Religions of Star Trek

Lesson 4: What Does It Mean to Be Human? "Data: Man and Machine"
Star Date 2.28.2021

Objectives: Explore the second of the Five Core Questions—*What does it mean to be human and alive?*—and how it relates to the way Star Trek explores that same question.

Materials: Teachers should download lesson plan and attachments onto their desktop, login to Unity's YouTube account.

Time allotment: Suggested for 60 minute online class.

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1. **Zoom Welcome** (as youth arrive into the breakout classroom)

   - Teachers and youth are expected to log on to zoom at 11:15am (15 min before class begins at 11:30am) so that everyone can be organized into correct breakout classrooms. We want to make sure there is an attentive adult in each breakout classroom with youth.

   - Greet youth and ask everyone to correct their display name as needed. Ask everyone to select "gallery view" to see everyone else.

   - Staff will take attendance.

2. **Zoom Icebreaker: "What would you take?"** (5 minutes, begin while waiting for everyone to arrive)

   Taking turns, have each youth respond to the following scenario: "You have been exiled to a deserted island for a year. In addition to survival essentials, you may take one piece of music, one book, and one luxury item you can carry with you. What would you take and why?" Everyone takes a moment to think before sharing their choices with others in the group.

3. **Chalice Lighting:**

   Light a chalice at your home, invite youth to light their own chalices and say together: *"We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith, the light of truth and the warmth of love."*

   Teacher reads: (from science fiction author, Isaac Asimov) *"Part of the inhumanity of the computer is that, once it is competently programmed and working smoothly, it is completely honest."*

4. **Brief Check-in** (5 minutes)

Continue weekly ritual/check-in (e.g. sharing a joy or sorrow so that everyone feels present in class).

5. **Introduction: Robots—Man or Machine?** (20 minutes)

Teacher summarizes: The idea of intelligent robots working/living alongside humans is not new. In 1942 Isaac Asimov, a master science fiction writer of the 20th century, wrote the "Three Laws of Robotics"—rules of conduct (or code) that guide how robots should interact with humans and one other.

Screen share lesson attachment 4a (Three Laws of Robotics) and invite a youth to read the three laws aloud:

(a) A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

(b) A robot must obey the orders given to it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

(c) A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

Teacher summarizes: Asimov also believed that humans should follow these rules as well. His writing influenced not just future science fiction writers, but future computer programmers and robotic engineers.

Questions for Discussion:

- What is the difference between a robot and artificial intelligence?

- When does a robot stop being a "tool"?

- Why do you think it is important to incorporate the Three Laws into a robot or artificial intelligence?

- What might be the consequence of not coding the Three Laws?

Teacher summarizes: In all the Star Trek series, we see the influence of Isaac Asimov. The ship's computer is an example of Artificial Intelligence used as a tool to help humans in their work. The Enterprise crew also encounter artificial intelligence and androids, but they are often lacking the "Three Laws" as they are creations of alien technology. Still, they offer an opportunity to explore what happens in the encounter between Artificial Intelligence and human beings. Most of the Original Series (OS) episodes maintain the superiority of human intellect that can go beyond logic to an appreciation of paradox. This human capacity triumphs over the cold and sterile Artificial Intelligence, sometimes in comical ways.

In the original series, we saw the character Spock—with his stoic nature and suppression of emotion—help writers play with the idea of what it is to be human. But they also used Spock to show the flaws of being purely logical, often accusing him of being cold and computerized; qualities less than ideal for a life form. In fact, it would be difficult to find any examples of robots/computers/androids in the OS that were treated as life forms.

Questions for Discussion:

- What do you know about Data?

- Compare Spock with Data. In what important ways are they different?

Teacher summarizes: When the android character "Data" appears in the Next Generation Star Trek series (NG), it's a revelation that he is considered a life form at all. Gene Roddenberry and new writers found fertile ground to explore not just what it is to be *human*, but what it means to be *alive*. Data is a machine, but he seems to have something no previous Artificial Intelligence had: a consciousness, a soul. *Consciousness* is a tricky topic to explore, let alone the *soul*. These questions go deep into what it means to be a sentient being.

Data is also a human creation, the culmination of a dream of blending mechanical engineering with computerized Artificial Intelligence. His creator, Dr. Noonian Soong, seems to have incorporated the "Three Laws," but thinking that Data was not quite ready to handle the confusion and power of emotions, Soong left emotions out in creating Data.

Similar to Spock, the NG writers use Data to explore human relations, emotions, and behaviors. Unlike Spock, Data wants to understand emotions and tries to learn, often asking blunt questions about related human behaviors. Data is curiously driven to become more human, making him seem less robotic to the viewer. In the very first episode, First Officer Riker calls Data "Pinocchio." Another episode compares Data to the Tin Man from the *Wizard of Oz* (who lacks the emotional heart), and like the Tin Man, Data may actually turn out to have had a heart all along.

6. **Watch and Discuss Episode Clips of Data** (30 minutes)

   (a) **Teacher summarizes:** In the NG episode "All Good Things," Capt. Picard relives various points in his life, including his first meeting with Data.

   - This clip humorously shows how difficult it can be to be to take human speech literally:

     Screen share (with audio) https://youtu.be/hRG7fZuQSk0M (1.11 min)

   (b) **Teacher summarizes:** There are many wonderful NG episodes that show Data's exploration of what it is to be human and alive. Data often confronts the prejudice of being merely a machine and not a life form. In the episode "The Quality of Life," Data discovers a possible emergent life in a robotic tool:

- In the first clip Data explains that consciousness is an "emergent" property of life:

  Screen share (with audio) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSXffX8weME (0.26 min)

- Later in the episode, he risks the lives of others to protect this possible new life: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSJhXK5eCZ4 (1:00 min)

(c) Questions for Discussion:

- What can you determine as the difference between a machine and a life form? Between a robot and a human?

- Are there parallels to ethical debates surrounding abortion (when is a fetus a human child?) and euthanasia (when is a person no longer a person?)?

(d) Teacher summarizes: Data gets into all sorts of situations where he is confronted by the complexities of human relations: dealing with friendships, enemies, sex, love, death and self-worth.

- In the episode "In Theory," Data becomes involved in a romantic relationship. He tries hard to make it work, but it doesn't work out. As in most relationships, both people are a part of why it didn't work:

  Screen share (with audio) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYvWdDPiNz4 (3:36 min)

- Although Data lacks emotions, he still manages to show some very human characteristics. In the episode "Peak Performance," Data struggles with loss of confidence: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHERkWZEnUg (4:31 min)

- He tries to make sense of his own experiences of trust, loss, death, and mortality:

  - In the episode "Legacy," Data defines friendship: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcqIYccgUdM (0.45 min)

  - In the same episode "Legacy," he asks Riker about loss and trust: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgGEZ_uqt9M (1:54 min)

(e) Questions for Discussion:

- What do you think of Data's unique point of view on these subjects?

- Data misses a lot of human social cues. Do you think that problem is limited to aliens and androids?

- Data does not have human emotions, but he clearly seems to be affected by the relationships he makes. Why do you think this is important?

7. **Extinguish the chalice**, saying together: *"May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts."*

8. **Leave zoom breakout classroom:** wait until all youth have left, click "Leave" then "Leave Meeting."

Viewing clips, in order of sequence:

- In the NG episode "All Good Things," Capt. Picard relives various points in his life, including his first meeting with Data. This clip humorously shows how difficult it can be to be to take human speech literally: https://youtu.be/hRG7fZuQSk0M (1.11 min)

- In the episode "The Quality of Life," Data discovers a possible emergent life in a robotic tool. Data explains that consciousness is an "emergent" property of life: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSXffX8weME (0.26 min)

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