

Doctor by Doctor: Dr. Leonard Horatio McCoy



Introduction

This essay continues my survey of the various doctors in the many parts of the *Star Trek gesamtkunstwerk*. Here I turn to the most well-known of all of the doctors, Leonard Horatio McCoy. McCoy was portrayed by DeForest Kelley (1920–1999) in *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966–69) as well as in the animated series (1973–74). Kelley as McCoy also appeared in the first seven *Star Trek* movies and made a brief appearance as a very elderly doctor in the pilot episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, “Encounter at Farpoint” (Corey) in 1987. More recently, the role was assumed by Karl Urban in the franchise film reboot, *Star Trek* (Abrams 2009) and its sequels.

The fictional Dr. McCoy was born in 2227 in Georgia, trained at the University of Mississippi, married, with one daughter, and after divorcing (Sutherland, “The Survivor”), became chief medical officer of the *Enterprise* under the command of Captain James T. Kirk in 2266.

The core trio of Kirk, Spock, and McCoy comprise a command troika modelled on classical mythology. Diversity and multiethnicity are embraced with the inclusion of a human-alien hybrid (Spock), along with a bridge crew that included a Scotsman with a broad burr, a black female communications officer, a Japanese helmsman, and a Russian navigator. “Though dominantly white, this was an integrated cast for 1960s network television” (Bernardi 216). Even greater ethnic and gender mixes were produced in later years, as witnessed in ensuing *Star Trek* series spinoffs that portray a female as well as an African-American captain.

The production team in the original series of *Star Trek* noted “the exquisite chemistry among Shatner, Nimoy, and Kelley, three men as different from one another as the characters they played. The actors truly enjoyed one another, and it showed in their performances” (Rioux 154), helping to eventually give the series its past and current cult status.

McCoy’s Humanity

Gene Roddenberry, the series’s creator, “wanted someone capable of more than medicine and counselling; he wanted someone who was confessor and physician.... He would be a humane hero and a voice of human conscience” (Rioux 140).

Interestingly, Kelley’s uncompromising and occasionally harsh pronouncements, and his “matter-of-fact” deliveries were modeled on the way that a doctor had given his family the news of Kelley’s mother’s terminal cancer, an event that he honed as the “abrasive sand” in fashioning McCoy’s deportment (Rioux 140). Kelley himself felt that “McCoy is merely human. At times he feels fear. At times he can perform really dangerous acts. But he’s always just a man who feels and who thinks and who searches. And who makes mistakes” (Rioux 182), further emphasizing the humanity of both character and actor.

Castmate Nichelle Nichols (who played Communications Officer Uhura) noted that Kelley, like the doctor that he portrayed, was

[a] kind person, but he was a strong person, and, like Bones, he was irascible, don’t push his buttons.... he would quietly put you in your place.... His work, his craft, his art, was very private, very personal.... you didn’t notice it—you didn’t see it (Rioux 155).

Producer Robert Justman reminisced, referring to Captain Kirk and Science Officer Spock, that “[i]t became apparent ... very early on that the character of McCoy was going to be a linchpin—a fulcrum upon which one side was balanced with the other” (Rioux 158), such that McCoy’s humanity balanced Spock’s cold and inhuman logic:

The barbs, bristles, and brotherhood between Spock and McCoy began subtly.... the doctor’s jutting chin or squinted eye provoked the lifted brow and tilt of the Vulcan’s head, and in reaction, the doctor’s head pulled back in mock disgust or confoundedness, and so it went. The writers ... picked up on it. The two actors had a syn-copated timing that lent itself to good use for comedic effect or dramatic clashing of wills (Rioux 154).

Spock and McCoy are physical manifestations of the two extremes that influence the captain’s every decision. They

symbolize Captain Kirk’s internal dilemmas. The two of them seem to verbalize the arguments that the captain must consider. Because we cannot get into the captain’s head to hear what he is thinking, Spock and McCoy are doubly important to the series’ ability to tell its stories well—it is primarily through them that Kirk’s internal conflicts can be dramatized (Gerrold 15–16).

This troika can be reduced to a Platonic triad of action and spirit (Kirk), logical objectivity (Spock), and emotion (McCoy). The captain had to guard against the latter’s tendency to behave in the fashion of “the compassionate physician who expresses himself freely, represents the irrational desires” (Barad and Robertson 57).

McCoy’s was “the human courage of an extraordinary but altogether human soul ... the one who was vulnerable. Kelley understood that McCoy was to be the human presence between the two extreme personas, neither of whom would ever be mistaken for a real person. Only McCoy was real.” (Rioux 168). McCoy provided a brake and a balance. He is the quintessential humane doctor, a “man of heart that resists and balances the Vulcan Spock’s calculated logic” (Petraný 132).

It was thus that McCoy became “the human conscience of

the ship” (Rioux 168), an extremely powerful vessel that constituted a marvelous scientific accomplishment but whose crew could easily forget their humanity and humaneness in their technological immersion.

Human McCoy vs. Alien Spock

McCoy’s endearingly grumpy comments deliberately and constantly underscore Kirk’s conscience, an effective and frequently acerbic counterpoint to Spock’s Benthamite utilitarian logic.

Moreover, in classical mythology, the animal (or its intelligent transformation into a legendary creature fit for a bestiary) represents brutish and unrepressed emotions. *Trek* hardly ever incorporates animals into narratives but instead inscribes the sentient machine as “the primary ‘other’ against which we define ourselves” (Wagner and Lundeen 49). Thus, “[m]achine is to human as logic is to feeling. Or more precisely, machine is to human as barren logic is to logic-plus-feeling” (ibid). When McCoy wishes to dramatically underscore the inhumanity of utilitarian logic, he distances Spock from humanity by comparing him to a sentient computer. Moreover, McCoy’s humanity urges him to indulge in creature comforts, inclinations that he accedes to when such actions do not interfere with his duties. This does not stop Spock from accusing him of being a “sensualist” (Pevney, “Arena”).

However, McCoy sometimes loses his temper (another human indicator and weakness) in his arguments with Spock, whose Vulcan logic infuriates him and provokes him into spitting out bigoted insults that invoke Spock’s green blood (his hemoglobin is copper based) and other physical differences. These remind us of McCoy’s roots and training, those of a physician:

“You green-blooded, inhuman ...” (Meyer, *The Wrath of Khan*)

“You green-blooded Vulcan.” (Shatner, *The Final Frontier*)

“That green-blooded son of a bitch. It’s his revenge for all those arguments he lost to me.” (Nimoy, *The Search for Spock*)

“Green-blooded hobgoblin.” (Nimoy, *Star Trek* 2009)

“Pointy-eared bastard.” (ibid)

Spock does not fail to retaliate with equally caustic barbs, such as “That’s not at all surprising, Doctor. He’s probably terrified of your beads and rattles” (Daniels, “I, Mudd”).

Despite these lapses, McCoy’s behavior was typically exemplary, and for example, Nichols referred to McCoy as Uhura’s “sassy gentleman friend” (Rioux 154). Grace Lee Whitney (who played Yeoman Janice Rand) described McCoy as Kirk’s “friend, personal bartender, confidant, counsellor, and priest,” (Whitney 84). Kirk and McCoy are on first-name terms, and Kirk calls McCoy “Bones,” a play on “sawbones,” an epithet referring to barber-surgeons that he uses as a friendly nickname.

Spock’s quintessential Millsian utterance is: “Were I to invoke logic, logic clearly dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one” (Meyer, *The Wrath of Khan*). This logic eventually leads to Spock’s death.

However, Spock’s “katra” (soul) is implanted in McCoy, and for a time, McCoy develops a split personality, sharing Spock’s traits. However, in Kirk’s words, “because the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many,” Spock is eventually restored to life with the help of a new body and the katra McCoy carries (Nimoy, *The Search for Spock*). It is perhaps through this humanizing influence that Spock accepts and eventually embraces his half-human heritage: “All things end... [Y]ou must have faith ... that the universe will unfold as it should. Logic? ... Logic is the beginning of wisdom, not the end” (Meyer, *The Undiscovered Country*).

Old-Fashioned Distrust of Technology

McCoy takes his sometimes homely humanism further by expressing misgivings with regard to specific items of technology, in particular the transporter, an instantaneous transportation device that is ubiquitous in the *Trek* universe (Grech “The Trick”). McCoy expresses these misgivings most clearly in the very first *Trek* novel, *Spock Must Die!*, which begins: “What worries me is whether I’m myself any more. I have a horrible suspicion that I’m a ghost. And that I’ve been one for maybe as long as twenty years” (Blish 1). McCoy’s disquiet arises from the simple physical fact that during transportation, the original body is destroyed and a new body, complete with memories, is re-created.

A Lockean continuity criterion has been proposed which states that there can be only one original and that a duplicate cannot possibly be tantamount to the original if there is any form of discontinuity in the transportation process. However, the transporter’s inventor recalls that the “original transporter took a full minute and a half to cycle through. Felt like a year. You could actually feel yourself being taken apart and put back together” (Straiton, “Daedalus”). In more modern versions of the device, “for a split second you can actually feel yourself in both places at once” (Burton, “Fortunate Son”), and this establishes continuity (Grech “The Trick”). Hence, McCoy’s misgivings in this respect may be groundless.

McCoy expresses no such apprehensions when utilizing contemporary (twenty-third-century) medical technology, which in the 1960s and 1970s prefigured modern twentieth- and twenty-first-century point-of-care investigations, imaging scanners, multifunction monitors, portable diagnostic devices, laser scalpels, and more. Indeed, when traveling back in time to our current era, McCoy scorns medical techniques, with utterances such as:

“Sounds more like the goddam Spanish Inquisition.”

“Damn medievalism here! ... Chemotherapy! ... Fundoscopic examinations!”

“Dialysis? My god, what is this, the Dark Ages?” (Nimoy, *The Voyage Home*)

However, McCoy’s knowledge is in turn belittled by aliens who are around six thousand centuries older: “A physician? In contrast to what we are, you are a prancing, savage medicine man. You dare defy one you should be on your knees worshipping?” (Senensky, “Return To Tomorrow”).

McCoy's cantankerous humanity is best brought home to us through the revelation of his personal demons. He is riven by his part in helping his father to commit suicide in order to relieve him from intractable chronic pain (from an unspecified disease). McCoy's personal anguish and "pain is the deepest of all." McCoy tells his father: "I'm here, Dad. I'm with you, Dad.... I've done everything I can do. You've got to hang on.... all my knowledge and I can't save him.... You call this alive?" Unfortunately, shortly after he turns off his father's life-support machine, a cure is discovered for his father's illness, hence McCoy's guilt and angst (Shatner, *The Final Frontier*).

Catchphrases

In *Trek* as in other series, characters are sometimes stereotyped into saying "a series of lines that fans readily recognize:

some that are favorites in particular episodes [...] and some which are closely identified with characters" (Amesly 68). In McCoy's case, this is used as an excuse to further emphasize his humanity, through the utilization of two typical utterances.

McCoy declares someone dead on twenty occasions with a catchphrase identical or close to, "He's dead/He's dead, Jim" (Amesly), a phrase that has entered into popular parlance and culture, to the extent that Kelley joked that this line ought to appear on his tombstone (Kaplan).

Yet another catchphrase is "I'm a doctor, not a(n)..." which is used when McCoy is asked to perform competencies beyond his training. These utterances have become known as "doctorisms" and McCoy's are listed hereunder:

"I'm a doctor, not a flesh peddler." "The Return of the Archons" (Joseph Pevney)

Read This recently read and recommended by Darrell Schweitzer

Of Eggs, Chickens, and the Fall of Rome

Macrobius (or Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius) was a writer of the early fifth century CE, about whom little is known, save that he may have been a Romanized Greek from Egypt. He wrote, in Latin, the *Saturnalia* (available in three volumes from the Loeb Classical Library), which is part of a genre popular in late antiquity, descended from the dialogues of Plato but devolved into light reading. The *Saturnalia* is in the form of a lengthy imaginary dinner conversation between (mostly) real people, who were not necessarily acquainted or even alive when the book was written. It is a vast compendium of curious lore somewhat akin to the *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius or *The Learned Banqueters* of Athenaeus, filled with discourses on the divinity of the Sun, the universal wisdom of Vergil, arcane points of grammar, and even speculations on the workings of the human digestive system.


Toward the end of all this, as the characters and perhaps the author have become a little punch-drunk over such an avalanche of erudition, we find the following:

Evangelus ... in a trifling mood, said, "Away with these subjects, which you ventilate only to parade your chatter: instead, if your wisdom has the skill, I want to learn from you whether the egg or the chicken existed first." (Vol III, 295)

There follow three pages of explication in the finest style of ancient philosophy, presenting both sides of the matter

without drawing any conclusion. In favor of the egg, we are told that "the first stage of anything is still incomplete and unformed and is shaped and perfected as time passes and skill grows." Thus the bird forms from the originally shapeless matter inside the egg. The egg is even worshipped by devotees of Father Liber as "a likeness of the universe, which by general agreement is held to be the first beginning of all that is."

In opposition to this: "an egg is neither the beginning nor the end to that which it belongs: the beginning is the seed, the end is the fully formed bird, while the egg is the processing of the seed." An egg could no more exist before a chicken than a womb could exist before a woman. But where did the first chicken then come from? "A considerable number of living things that arise completely formed from the earth and rain, like mice in Egypt, like frogs, snakes, and similar creatures elsewhere...." Birds were therefore formed perfectly by nature and given the power to reproduce themselves. (Such a notion—spontaneous generation—dates back well before Aristotle and was not fully refuted until Pasteur did it in 1859. It would have sounded quite plausible to fifth-century readers.)

One suspects that Macrobius himself was a chicken partisan, but it does not matter. How time-binding to realize that this eternal question vexed the best minds of the educated elite sixteen centuries ago. There is also a note of warning here as we imagine them at their leisure, obliviously debating such things against the backdrop of the steady tread of the Visigothic hordes on their way to Rome. 

"I'm a doctor, not a bricklayer." "The Devil in the Dark" (Joseph Pevney)
 "I'm a surgeon, not a psychiatrist." "The City on the Edge of Forever" (Joseph Pevney)
 "I'm a doctor, not a scientist." "Metamorphosis" (Ralph Senensky)
 "I'm a doctor, not a physicist." "Metamorphosis" (Ralph Senensky)
 "I'm a doctor, not an escalator." "Friday's Child" (Joseph Pevney)
 "I'm a doctor, not a mechanic." "The Doomsday Machine" (Marc Daniels) and "The Empath" (Joyce Muskat)
 "I'm a doctor, not an engineer." "Mirror, Mirror" (Marc Daniels)
 "I'm a doctor, not a magician." "The Deadly Year" (Joseph Pevney)
 "I'm a doctor, not a coal miner." "The Empath" (Joyce Muskat)
 "What am I, a doctor or a moon shuttle conductor?" "The Corbomite Maneuver" (Joseph Sargent)

Specific Episodes

McCoy plays an important supporting role and is often a principal protagonist. For example, he is a central character in "The Man Trap" (Daniels), the very first episode aired, where he finds that an old flame of his has been replaced by a deadly shape-shifter. In another episode, he is actually killed but later brought to life (Sparr, "Shore Leave"). In a particularly poignant episode, McCoy discovers he is dying of "xenopolycythemia," an incurable disease, only to find both love and a cure among an alien species (Leader, "For the World Is Hollow and I Have Touched the Sky").

McCoy also uses his medical knowledge in order to save a landing party from a disease that swiftly causes insanity, followed by terminal and accelerated old age (McEveety, "Miri"). Yet another landing party is saved from terminal and accelerated aging in "The Deadly Years" (Pevney). And when captured by a group of aliens who have exceptionally strong paranormal powers, McCoy discovers how to infuse the landing party with the same powers (Alexander, "Plato's Stepchildren"), allowing the landing party and crew to escape.

His expertise also leads to healing alien beings, including, most notably, a "Horta." Spock notes that "this is a silicon-based form of life. Doctor McCoy's medical knowledge will be totally useless." Kirk retorts: "He's a healer, let him heal." McCoy agrees with Spock, exclaiming "You can't be serious. That thing is virtually made out of stone! ... I'm a doctor, not a bricklayer," provoking Kirk into stating: "It's wounded. Badly. You've got to help it.... You're a healer. There's a patient. That's an order." When McCoy succeeds, he triumphantly exclaims: "By golly, Jim, I'm beginning to think I can cure a rainy day!" (Pevney, "The Devil in the Dark").

Both Kirk's and Spock's lives are repeatedly saved by McCoy's medical skills. For example, he induces a fake state of death in Kirk through the injection of a neuroparalyzing drug during a mortal duel (Pevney, "Amok Time"). In his turn,

Spock's life is saved when McCoy temporarily learns neurosurgical techniques that allow him to reimplant Spock's brain, which had been removed and stolen by an alien culture (Daniels, "Spock's Brain"). McCoy also manages to save an entire human colonized planet from large amoeboid aliens, even when Spock is incapacitated and unable to help (Daugherty, "Operation Annihilate!").

McCoy's humanity occasionally results in catastrophic accidents, and indeed, the entire timeline is changed when McCoy accidentally overdoses on a powerful stimulant, and in a paranoid frenzy, hurls himself into a time machine, goes back in time, and alters history. Fortunately, Kirk and Spock are able to go back in time and restore the future (Pevney, "The City on the Edge of Forever").

McCoy the Interdisciplinary

In many of these as well as in other episodes, McCoy reprises the role of an interdisciplinary, demonstrating the practical skills and knowledge of a biological researcher and not just those of a doctor. Such traits are encouraged by the genre, which tends to promote scientific skills as well as interdisciplinary collaboration while generally rejecting narrow specialization of the contemporary scientific type (Grech, "Interdisciplinarity"). McCoy can truly be said to be "the ultimate space family doctor" (Petranj 132).

For example, McCoy is a forensic pathologist, well versed in autopsy work in both animals (Matheson, "The Enemy Within") and human (Daniels, "The Man Trap").

Ethos

McCoy's spirit can be captured by four statements.

"Compassion, that's the one thing no machine ever had. Maybe it's the one thing that keeps men ahead of them" (Lucas, "The Ultimate Computer"). This simple and self-explanatory passage enjoins us to heed Frankenstein's plight, as science and mechanism

offer a glimpse of a liberated and empowered humanity, which could be realized thanks to the wonderful possibilities of technology; but so too, they indicate the terrible price of that seductive empowerment in the substitution for our humanity of the qualities and characteristics of the machine (Fitting, "Futurecop" 345).

In addition, McCoy exclaims that "war is never imperative" (McEveety, "Balance of Terror"), a particularly important injunction from an important crewmember of a starship that could theoretically raze the surface of an entire planet at will.

Phlegmatism is implied in McCoy's observation that "Life and death are seldom logical" (Gist, "The Galileo Seven"), an unanimous acceptance of an unshakeable *status quo*.

And wry irony is also implicit in the statement that "The bureaucratic mentality is the only constant in the universe" (Nimoy, *The Voyage Home*), a sentiment shared by many doctors in contemporary medical practice.

McCoy's Philosophy

The series's (and McCoy's) philosophical principle is Kantian and deontological, affirming that the moral worth of any action lies within the action itself, irrespective of the consequences, as opposed to the utilitarian teleological notion that an action's moral value is to be found in its overall benefits, implying that the ends may justify the means (as argued by Eberl and Decker).

Trek's ethics is slightly modified from the Kantian version in that while Kantian thought is that only rational beings have intrinsic worth, we routinely attribute value and therefore the right to be treated with respect to humans who are not rational, including infants and the severely mentally impaired. This also extends to animals and is a philosophy espoused by the modern philosopher Tom Regan. The United Federation of Planets, including its doctors, champions this attitude, with nonrational beings, earthly or alien, treated with Regan's "respect principle."

Life is rife with choices, some of which are unpleasant. Sartrean philosophy states that we are completely responsible for our actions, potentially leading to anguish arising from the awareness of the burden of responsibility we hold. This also causes a degree of despair as we must rely only on that which we can affect or accomplish. All *Trek* doctors exhibit signs of such classical Sartrean "existential angst" due to decisions that they are forced to make during their work, as noted above when McCoy allows his father to die.

Influencing Life Choices

DeForest Kelley himself considered studying medicine before venturing into acting and was pleased with fan mail even twenty years after the TV series that revealed that a substantial number of fans had become doctors of all kinds, veterinarians, nurses, counselors, researchers, and animal and environmental advocates (Rioux 273). "He could have only been one healer—no one knew how many he had helped create with Dr. McCoy" (Rioux 273). As Kelley himself observed, one "can win awards ... but to influence the youth of this country ... is an award that is not handed out by the industry" (Rioux 273).

Discussion

The original *Star Trek* series was created and broadcast during the peak of the Cold War, and it presented rapprochement, "offering an image of the future in which humankind had overcome its divisions and united in a near utopian Federation" (Petrany 132). This Federation would grow further over the years and the ensuing *Trek* series, reflecting the unquenchable thirst of sf fans to believe in a brighter and better future.

The success of this future is predicated on the evolution of science in the years to come, yielding technologies that better our quality and ways of life. Doctors form part of this league of scientists since they are practical users of *techne* in their role as healers.

McCoy describes himself as "just an old country doctor" (Pevney, "The Deadly Years") who is perfectly transparent, with a caustic and plain-spoken manner that evidenced all of the traits required of a real country doctor. This upholds Westfahl's contention that doctors in sf often survive artificially within a "bell jar" (Westfahl 36), requiring a sort of anachronistic shield, a time bubble that maintains the status quo, underlining the homely, conservative, and therefore somehow safe nature of such individuals.

McCoy's humaneness is undeniable, highlighting a deeply caring man who repeatedly demonstrates a willingness to place his patient's life and interests ahead of his own, even if the patient belongs to an alien species. Truly, "Dr. McCoy's occasional crankiness cannot hide his caring spirit" (Petrany 132).

All of the traits highlighted above confirm that audiences, actors, directors, and producers, like patients, would prefer us doctors to be "one of us" and approachable. We even know him by his nickname, "Bones." He is capable of handling advanced technologies "yet shines as an unflinching patient advocate" (Petrany 132). It is also reassuring for the patient to know that advanced medical technology does not blind doctors to their own frail humanity or to the individual and tailored care that each patient expects and should be given. On the other hand, McCoy may well embody that which most doctors wish to attain, a humorous "sense of irascibility with real passion for life and doing the right thing" (Urban). ▲

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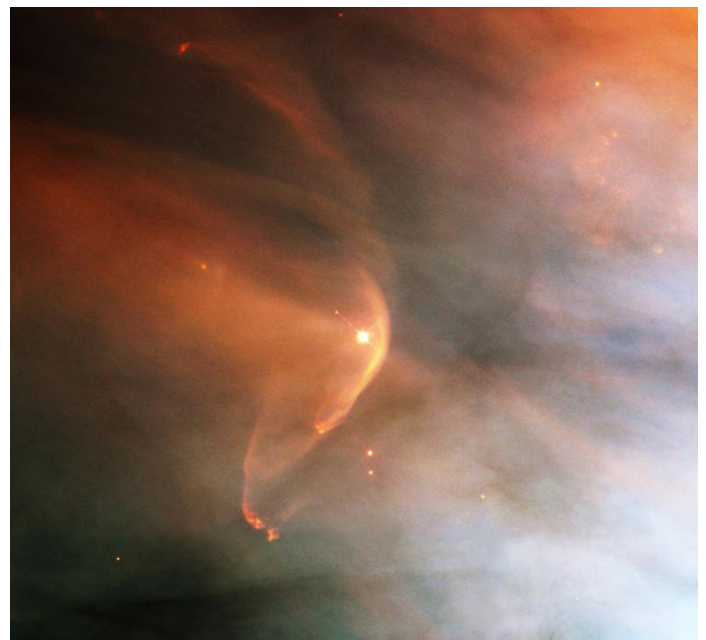


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