impermanence in all aspects of life. For the crew, the destruction of their beloved ship is a stark reminder that attachment, even to something as noble as their vessel, is fleeting and can lead to suffering. In particular, Kirk asks McCoy, "My God, Bones, what have I done?" using a favorite nickname for McCoy. McCoy responds, "What you had to do; what you always do: turn death into a fighting chance to live." At this moment, Kirk finally questions his decision-making and finds it immediately reinforced by McCoy.

In both *TWOK* and *TSFS*, the themes of duty and loyalty are intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative, mainly through the lens of Captain Kirk's leadership. Throughout these films, Kirk is consistently portrayed as a character caught in the crucible of conflicting responsibilities: his deep-seated loyalty to his crew, especially Spock, and his obligations as a commander within Starfleet. These scenarios offer a rich exploration of leaders' ethical tensions, balancing personal connections against the demands of their official roles.

Kirk's decision-making process, marked by a strong sense of moral integrity and emotional intelligence poignantly illustrates the complexity of ethical leadership. His choices often involve difficult trade-offs, highlighting the perennial dilemma of how far one should go in prioritizing individual loyalties over collective or institutional responsibilities. These moments in the films probe into the nature of duty—what it means to be duty-bound, the extent to which personal bonds influence duty and the costs associated with fulfilling one's obligations.

Moreover, the narrative raises significant questions about the bounds of loyalty. It challenges the audience to consider where loyalty should be directed and how it should be balanced with other ethical considerations, such as the welfare of the many and the principles of justice and fairness. In doing so, the films delve into the ethical implications of prioritizing personal ties, underscoring the moral complexities inherent in situations where loyalty to individuals may conflict with the greater good.

This exploration of duty and loyalty in the *Star Trek* narrative underscores the nuanced nature of these concepts, particularly in situations fraught with moral ambiguity. Kirk's character arc across these films demonstrates the challenges of ethical decision-making in a world where the lines between right and wrong are often blurred and where the best course of action is not always clear-cut. His journey offers a compelling reflection on the ethical landscape of leadership and the importance of navigating these moral terrains with wisdom and compassion.

The narrative arcs of these films chart a significant evolution in the ethical understanding of key characters, notably Captain Kirk, Spock, and Dr. McCoy. This evolution is catalyzed by a series of increasingly complex moral dilemmas that test their principles, decision-making, and resolve. In *TWOK*, we witness initial responses to ethical challenges, where each character grapples with their own beliefs and duties. By *TSFS*, these characters have grown profoundly, reflecting deeper moral contemplation and maturity in their actions. For Kirk, this journey involves transforming from a commander making decisions guided by a nuanced moral compass into one considering the broader implications of his actions. Spock's arc, especially his self-sacrifice, exemplifies an ultimate commitment to the greater good, a poignant embodiment of ethical selflessness. McCoy's struggle with Spock's *katra* in *TSFS* adds another layer, challenging his understanding of identity and moral responsibility.

The evolution of these characters' ethical understanding in these films speaks to the dynamic nature of morality. It highlights how exposure to varied and challenging experiences can lead to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of what it means to act ethically. Their journey resonates with the audience, offering insights into the continuous process of ethical growth and the importance of adapting one's moral framework to meet the complexities of real-life situations.

The Buddhist concept of karma is pivotal in the narrative continuum of *TWOK* and *TSFS*. The decisions made by Kirk and Kahn in "Space Seed" lead to the events of *TWOK*, and in turn, the decisions made by Kirk, Spock, and Khan lead to the events of *TSFS*. This karmic interplay is evident in how the characters' choices, such as Spock's self-sacrifice and Kirk's defiance of Starfleet, ripple forward to shape their journeys and the narrative's progression. The films

depict a clear cause-and-effect trajectory, resonating with the Buddhist understanding that every action seeds future experiences.

Interconnectedness, another fundamental tenet of Buddhist philosophy, is exemplified through the crew's collaborative efforts. Their united actions underscore the idea that individual choices and actions are not isolated but part of a more extensive, interconnected web of consequences and relationships. This theme is particularly evident in the crew's collective decision to rescue Spock, showcasing how individual actions collectively contribute to significant outcomes.

The films also reflect the Buddhist principle of the Middle Way, navigating a path between ethical extremes. The characters, particularly Kirk, often balance personal desires with broader responsibilities, embodying the Middle Way in their approach to complex ethical dilemmas. Their journeys through these moral landscapes illustrate the importance of avoiding extremes of action or inaction, instead finding a balanced, mindful approach to facing challenges. This narrative approach not only enriches the storyline but also offers a profound reflection on the applicability of Buddhist ethics in navigating real-world ethical complexities.

## 4.2 Ethical Evolution

In *TWOK* and its sequel *TSFS*, the central characters of Kirk, Spock, and McCoy embark on profound ethical journeys marked by significant moral dilemmas that challenge and reshape their core values and beliefs. Kirk grapples with the weight of command and the consequences of past decisions, facing tests of leadership that push him to redefine his principles. Embodying the Vulcan ethos of logic and duty, Spock confronts the ultimate ethical quandary: the sacrifice of self for the greater good, a decision reverberating through both films.

McCoy, the moral compass and emotional heart of the crew, faces his unique challenges, particularly in *TSFS*, where he confronts issues of identity and ethical responsibility in a profoundly personal way. Throughout these films, each character's ethical perspective evolves significantly. Kirk transitions from a commander making decisions based on Starfleet protocol to a leader guided by a more complex moral compass. Spock's actions epitomize the interplay between duty and selflessness, while McCoy's journey highlights the ethical implications of loyalty and friendship.

These narrative arcs are not only a reflection of the characters' individual growth but also illustrate the broader theme of personal development through adversity. These characters' ethical decisions and actions, set against the backdrop of space exploration and interstellar conflict, offer a compelling lens through which to explore their evolving ethical stances. This

progression sets the stage for a deeper analysis of their decisions in the context of the challenges they face and the growth they experience.

In *TWOK*, Kirk is portrayed confronting profound loss, epitomized by the death of Spock and the emergence of the Genesis crisis. Initially, his responses are somewhat reactionary, characterized by a mixture of impulse and command-driven decision-making. By the events of *TSFS*, however, Kirk exhibits a notable shift towards a more reflective and measured approach. This evolution in his character is evident in how he navigates the moral complexities of resurrecting Spock and defying Starfleet, reflecting a deeper engagement with the ethical dimensions of leadership and responsibility.

Spock's self-sacrifice at the end of *TWOK* is a poignant moment of ethical significance, profoundly affecting the narrative of *TSFS*. This act, rooted in a deep sense of duty and the welfare of the many, raises critical questions about the nature of selflessness and sacrifice. In *TSFS*, the aftermath of this decision profoundly influences the dynamics among the remaining crew, particularly in their quest to bring Spock back. His sacrifice becomes a defining moment in the series, encapsulating the essence of duty, loyalty, and the pursuit of the greater good.

McCoy's narrative in *TSFS* centers around his struggle with inheriting Spock's *katra* presents a complex ethical quandary that extends beyond the boundaries of traditional medical ethics. This struggle forces McCoy to confront issues of identity, personal autonomy, and the weight of carrying another's consciousness. His journey through this inner conflict highlights the moral dilemmas associated with friendship and duty, challenging his understanding of what it means to be responsible for another's legacy. This arc deepens McCoy's character and showcases the ethical complexities inherent in situations where personal and professional boundaries intersect.

Each character's ethical evolution is illuminated through critical moments of decision-making. Their responses to ethical dilemmas in these films showcase a maturation in moral reasoning and highlight the multifaceted nature of ethical decision-making in extraordinary circumstances. In the interconnected narratives of *TWOK* and *TSFS*, key characters' ethical decisions and actions can be contextualized within Buddhist ethical principles. Captain Kirk's choices, particularly in the face of complex dilemmas, resonate with the concept of karma. His actions, whether to confront personal loss or challenge Starfleet directives, align with the Buddhist understanding of cause and effect in ethical behavior, where every action has repercussions that shape future experiences.

Spock's self-sacrifice, a defining moment in *TWOK*, is emblematic of Buddhist selflessness. His willingness to give up his life for the greater good mirrors Buddhist teachings on compassion, *karuṇā*, and non-attachment, *anattā*. This act can be seen as paralleling the path of the Bodhisattva, where one forsakes personal gain or liberation for the welfare of others, underscoring a deep commitment to altruistic action.

McCoy's journey, particularly his struggle with Spock's *katra*, encapsulates the Middle Way, a fundamental Buddhist principle. His internal conflict and the subsequent journey reflect a balance between attachment to his friend and the necessity of letting go. This storyline adds depth to his character and showcases the Buddhist ethos of finding a harmonious path through life's ethical complexities.

In sum, the ethical evolution of Kirk, Spock, and McCoy across these films mirrors vital aspects of Buddhist ethics: moral development, the interconnected nature of actions and consequences, and the pursuit of a deeper understanding and enlightenment. Their journeys provide a rich tapestry for examining how Buddhist principles can be applied to understand and navigate the ethical challenges of life, even in the farthest reaches of space.

### 4.3 Narrative Cohesion

The narrative arcs of *TWOK* and *TSFS* are intricately interwoven, not just in the plot but in the ethical themes they explore. The progression from *TWOK* to *TSFS* sees a continuous thread of ethical challenges and resolutions, shaping the characters and the overarching storyline. In *TWOK*, key ethical dilemmas such as Spock's ultimate sacrifice and Kirk's command decisions under duress lay a foundation of moral complexity that extends into the subsequent film.

*TSFS* picks up these ethical threads, delving deeper into the consequences and moral quandaries that arise from the events of *TWOK*. The themes of sacrifice, duty, and the greater good, introduced in *TWOK*, are further explored and expanded upon. Spock's self-sacrifice, a poignant moment of individual duty towards the many, catalyzes the events in *TSFS*, where the concept of the greater good is examined from a broader, more collective perspective.

The continuity of these themes across the two films is significant. They evolve from focusing on individual actions and decisions to encompassing a collective ethical responsibility. This transition highlights the growing complexity of moral decisions the characters face, especially Kirk, who must navigate the choppy waters of personal loss, professional duty, and the overarching welfare of his crew and the broader community. The narrative journey from *TWOK* to *TSFS* thus becomes a profound exploration of ethical evolution – from the personal sacrifices of one for the many to the shared burdens and responsibilities of a group facing moral challenges together.

The ethical themes and moral dilemmas presented in *TWOK* and *TSFS* resonate far beyond the confines of their narratives, contributing significantly to the philosophical tapestry of the broader Star Trek universe. These films delve into complex moral questions, enriching the series' ongoing discourse on humanity, ethical governance, and societal norms. The decisions

and character developments witnessed in these narratives reflect more significant existential and ethical themes central to the *Star Trek* ethos.

In these films, the exploration of personal sacrifice, duty, and moral responsibility transcends the immediate context of the Starfleet crew. It touches on broader philosophical questions about what it means to be human, the nature of ethical leadership, and our responsibilities towards one another in society. The moral quandaries Kirk, Spock, and McCoy face serve as microcosms for more significant issues, reflecting on how individuals and societies grapple with complex ethical decisions.

Moreover, these narratives address universal ethical questions that are as pertinent today as they are in the imagined future of *Star Trek*. The balance between individual rights and the common good is a recurring theme, particularly exemplified in the juxtaposition of Spock's selfless act against the broader needs of the crew and federation. The ethical implications of technological advancements, such as the Genesis device, provoke thought about the responsibilities that come with power and knowledge. These films challenge viewers to consider how technological progress can benefit and threaten society and the ethical frameworks necessary to govern such advancements.

Through the *Star Trek* universe lens, *TWOK* and *TSFS* thus contribute to a nuanced conversation about ethics, morality, and human nature. They offer a space for reflection on the complexities of moral decision-making at the individual and societal levels and the importance of ethical considerations in shaping our future.

In concluding our exploration of *TWOK* and *TSFS*, it is imperative to reflect on the significant role of ethical storytelling within the science fiction genre, with the *Star Trek* franchise standing as a quintessential example. These narratives transcend mere entertainment; they provide a vital platform for delving into and dissecting complex moral and philosophical issues. Through its imaginative setting and compelling characters, *Star Trek* brings to life ethical dilemmas that resonate deeply with contemporary audiences, offering a mirror to our society and the human condition.

*TWOK* and *TSFS* exemplify this tradition of ethical storytelling. They navigate themes of sacrifice, duty, and the consequences of technological advancement, addressing issues that are as relevant today as they are in the fictional future. These films engage viewers with their dramatic plots and prompt them to consider the moral fabric of their lives and the broader world. The ethical challenges faced by Kirk, Spock, and McCoy encourage audiences to grapple with similar questions of right, wrong, and the gray areas in between.

Therefore, the enduring appeal of *Star Trek* lies not only in its capacity to entertain but also in its ability to engage with profound moral questions and ethical exploration. It is a testament to the power of storytelling as a means to explore and understand the complexities of the ethical

landscape, inspiring audiences to reflect on their own moral choices and the impact of those choices on the world around them. *Star Trek* thus remains a vital and influential force in ethical storytelling, combining engaging narratives with deep philosophical inquiry.



# Chapter 5

## Conclusion

### 5.1 Summary

Analyzing *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan (TWOK)* and *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock (TSFS)* through a Buddhist lens yields profound ethical insights, enriching our understanding of the narrative and its characters. Central to this exploration are Buddhist principles such as non-attachment, *annica*, interconnectedness, *pratītyasamutpāda*, and the Middle Way, *Majjhimā-patipadā*, which offer unique perspectives on the unfolding events and the dilemmas faced by the characters.

Spock's self-sacrifice, a key element in both films, is emblematic of the principle of non-attachment and interconnectedness. His decision to prioritize the needs of the many over his own life demonstrates a deep understanding of the impermanent nature of existence and the interdependent nature of all beings. Similarly, Captain Kirk's evolution in decision-making, especially in *TSFS*, reflects the Middle Way. His choices, balancing between extreme reactions and inaction, embody a mindful approach to complex ethical dilemmas.

These insights gleaned from the Buddhist analysis do more than deepen our appreciation of the *Star Trek* narrative; they offer valuable lessons applicable to contemporary life. The characters' journeys and the ethical choices they make invite viewers to consider how principles like non-attachment, interconnectedness, and the Middle Way can be integrated into their decision-making processes and worldviews.

The ethical development of key characters in *TWOK* and *TSFS* can be insightfully viewed through the lens of Zen Buddhism. Captain Kirk's transformation throughout these narratives is particularly telling. He evolves from a more instinctive, reaction-driven leader to one embodying mindfulness and deeper awareness, a journey that mirrors the Buddhist path towards heightened consciousness and understanding.

Spock's character, especially in his acts of sacrifice, profoundly represents the Buddhist principles of non-attachment and selflessness. His willingness to place the needs of the many above his own resonates with the Bodhisattva ideal in Mahayana Buddhism, characterized by the pursuit of enlightenment for oneself and all beings. This selfless approach underpins much of Spock's decision-making and interactions throughout the films.

McCoy's internal struggle, particularly in grappling with Spock's *katra*, explores themes central to Buddhist philosophy, such as impermanence and the concept of non-self. His journey challenges traditional notions of identity and existence, echoing the Buddhist teachings on the transient and interconnected nature of all life.

Together, these character arcs weave a rich tapestry that enhances the narrative complexity of the films and provides a relatable framework for understanding and applying Buddhist principles in the face of complex moral and ethical dilemmas. The growth and decisions of these characters invite viewers to consider how Buddhist teachings might inform their own perspectives and choices in life's multifaceted ethical landscapes.

The Buddhist analysis of *TWOK* and *TSFS* deepens our understanding of these films and highlights the narrative sophistication inherent in science fiction. These films exemplify how ethical and philosophical themes can seamlessly integrate into storytelling, adding depth and complexity. The ethical dilemmas faced by the characters and their subsequent development serve as a conduit for exploring larger philosophical questions, enriching the narrative fabric of the *Star Trek* universe. This type of analysis can also enrich the enjoyment of viewing the films.

This approach to storytelling, where characters grapple with profound moral choices, invites viewers to engage with philosophical and ethical issues on a deeper level. It encourages active engagement with the narrative, prompting viewers to reflect on the moral dimensions of the choices and actions depicted on screen.

In conclusion, the narrative complexity achieved through integrating ethical and philosophical themes in *TWOK* and *TSFS* underscores the value of such narratives in science fiction. They foster a richer understanding of ethical principles and their practical applications, extending beyond the fictional realm to offer insights relevant to real-world contexts. These films demonstrate the power of storytelling to entertain and engage viewers in meaningful ethical contemplation.

The insightful application of a Buddhist framework to *TWOK* and *TSFS* opens up avenues for similar analyses across the broader *Star Trek* universe and other science fiction works. Iconic series like *Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG)* and *Star Trek: Voyager (VOY)* present rich narrative landscapes with diverse characters and storylines offering new contexts to explore Buddhist concepts. Characters such as Captain Picard or Captain Janeway and episodes dealing with complex moral and philosophical issues could provide fertile ground for further exami-

nation through the lens of Buddhism, including the *TNG*-based film, *Star Trek: Insurrection*, which includes broad references to mindfulness.

Extending this analytical approach to other seminal science fiction works, such as *Blade Runner* or *The Matrix*, could also yield fascinating insights. These narratives, which delve into themes of consciousness, reality, and morality, are ripe for exploration under the Buddhist paradigm. Such an analysis could illuminate how these films address existential questions and ethical dilemmas, and how their treatment of these themes aligns or contrasts with Buddhist principles. This expansion of the analytical framework enriches our understanding of these narratives and underscores the versatility and relevance of Buddhist perspectives in interpreting the complex ethical landscapes of science fiction.

The analysis of *TWOK* and *TSFS* through a Buddhist lens underscores the value of interdisciplinary approaches in examining ethical narratives within science fiction. To further enrich this exploration, integrating insights from diverse philosophical traditions, such as existentialism, Confucianism, or Stoicism could provide additional layers of understanding. These philosophies, each with their unique perspectives on morality, existence, and societal norms, could offer fresh angles from which to view the ethical quandaries and character developments in these narratives. Further, as these and other media are not usually explicitly created with a Buddhist framework in mind but rather acquire aspects via cultural osmosis, other ethical and philosophical frameworks are likely to seep in, making integrating insights from other philosophical traditions likely successful.

Moreover, combining different ethical theories like deontology and utilitarianism with Buddhist ethics could yield a more holistic comprehension of the moral complexities presented in science fiction. This approach would allow for a multifaceted analysis of characters' decisions and actions, considering various ethical dimensions and principles.

Embracing these interdisciplinary approaches can significantly deepen our appreciation and understanding of the ethical and philosophical themes that are so central to science fiction. By drawing on a range of philosophical perspectives, we can uncover broader insights and engage in a more comprehensive dialogue about the moral questions and dilemmas that these narratives present, enhancing our overall interpretation and enjoyment of the genre.

The application of philosophical concepts to film analysis, as demonstrated in exploring *TWOK* and *TSFS*, highlights the importance of a multidisciplinary approach. By integrating perspectives from philosophy, ethics, and media studies, this method ensures a comprehensive and nuanced analysis. Such an approach not only enriches the interpretation of the narrative but also enhances critical thinking skills, allowing viewers to engage with the film on a deeper, more thoughtful level.

This methodology goes beyond traditional film analysis by encouraging a more profound engagement with the philosophical themes embedded within the narrative. It fosters an appreciation for how these themes are woven into the story and how they resonate with broader existential questions. The benefits of this approach are particularly evident in genres like science fiction, where complex moral and existential dilemmas are often central to the plot.

In conclusion, this methodological approach significantly enriches our understanding of film and television narratives. It offers a remarkable lens through which to view and interpret the ethical and philosophical dimensions of science fiction, providing a richer, more complete understanding of the genre's capacity to explore and reflect on the human condition.

## 5.2 Relevance and Final Thoughts

The ethical issues explored in *TWOK* and *TSFS* are relevant to contemporary societal and global challenges. For instance, the moral quandaries surrounding the Genesis device mirror current debates in technology ethics, particularly concerning artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. These narratives raise crucial questions about the ethical boundaries of scientific advancement and the responsibilities accompanying such power, paralleling modern concerns over the potential consequences and ethical implications of rapidly advancing technologies.

Additionally, the portrayal of leadership and decision-making in the films offers insightful parallels to current political and corporate accountability discussions. The dilemmas faced by characters like Captain Kirk resonate with contemporary issues of leadership ethics, highlighting the importance of responsible and transparent decision-making in positions of authority.

Furthermore, the films' exploration of the balance between individual rights and collective welfare echoes current debates on public health, environmental responsibility, and social justice. The narrative tension between personal freedoms and the larger community's needs is highly pertinent to contemporary discussions, particularly in the context of global challenges such as climate change and pandemics.

In summary, *TWOK* and *TSFS* not only provide compelling narratives within the science fiction genre but also engage with ethical themes that are deeply relevant to our current societal discourse, encouraging viewers to reflect on these issues in the context of their world.

In today's complex ethical landscape, Buddhist principles offer profound insights that can guide contemporary decision-making. The practice of mindfulness, a cornerstone of Buddhism, is particularly relevant, providing a framework for navigating intricate moral situations with greater clarity and empathy. By fostering a heightened awareness of the present moment and a deeper understanding of the implications of our actions, mindfulness can enhance the decision-making process, leading to more thoughtful and compassionate outcomes.

The Zen principle of compassion, *karuṇā*, is also pivotal in addressing contemporary societal challenges. Applying compassion to global issues like inequality and conflict encourages empathetic approaches that seek to alleviate suffering. This perspective can inspire more humane and equitable policies and practices at individual and collective levels. Furthermore, the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness offers a valuable perspective on modern problems. Recognizing the interdependent nature of our world encourages a holistic approach to global challenges. This understanding fosters cooperative and collaborative efforts, highlighting how actions in one part of the world can have far-reaching effects elsewhere. By embracing interconnectedness, we can cultivate effective solutions and acknowledge the shared nature of our global community.

In conclusion, the enduring relevance of science fiction, and the *Star Trek* franchise, in particular, lies in its power to explore and elucidate complex ethical issues. These narratives extend beyond the realm of entertainment; they serve as catalysts for thought and discussion, prompting us to reflect on and engage with real-world moral dilemmas. Through the lens of *Star Trek*, viewers are invited to consider futuristic scenarios and the ethical implications that resonate with our contemporary world.

These narratives underscore the importance of continuous ethical inquiry. Philosophical thought, including applying Buddhist principles, is crucial in helping us navigate the often intricate moral landscapes we encounter, both in reality and within these fictional universes. These stories encourage us to question, to think deeply, and to consider the broader implications of our actions and choices.

As we engage with the *Star Trek* universe and other science fiction narratives, we should embrace them as sources of entertainment and as valuable tools for understanding and addressing the ethical challenges of our time. These narratives invite us to be not just passive consumers of content but active participants in a more significant dialogue about morality, responsibility, and the future of our society.

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