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An Exercise in Exceptions: Personhood, Divergency, and Ableism in the STAR TREK Franchise

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An Exercise in Exceptions: Personhood, Divergency, and Ableism
in the *Star Trek* Franchise

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, for being my rock throughout my college and graduate education, and without whom this paper most certainly would have never been written. Additionally, I am thankful to her for introducing me to science fiction, and to *Star Trek* in particular, as well as listening to me rant about Data, Julian Bashir, and the Doctor and their characterizations long before the idea for this thesis was ever conceived.

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Abstract

In 1987, more than two decades after *Star Trek: The Original Series* aired on television for the first time, the Enterprise returned to delight audiences with an all-new crew in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. With the new generation came new issues and adventures for the crew and the audience to explore, and the popularity of the show led to the production of three successful spin-offs. These four new shows in the *Star Trek* franchise dealt with more complex plots and commentaries than the original series before them; three characters in particular – Lt. Commander Data, Dr. Julian Bashir, and the Emergency Medical Hologram – demonstrate certain questions and issues about personhood and humanity. There is an exploration of what it means to be human in every character’s storyline, from Data winning his right to self-determination, to Dr. Bashir revealing he is genetically enhanced, and to the EMH discovering his autonomy. Through these characters, *Star Trek* takes the audience on a journey of self-discovery and identity to find what lies beyond the human, while opening up room for discussions about neurodiversity and neurodivergent representation, intersecting oppressions and limitations, genetics, victim-blaming, and ableism.

Chapter One: Humanity: The Final Frontier

There have been many Captains and crews throughout the *Star Trek* franchise, from Captain Kirk to Captain Janeway, each one a mediator of uncertainty and representative of the moral good. Since the original series aired in 1966, *Star Trek* has spawned over a dozen television programs and films, hundreds of books, a large catalog of merchandise, and a fanbase that stretches over sixty years. Despite its longevity and its plethora of ever-changing content, one particular theme has managed to meld into the essential storytelling of *Star Trek* itself: an exploration of the human experience. The show almost always follows the crew of the given ship or station on their journey to grow as people, and in some cases discover who they are. All the while, the crew as a whole is exploring space and all it has to offer, to learn and develop their understanding of the world around them. The opening lines of each episode of *Star Trek: The Original Series*, and later, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, paint a vivid picture of exploration synonymously describing human betterment and the ultimate adventure. The canvas that picture is painted upon is another constant in *Star Trek* lore: The United Federation of Planets.

The Federation is the utopian governing body within the *Star Trek* Universe, originally made up of humans from the distant future, and a hyperlogical race of aliens called the Vulcans. It would later expand to include the Klingons, a warrior race often set as the villains in stories from the original series. As a government, the Federation seems very attractive to the viewer: there is no established currency as most monetary trade has been abolished, anyone and everyone

is an equal citizen, and there are no class struggles preventing people from joining the occupation of their dreams. Leonard Nimoy described the Federation in an interview with Charlie Rose as “Simple. Plain and simple...It’s a morally structured society, and I think it is a very, very, desirable society” (153). Originally airing 1966 Cold War America, it makes sense that this perfect utopian society is the basic governing body the crew of the Enterprise belong to, as they are radical, peacekeeping explorers, often finding themselves in sticky situations with other civilizations where a strong understanding of morality might come in handy. However, as time went on, in both the show and in reality, the image of the Federation as a simplistic peacekeeping society evolves too. In *The Next Generation*, the viewer begins to associate the Federation more as a governing body that mostly means well, but often forgets the importance of individuality in the face of utilitarian philosophy. One such instance includes when Captain Picard has to fight for the basic rights to self-determination and autonomy of one of his crew, simply because Data is a different kind of life that has no actual legal basis for being a person, and the Federation cannot look past his potential uses. In three of the more popular spin-off series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and *Star Trek: Voyager*, the Federation’s morals have skewed ever so slightly to allow for drama and conflict between the Captains and bureaucracy. Of course, this makes for good television, especially in the 1980’s when the spin-off first aired: both society and media is more complex than it was twenty years previously, and the desire for individuality continues to grow. But even with such moral grayness, the Federation is still a place where anyone can be anyone without prejudice, unless you are a new form of artificial life. Or a genetically enhanced human. Or an accidentally sentient hologram. The Federation can claim it is a well-adjusted potential futuristic version of today’s human race, but it does not erase the subtle injustices it subscribes to throughout the franchise. And yet, those

infractions to humankind can be analyzed and utilized to look at a parallel view of the Federation, and humanity: an “ever shifting” human experience between “nature, culture, human, and machine” (Weiss, 188).

Across all three spin-offs, there is an interesting emphasis on physical and mental abilities. In the future, *Star Trek* suggests that most illness and debilitating disabilities have all but disappeared from society, and those that have not are easily accommodated and accepted as a normal part of life. Furthermore, diversity is celebrated and encouraged by all, to the point where prejudice is almost a non-issue. However, while it may not be so blatant in Federation society as it is in life outside television, prejudice still exists in the *Star Trek* universe, and even in the federation itself. In the stories of Data, Dr. Bashir, and The Doctor, the viewer is exposed to the trials and tribulations of being disabled in a world where many believe disability and neurodiversity are finally accepted as “normal,” when in fact, ableism still affects the lives of many. Ableism in this sense not necessarily being a hatred of neurodiversity or disability, but instead a lack of understanding and comprehension brought on by the widely held belief that society has outgrown the need to advocate and inform others on behalf of marginalized persons. The need is still very much real, and the evidence to prove it is present in the role the Federation plays in each character’s struggle for autonomy and personhood. Despite being largely inclusive, there are still some people the Federation and Starfleet ignore, and in some cases, outright condemn for their very existence, out of fear and uncertainty, or simply out of ignorance.

The Federation is not as enlightened as it appears to be in *The Original Series*, rather: it is a product of mid-to-late 20th Century American idealism and the ability to disguise current issues American society was facing as thematic storytelling through the lens of science fiction and futurism. Utilizing technology, non-human characters, and highly-stylized situations, the

Star Trek franchise is able to not only explore the potentialities of progress in a future society, but to examine and comment on the shortcomings it saw in the same society. In doing so, the show manages to push boundaries in television without so much offense to their viewers, allowing them a glance at possible solutions and outcomes of specific issues that still exist in American society today. Essentially, *Star Trek* really is a show about exploration, but not of outer space. It delves deep into human nature and how society operates and challenges points of view that are often shared commonly among viewers. Present in most singular episodic plots is a layered analysis of social constructs and the nuances that surround them, as the characters of *Star Trek* “seek out” new people and ideas and try to learn from different individuals' experiences and perspectives, most of which are still relevant today. It boldly goes where no one has gone before: an honest, and flawed, interpretation of the future of humanity and social constructs through the representation of intersecting issues and ideals.

Chapter Two: Data

Lt. Commander Data and the Proof of Personhood

In 1987, almost 20 years after *Star Trek: The Original Series* was canceled, CBS aired *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. It was a very different show to the original: it featured an entirely new cast, with a new Captain, and a new Enterprise. Set 100 years later, the new series was very distinctive from its predecessor, and set itself apart from the swashbuckling days of William Shatner's Kirk. Not only did this drastic change in style and period become a precedent for all *Star Trek* series which came afterwards, but it did a remarkable job of bringing *Star Trek* into the future. Not further into the potential unexplored future of canon, but from the flamboyant, passionate, chaos of the 1960's, to the abstract, carpeted, boldness of the 80's. In the two decades it was off the air, Roddenberry wanted *Star Trek* to grow into the new style of the decade alongside original fans, and yet still appeal to the new, younger audiences. It also worked for the storytelling of the show: it allowed a regeneration of topics, issues, tone, and characters, to refresh the franchise and give it new life, while realistically simulating the passage of time within the plotline of the show. Of course, with this rejuvenation came several changes to denote what progress the Federation had been making while off air: the Klingons are no longer the enemy, if still not on the best of terms with Humans and Starfleet, and Vulcans are now not the only non-human lifeforms to be enlisted in Starfleet. Furthermore, technology has advanced significantly. Replicators are available in every mess hall, personal quarters, and Captain's ready

room on board each ship, ready to manipulate basic molecules into fully cooked meals. The holodeck is a remarkable piece of engineering that allows the crew to step into a seamlessly realistic simulation of anywhere with anyone at any time. And possibly the most impressive advancement of technology is the ability to build life from purely technological roots, as is the case with Lt. Commander Data. Data is a humanoid android and a member of Captain Picard's senior staff on board the Enterprise. Despite the science behind his existence being so complex, his character begins as a very two dimensional being: he is artificial, and has no emotions; but Data would like to understand and be accepted by humans. He wants to be as human as he can be, because there is a barrier put up between himself and the rest of the crew in the form of othering. Data is visually othered: Brent Spiner is painted in silver/white paint so that his skin looks bloodless, his eyes are creamy yellow that denotes no natural pigments. He walks stiffly, and disjointedly, not naturally as a biological human would. He frequently is used for his intelligence and his super strength, both of which are part of his design. And he cannot speak in contractions: nuanced language is difficult for him to understand, especially heavy emotions and humor. However, as the series progresses in every Data-centric plot the viewer can see the little adaptations and improvements he makes to his character, as though he is building up his personality to seem more like a person.

The episode "Measure of a Man" begins with a poker game; poker being a game of chance, and of bluff. Chance and bluffing are not things one might associate with machinery and technology, so this juxtaposition set us up for the coming events. But in this game, Data learns that there is an "essence of memory" that cannot be translated into downloadable information, and no amount of reading will ever surpass the value of experience. Lt. Bruce Maddox, from Starfleet does not understand this aspect of Data, only seeing him as a machine, referring to him

constantly as “it,” treating him like an object. That is why he has come to the Enterprise to collect Data and bring him back to Starfleet for experiments, in an attempt to recreate his positronic brain and possibly build an army of extremely useful Android Starfleet officers. Maddox does not believe Data has that “ineffable quality” that living beings have, and thus lies the main argument of the hearing that takes place halfway through the episode, to determine if Data is a person and should therefore have rights. He asserts that Data is not “sentient,” or a being who is able to perceive or feel things. Picard argues simply that Data is sentient. There are good points in favor of Maddox, as demonstrated in Riker’s first argument, but also in the body of the show itself. Data is a machine built by man, for man. He does not have emotions, or what is perceived as the human standards for emotions. But arguably, if the Federation were to judge based solely on construction and emotions, then Vulcans and Klingons would not be people due to their own difference in temperaments and emotionality to humans; and on the grounds of being man made, then it can be argued that in a sense, we are all man made as we are all technically conceived and birthed by a fellow human being.

Sentience in the *Star Trek* universe brings up an interesting philosophical debate about what constitutes humanity. At what point does society acknowledge someone as “human?” In “Measure of a Man,” Picard believes Data is sentient because he is alive, and he has memories, experiences, and relationships that make him, and therefore should be by every definition, a person. However, in American history alone one can find many examples of humans mistreating other humans as less than people; why would an android fare any better? Furthermore, it is what makes Data different that calls into question his personhood: he is physically made up of wires and circuits rather than flesh and blood, and does not have emotions, at least not like what other humans would expect. However, Data is not the only one in the whole Federation who uses

technology to survive in a way unlike other humans: Geordi La Forge uses a VISOR reliant upon infrared light to see, having been born blind. In *Voyager*, Seven of Nine is part Borg due to having been assimilated, but her humanity is never called into question, even though she still has Borg technology attached to her body. Hugh, a Borg brought on to the Enterprise is even treated like a person very early on, and he is more machine than flesh. It can be argued then that it is not Data's physical technological attributes that are being questioned so much as his inability to connect emotionally. Maddox assumes Data is an "it" because he does not apply identity to Data, whether because he does not understand him or because he does not care to try. It is impossible to know whether Maddox would still have behaved the same throughout the episode if Data had been neurotypically presenting, but the fact that he assumes that Data should be able to connect emotionally is he were more than just a machine, demonstrates the ableist misunderstanding of why some people seem not to feel and express themselves in a way that resembles others. Data is being punished then, in a sense, for not seeming more approachable and emotionally complex. The vague term "sentience" is simply the vehicle by which Picard is now forced to prove that the expression of emotions has no bearing on an individual's personhood.

Because of the gray areas in what constitutes as sentient, Picard asks Maddox to explain his criteria of a sentient being, as his opinion is the one for which the hearing is even being conducted. His definition is as follows: "intelligence, self-awareness, consciousness." Picard is able to prove that Data is intelligent and self-aware, but he cannot not prove Data, or anyone has consciousness, because it is immeasurable as a concept. One cannot determine whether one is a sentient being truly, because there is no actual measure by which one is a man. And if Data *is* a man, a person who has protected rights, then creating an army of Datas to serve the Federation, then the situation becomes the Federation creating a new race of beings and enslaving them.

Picard addresses the court, saying “Starfleet was founded to seek out new life; well, there it sits, waiting.” Captain Louvoius, the JAG officer present and the officer acting as judge, concedes that Data is an unknown to her and all of them, and she is not qualified to determine whether or not he “has a soul” but that she must give him the freedom to explore that for himself. In doing so, she upholds the morals of Starfleet and the Federation in protecting the rights of all living beings, and sets a precedent that officially gives Data rights as an android.

Star Trek is about exploration and boldly going “where no one has gone before.” So, it would make sense that legally, they would always be willing to entertain new ideas and concepts as previously unknown facts. An enlightened society, the Federation relies on truth and conscience to dictate regulation, rather than allowing rules to consume their morality. When Picard is scrambling to come up with a good argument, a conversation he has with Guinan in *Ten-Forward* is extremely enlightening. Guinan, played by Whoopi Goldberg, and one of the people of color in the main cast, points out the poignant yet overlooked issue with Data being ruled the property of Starfleet, an issue that is bigger than any one person involved. She points out that historically in many worlds, there have always been “disposable” people, who do the dirty work for others who don’t want to because of hazards or difficulty. And a whole army of Datas would mean “whole generations of disposable people,” or an enslaved race. And that is the real, bigger issue at stake here: the Federation does not condone slavery or the institution of making persons into property, but if Data is a person who is about to be replicated for Federation advancement, then slavery is what they will have. It is “the truth that is obscured behind a comfortable, easy euphemism: property.”

In his work, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant advises us to “act in such a way as to treat humanity... always as an end and never merely as a means.” This is

an early concept of human rights that rings true throughout the episode. There cannot be disposable people, as no one is a tool for others. Data is a person, and therefore despite not being a human, shall be treated as an end rather than a means to an end. It is this distinction that is of importance when viewing Data and other characters throughout *Star Trek* that helps determine the status of personhood for these people. The Emergency Medical Hologram on *Star Trek Voyager*, for example, is used as a means for medical assistance, despite developing an entire personality, with thoughts, dreams, desires, and emotions- something even Data is never determined to have- yet still must wait several seasons before being completely recognized as a person in his own right. And the importance of the distinction between ends and means is not only applicable to the technology in *Star Trek*. Android and holograms are simply allegories for those who have had, or who are currently trying to prove their worth and their status as a person in our own society. In fact, android and/or robots, and even aliens as allegories for oppressed people is a trope of science fiction overall, as featured in works such as *I, Robot* (Isaac Asimov), and *Alien Nation* (Graham Baker). It may be a question of the future, with artificial intelligence becoming more and more advanced and breaching into the category of life, but it is more currently a question of our past; the oppression of people who simply wanted to be recognized as human beings.

The episode title “The Measure of a Man” is a paraphrase of Protagoras’ famous phrase “Man is the measure of all things,” or more accurately “Of all things the measure is man: of those that are, that they are; and of those that are not, that they are not.” The general interpretation of this phrase is that things do not themselves hold any value or truth, but in fact, “simply exist;” but we as individuals are what determines their value and the value of ourselves through our own interpretations, perceptions, and experiences. In the episode, Data talks of an

“ineffable quality” to memory that is unreplaceable, because while one might be able to obtain information, one might not be able to understand the “essence of the experience.” It is Data’s experience that gives him value, that gives his life value. He is not a mere machine, because he has the ability to determine value and truth in his own way, such as caring for his friends, his pet cat Spot, and his personal belongings. And it is this ability that philosophically proves once and for all that Data is a person, and he does have a soul.

Data and Accidental Autistic Representation

Part of Data’s struggle in the series involves learning to relate to humans while having “no” emotions, whereas humans are extremely emotional beings. Throughout the series, Data struggles with emotions, and understanding the social responses emotions lead to, in order to better support and connect to his friends. According to The American Psychological Association, children with autism often feel in similar ways. In many cases, autistic adults and children have a hard time understanding social emotions, and therefore seem emotionally and socially inept, or emotionless. Oftentimes they will try to mimic other non-autistic people and their demonstration of emotionality to seem more “normal” and connect with others. However, just because they do not understand emotionality and social queues, does not mean they do not experience feelings themselves. It is hinted at several times in the show that Data may have emotions hidden within him, but that he just does not experience them with the same expression as a neurotypical human would. He wants to help his friends in both life and death situations, and in mundane ones. He likes to spend time on the holodeck, and playing games with his friends and coworkers. He wants to learn about himself, his origins, his father. He even owns a pet cat named Spot. All of these details about his character would suggest that Data is capable of curiosity, courage, and love; and

subjectively, he is capable of experiencing many strong emotions. The fact that Data's struggles, despite originally being written solely to highlight the aspects of life that a living machine from the future might struggle with also somehow encapsulates a common experience felt amongst autistic people is not lost on the viewers.

"As Data learned what it means to be human, I did too," says Katherine Taylor, in her article "I Am Not a Robot." Taylor grew up watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and identifying with Data, as a person on the autism spectrum. She points out that before Data, the character that was often associated with autism was Spock, from the original series. What is interesting about that association is that Spock's inability to express emotion was not inherent, rather a conscious choice, conditioned by his Vulcan heritage. He was trying to separate himself from humanity, rather than assimilate into it. At the same time, he felt like showing emotion would make him a lesser Vulcan. While Spock's feelings of displacement are reminiscent of an autistic person's own feelings of disconnection, they do not parallel the experiences of an autistic person as Data's own struggle to find humanity for himself. Vulcans purposefully repress their emotions, because they believe extreme emotions lead to illogical choices, and logic is a concept they thrive on. Spock struggled to suppress his emotions occasionally, due to his half human heritage, but often was able to ignore them. This did separate him from other members of the crew. Data, on the other hand, finds difficulty in expressing emotions, understanding nuances, and assimilating into human culture while actively trying to do so. According to Taylor, Data behaved more like a neurodivergent person might, because he was often creating routines to help him navigate the world around him, practicing things in private like whistling and laughing at what he believes to be humor in order to pass as human more effectively, and took people's word for face value, not necessarily understanding deception all the time. These are all typical

behaviors of a neurodivergent child trying to connect with others. She even says that sometimes, she as an autistic person was likened to a robot, because she seemed out of touch with her emotions. With these parallels in mind, “Measure of a Man” takes on a second meaning: the idea that autistic people should be allowed the same rights to self-determination and bodily autonomy that neurotypical people are afforded. The episode establishes that Data is definitely different from his organic crewmates, but that those differences should not matter. He makes friends, enjoys hobbies, and feels a sense of duty to his occupation, proving he is capable of emotion, just not capable of expressing it the way the average audience member might expect. But “Measure of a Man” is not the only episode that highlights Data’s uncanny resemblance to autistic people, and furthermore it is not the only one to advocate for them through Data’s character arc.

In the season four episode “Data’s Day,” the viewer is taken through a day in the life of Data on board the Enterprise. He is detailing his day for Lt. Maddox, so that he might better understand Data’s day to day experiences in his work to replicate the positronic brain. On this particular day, there are two important events taking place: a Vulcan ambassador is visiting the ship, and more importantly, it is the wedding of Miles and Keiko O’Brien. It is revealed that Data was friends with Keiko before Miles, and he introduced them; because he is a large part of their love story, he has the honor of giving Keiko away in the ceremony. What is interesting about this episode from the start is that though he is a Starfleet officer, Data is more detailed and present with his recounting of the events leading up to the wedding, and less so with the evil plot of the Vulcan, who they soon find out is actually a Romulan, whom the crew thwarts. He explains that he has created an algorithm to help him predict likely human emotional reactions based on circumstances, as he finds human emotions puzzling. He often runs this program and uses it to interact with others, as well as practicing humor with Geordi and observing others and

how they interact. His routines of using various mathematical and logical devices to understand the nuances of humanity that he does not understand are much like the way autistic people might go about trying to do a similar thing when trying to mask symptoms (Russo). However, since emotions typically cannot be analyzed like an algorithm, and humans are unpredictable, Data is flummoxed when Miles is unhappy about the good news Keiko had asked Data to pass along to him: she has called off the wedding. Data thinks Keiko is happy about calling it off, because she told him she was and he takes things for face value, not having the intuition to understand that though she seems calm she is actually stressed. He believes that Keiko being happy will make Miles happy, as would be logical, except Miles is livid. In the episode, Data also reveals that certain complex concepts of human communication are still something he has “yet mastered.” Humor and irony are part of that, so Data finds himself guessing and practicing such things to himself, and with friends who he believes can simply teach him. He goes to Geordi to understand why Miles is upset, to Counselor Deanna Troi to understand Keiko’s stress, and to Dr. Crusher to try and learn to dance for the reception. Essentially, what this episode is truly proving is that Data does feel emotions, but he cannot properly grasp intuition, as he says in the episode, he often wishes for the capacity to have a “gut feeling.” Intuition is something that many people on the autism spectrum struggle to grasp as well, but it does not mean they cannot feel, and it does not make them less human.

The introduction of Data’s brother, Lore, sheds some light on why his creator/father Dr. Noonien Soong, who endeavored to make the most advanced android and first technological life form, never gave Data typical human-like emotions. Lore was given a specific emotions chip, allowing him to experience human emotions and express them in a human-like way. Except Lore is unbalanced, and Data and crew quickly learn that he is the “evil twin.” In the season one

episode “Datalore,” the Enterprise crew is passing by the planet Data was discovered on, and decides to investigate the disappearance of a missing colony from the planet's surface. Upon beaming down to the planet, Data, Riker, La Forge, and Yar discover the abandoned lab of Dr. Soong, where they infer that Data was created. They also discover the disassembled pieces of another android that looks exactly like Data. Riker is cautious, but Data asks “is this my brother?” assigning this android both gender and a place of sentiment in Data’s view of the world. He tells Riker that it is “very important” to him to find out if this other android can be alive like him, because he never thought he would find a link to another lifeform like himself. The away team brings the android up to the ship, and once assembled, they discover Lore is just like Data, but claims Data is “imperfect” and Lore was created to replace him. As it turns out, it is the opposite: Lore was created first, but his uncanny human likeness combined with his aggressiveness made him an outcast and the community rejected him, so Dr. Soong built Data to correct those mistakes.

Perfection is an interesting concept in *Star Trek*. On one hand, the show celebrates imperfection, such as highlighting the limitations of humans and how they are continuing to learn about the universe around them. But on the other hand, the show often demonstrates a subtle yet notable strive for perfection in its characters: Data trying to perfect human sneezing at the beginning of the episode is just one of many little scenes that *The Next Generation* presents. The Federation is seeking out new civilizations and worlds to help itself grow and develop in technology and knowledge, essentially bettering itself. Not to say that this is a bad goal: progress is very much celebrated in *Star Trek* and very rarely comes with an overwhelming negative trade-off. However, Data’s interpretation of “imperfect” in this case is synonymous with “incomplete.” He believes that he was not given the means by which to fully function as an

android in human society, and that Lore was, especially due to the emotion chip Lore possesses. Explained with the clinical detachment of an artificial lifeform, Data is implying that he is not as human as Lore because he has no emotions, and does not understand their humor or use their language patterns. “Perfection” and “incompletion” in this sense are actually internalized ableism that is being forced on Data by his brother. Perhaps this is due to how Lore was treated because of his own divergencies, and the unfairness of their father choosing Data over Lore. Lore is mentally unstable and he was deactivated as a result, rather than assisted or rehabilitated so that he could quell his homicidal tendencies. Had Lore been shown kindness instead of treated like a machine, perhaps he would not have such a deep-seated jealousy for Data and would not have betrayed the humans. Data, on the other hand, was given a chance to stay active and alert, because he is not prone to violence; but the subtle implication that he is incomplete bars him from feeling like he belongs. Both brothers are victims of the idea that disability and neurodiversity are obstacle to be overcome, rather than qualities that need to be accommodated by society at large.

Just because he cannot pass for a typical human does not mean Data is incomplete or wrong. People with developmental disabilities and/or who are on the autism spectrum often experience similar disconnects to neurotypical displays of emotions or behaviors. They might relate to a social construct without being able to demonstrate it or understand it in the typical way. But the way one connects with others on an emotional and social level does not make a person perfect or imperfect, or incomplete. Lore for example, is supposedly more human, but he is a much more violent being than Data. Data is not untruthful or disloyal to his friends, whereas Lore allows his ego to guide him and actively tries to kill them due to his superiority complex. Having the emotionality of a neurotypical human does not make Lore more functional in

Federation society, but instead leads to more problems due to his own mental health. Perhaps this is the show demonstrating that Data is exactly what he was meant to be, and his imperfections are what make him human.

Data considering Lore to be more human also begs the question: why does it matter? Dr. Soong wanted to create a human-like android using a positronic brain, and so he did multiple times. But whether or not Data or Lore fit in with humans is important for Data for the same reason it is important to him to find out if Lore is alive: he wants a sense of belonging. Data's entire existence on screen can be boiled down to the need to belong, a concept that heavily implies his possession of a soul and consciousness, and therefore his personhood. He calls Dr. Soong and Lore his father and brother, the crew his friends, and the Enterprise his home. Acceptance and belonging are something that Data strives for, and actively wants, spurring on his hobby of studying humanity and practicing human behaviors. And it is that yearning for acceptance in the face of also being so different and socially disconnected that makes Data all the better as a representation of an autistic person.

Data does not just embody the emotional and social experiences of a neurodivergent person, but also the societal limitations placed upon them. In "The Offspring" Data creates a new android, Lal, to try and further Dr. Soong's research into creating advanced artificial life. Lal is programmed to call Data "father" as she is, to Data, a product of him procreating, his child. From the start, there is some controversy as to whether or not Data should have been allowed to begin this experiment. Captain Picard is momentarily frustrated with Data as he did not sanction or have any knowledge of Lal's existence, and he is not only concerned with the implication of Data doing it without permission, but what Starfleet might do or say when they find out. Of course, the question then becomes: why would Data have to ask his Captain's permission to

procreate when his biological crewmates do not have such limitations? Data asks the Captain why he is being held to a different standard, and the answer is of course because he is different. While he may have proven in “Measure of a Man” that he deserves human rights and the right to self-determination and autonomy, he did not prove he is capable of guiding the life of a child. Picard wants to dissuade Data from referring to Lal as his child, but Deanna Troi points out that Lal is Data’s offspring and as a sentient being, that makes her his child. There is a misconception in about autistic people that assumes they cannot be good parents, as they might not love their children, or express love in the way a child needs. Such is the concern for Data, who is also misconceived as not possessing the emotionality to raise a child. But like in the case of autistic parents, there is no cause for worry or concern, the uneasiness that comes with Data being a parent is a result of others not viewing him as capable. People on the autism spectrum have children and raise families of neurodivergent and neurotypical children quite often, but due to a lack of visibility for autistic adults in general, and a lack of knowledge about autism, they are often overlooked by society, and considered to not exist (DeWeerd). In Data and Lal’s case, there has never been an android procreation in known history, so a similar lack of knowledge and understanding might be at play, in addition to the concern about whether or not Data can love.

As Lal grows and develops, Data revels in the experience of being a parent, and of experiences what it is like to grow into sentience once again through her. He heeds some advice from Dr. Crusher about how to help Lal fit in more, something he struggles with himself and does not wish for her to experience. It is through this interaction that Data surmises that he cannot give her love, as he does not believe he is capable of human emotion. Dr. Crusher begs to differ, implying that Data does feel love and emotions in his own way. He asks Guinan to employ Lal so she has a better understanding of human behavior through observations. She

begins to show signs of having surpassed Data's own programming, by using contractions when speaking, and eventually feeling the physical sensations of emotions, such as fear and love. Data is surprised about this development, but is not disappointed. He believes it is a very human concept, for a parent to wish that their child grows beyond what they can give them, and flourish into their own person. Meanwhile, Admiral Haftel arrives on the Enterprise, looking to take Lal away. Like in "Measure of a Man," Haftel is challenging Data's bodily autonomy to procreate, a challenge that autistic people also sometimes face (Taylor). He does not understand that Lal and Data are like any parent and child and should not be separated from one another before they are ready, and tries to insist that Lal's existence to science and the continued research into robotics and positronic brains is more important than hers or Data's feelings. This situation is quickly put to rest, when Lal suddenly and inconceivably begins to malfunction and die due to a catastrophic systems failure. Haftel is forced to allow Data to try and save Lal, and he is unsuccessful. In her final moments, Lal, who managed to develop in a way that reads more like a neurotypical person, tells her father that she loves him. Data is upset that he cannot love her back, but Lal understands and says "I will feel it for both of us." Though he is not able to feel the loss is often expected when a parent loses a child, that does not mean he cannot feel it at all. He tells Lal he "wishes" he could feel love for her, and for an ever-literal android, "wish" is an odd word choice for him, indicating that there must be some sort of sadness or longing emotion there already.

Data was not necessarily written to be autistic representation. Brent Spiner, the actor that portrayed the character, was not aware in the beginning that Data was even relevant in such a capacity. It was not until neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks visited the set of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* well into its tenure and spoke to Spiner did he even realize that his character was making any significant impact. According to Spiner, he is "glad he didn't know too much about

it at the time,” because he would have tried to incorporate that goal into his performance, or influence the writers to specifically write with autistic representation with purpose, which in his eyes, would have ruined the whole thing (JLGB). What would the *Star Trek* writers have known about the experiences of neurodiverse people, especially in the late 80s and early 90s when research was barely scratching the surface of these issues? But while they may not have been prepared to write an autistic character, they were prepared to write an android struggling to find his place amongst humanity, and that was perfect for what the show needed. As it is, Data is already one of the best neurodiverse representations in the franchise. Kathrine Taylor mentions a particular episode in her article, where Q, an (almost) all knowing and all-powerful alien offers Data the ability to be human. It would make sense for Data to be tempted by this offer, as understanding human emotions is one of his main character goals. But ultimately, he refuses. Though he continues to strive for functionality and acceptance, he is still able to accept himself for who he is, and that is the message that Data leaves for autistic viewers: you do not have to be like anyone or everyone else to be human.

Chapter Three: Dr. Julian Bashir

Dr. Julian Bashir and The Implications of Genetic Manipulation

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine is a very different take on the *Star Trek* universe than the previous two installments. It opens on a space station in orbit above post-revolution Bajor, a planet of human-like aliens that had been conquered and enslaved for years by another race, the Cardassians. The show centers around the station and its crew, rather than a ship, and thus its overall goal is not to “seek out” but rather to look within for new truths and discoveries. It may be argued the show is a darker interpretation of the franchise, a rawer depiction of the politics and the rough edges of a space military representing a united front against its enemies. The characters are more flawed, and yet more relatable as well. Miles O’Brien and his strained marriage, Jadzia Dax who has lived literally a dozen lifetimes, Quark’s not-so-legal business schemes, and Keira’s barely addressed post-traumatic stress disorder from fighting a rebellion against the people who oppressed her whole world. Where *The Next Generation* is an idealistic landscape of learning and growing as a society, *Deep Space Nine* is an honest example of how that society treats the people who happen to live in it. One such person is Dr. Julian Bashir, the young and brash Chief Medical Officer on the station. For five seasons, Bashir’s characterized as a young man who has a little too much self-confidence than what can be good for his ego, but is learning to compromise and work with the rest of the crew. But in the season five episode “Dr. Bashir, I Presume,” the show turned an entirely well-written character plot on its head: Julian

Bashir was a genetically enhanced person living his life based on lies and secrets, creating some serious self-loathing and identity problems for his mental health. When this is accidentally revealed to Starfleet by his parents in the episode, it is also revealed to the viewer at the same time, and it comes with absolutely no warning but every bit the same amount of shock the crew of *Deep Space Nine* portray. Anyone who has seen any of the other *Star Trek* series knows that genetic engineering is one of the most taboo crimes in the Federation, and for understandable reasons.

Hundreds of years before the events of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, the Federation, as a self-proclaimed moralistic organization, declared genetic engineering a crime. Eugenics, as they commonly refer to it, lead to the Eugenic Wars 100 years prior. The Eugenics Wars were a complicated point in history, and has been a part of *Star Trek* lore since *Star Trek: The Original Series*. In the original series episode “Space Speed,” Captain Kirk and his crew come across a spaceship carrying the surviving Augments from the Eugenics Wars and their warlord leader, Khan Noonien Singh. Though this episode takes place in the year 2267, it is revealed to the viewer that the war took place in the 1990s, and the Augments are hundreds of years old, despite looking young and healthy. This is a neat trick, one might think, but as it turns out, the reason they look so young is because they have been genetically augmented to be “superhuman,” hence their name: Augments. The history of the Eugenics Wars dates back to the 1950’s, or pre-Federation Earth, when the countries of the planet were still divided. Being the height of the Cold War, the Augments were advanced humans with super abilities created to try and bring peace to humanity, by using them to create a superior race through selective breeding and genetic engineering. A plan that was, most likely, an idea taken from Hilter’s “master race,” a plan that led to the deaths of millions of people during the Holocaust. World War II ended in 1945, and

this episode aired in 1967, well after the fall of the Third Reich, so it should not have surprised any viewer to learn that the plan to create an Augmented superior race failed spectacularly. The Augments had not only been given objectively superior physical bodies, but also a superiority complex that led to megalomania and egotism. Their enhanced abilities made them difficult to fight, and by the 1990's they had taken over most of humanity. Khan Noonien Singh became the most successful conqueror, ruling over two continents. Thus, the Eugenics Wars began, and eventually Kahn and the remaining Augments were forced to flee into space, never to be seen or heard from again until crossing paths with the Enterprise in the 23rd Century.

One could imagine why then the Federation would be hesitant about involving itself with genetic augmentation. The fear of creating a new Kahn, or anyone like him, is a real issue on their minds when discussing the value of genetic advancement, not to mention the moral implications. Genetic engineering allows humans to play God, to have control over life and death, and make decisions that possibly break the prime directive. The Prime Directive is a Federation policy that prevents any member of the Federation from interfering with the natural development of civilizations by purposefully or accidentally exposing them to advanced technologies prematurely. Genetic engineering would help advance humanity further than it naturally would have advanced without that interference. However, it does allow for physical and mental hindrances to be genetically altered so that someone may not have them any longer, possibly curing illness and injuries that would otherwise affect an individual's quality of life. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Lt. Commander Geordi LaForge was born blind. It is a physical disability that would have limited him, if it were not for the VISOR that he wears, allowing him to see in infrared and therefore function as a seeing person. Despite his disability, he becomes the Chief Engineer on the Enterprise, and lives a relatively unhindered life. He uses the VISOR for

most of his adult life, until he ultimately decided to get ocular implants, which were cybernetic artificial eyes, allowing him to see more like a seeing person (*Star Trek: First Contact*).

Eugenics is arguably just a way someone might be helped to rid of a disability they no longer want. Unfortunately, it's an unreliable process and its moral implications are fraught with power. More to another point, those who are genetically altered are held accountable, even if it is against their will, due to fear of a repeat of Kahn. In the fear of this technology, the Federation may seek to blame whoever is involved regardless of fault, including those who are harmed by it.

Upon being outed by his parents as a genetically enhanced individual, Julian fears losing his job and rank. He legally is not allowed to be a Doctor in Starfleet due to his genetic status, and he lied to the Federation to get to where he is at Deep Space Nine. The Federation views this as much of a crime as the altering that took place when he was child. However, this limitation has been placed on him because of something he could not control or change, due to a prejudice based on a 300-year-old experience. The Federation is victim-blaming someone for something that was done to him, and for trying to survive the best way that is available to him: by hiding what was done. Is it fair to judge him for lying when his parents had him altered without his consent, knowing full well the legal issues surrounding it, and because the Federation is afraid of repeating history? An argument is to be made that had his parents never come to visit, the Federation would have never found out, and that as he has not tried taking over the galaxy by this point, he most likely has no plans to do so. It is with this wisdom that the Federation comes to a compromise about the consequences of his genetic state and his fraudulent career: Julian is prevented from being promoted in rank, and his father takes accountability for his role in the situation by going to prison for a short period of time.

Julian, on the other hand, is less concerned with legality or politics, because he believes he was violated by his parents, and that his rights were infringed upon as a child with learning and developmental difficulties. Though he was a child, he believes that no one, not even his parents, had the right to alter him so drastically for something so non-life-threatening as being born with a developmental disability, such as autism. Julian struggles with his identity throughout the episode, claiming that Jules died in the enhancements he underwent, and that once they had been applied to his DNA, Julian Bashir was “born.” As he states to his father: “You used to be my father. Now, you are the architect, who designed a better son to replace the defective one he was given” (Dr. Bashir I Presume?) As a doctor, he knows that his previous condition was not the end all be all of his character, and that children with developmental disabilities are not doomed to be outcasts, but rather with the right nurturing can be independent, functioning members of society. As a genius with no parental experience, he can think of no reason for his parents to have had him altered than an extreme shame at having a disabled son. In a confrontation with his parents shortly after they accidentally let it slip that he had been altered, he expresses this concern:

Mr. Bashir: We saved you from a life of remedial education and underachievement!

Julian: You didn't give me a chance.

Mr. Bashir: You were falling behind.

Julian believes they selfishly threw away all his natural potential, reconstructing the son they wished they had and could be proud of, effectively killing their original son. The Bashirs kept this truth a secret from him until his 16th birthday, upon which he denounced their choices and

changed his name to fit the severe sense of loss he felt about his former self. His given name, Jules, became Julian, signifying that he was changed so much as to be a completely different person.

Annoyed with his parents and what he perceives to be a lack of caring, Julian expresses how he feels inhuman and fraudulent to his friend Chief Miles O'Brien. He feels like he is no longer human due to his enhancements and that his personhood was stripped from him as a child. Miles argues that Julian was, is, and will always be a person, whether he is enhanced or not. As one of Julian's closest friends and someone who has seen his fair share of surprising happenings in space, Miles' argument is more impactful: he can see that Jules and Julian are the same person emotionally, despite any physical and mental alterations. He says, "You're not a fraud. I don't care how many enhancements your parents had done. Genetic recoding can't give you ambition, or a personality, or compassion, or any of the things that make a person truly human." Miles cuts through Julian's self-pity and makes him see that Jules always had the potential to be whatever he wanted to be, and he is still the same person now, even with his disability. Though politics might have prevented him from becoming a doctor or joining Starfleet, he still would have grown to be the caring, morally good and consciously fair Julian of the present. In doing so, Miles is also advocating the point that Julian already had the qualities of a person that matter: personality and compassion, even when he may have been autistic. Like Data, pre-augmentation Julian is often discussed throughout the episode as though he had no potential at all to be like other people due to his diagnosis. It is almost like he was an object, just a husk of a child that his parents had made into a real boy. An object with no rights treated like the property of his parents, like perhaps, an android? Where Data has no ability to genetically altered, he does have the emotions chip given to him by his father that is meant to make him

seem more human. The main difference between the two characters is that Dr. Soong gave Data a choice, whereas Julian is not allowed to give his consent to the augmentation. Children in general, but particularly children with autism unfortunately can experience being treated in this way: as an object rather than a child. But Miles believes Julian had a personality and a soul, just as the viewer might believe of Data, and advocates for that in his conversation with Julian.

Miles is also offering a secondary point to Julian that connects to different relevant issues of today: no matter what procedures Julian may have undergone, changes he may have gone through, or how his personality has developed, he is still a human being worthy of being recognized as such. Perhaps this point is why Starfleet decide it is not worth firing Julian, but instead giving out the lightest of consequences. Regardless, Julian feels as though he is not the same person he was supposed to be when he was born, and further still that his parents tried to force him to be something they wanted, rather than what he wanted. One might make an allegorical leap into today's politics surrounding gender, LGBTQ+ rights, and more specifically, Trans Rights. However someone might identify or how they might appear, someone else's perceptions or expectations might be forcing them to be someone they are not. Furthermore, a person is a person, no matter what changes or transitions they might choose to make to themselves. Miles reminding Julian that how he felt about his own physical alterations does not cheapen his personhood, but coexists with it, makes for an interesting, if not vague point about how anyone may or may not want to appear to the world. He was the same person all along, and the transition does not mean that he isn't the "real" or "original" Jules still, but in fact, they are one in the same. For someone who might be struggling with identity, this implies that who they want to be is who they were all along, rather than someone they have to become. The crew of DS9 continue to use "Julian" rather than Jules, because that is what Julian is comfortable with,

but that doesn't mean they believe he and Jules are different people; on the contrary, Julian was a part of Jules, and Jules is still a part of Julian. He is still himself and no one can take that from him.

“There's no stigma attached to success, Chief,” Julian tells Miles, because he believes that the Bashir's genetically altered their son out of shame; however, there may be another reason. Julian understands that they did it because he was slow in school, and that's where his theory of being a disappointment comes from. But as his mother explains, her reasoning came from Jules' struggle: she couldn't stand watching her son fall further and further behind every day, trying and failing due to some unseen force to keep up, wondering if it was her fault, if she did something wrong during her pregnancy, or passed something on unknowingly, or if she was just a bad parent. And in this revelation of her inner turmoil, two things are revealed: first, his mother allowed her husband to move forward with the illegal enhancements because she thought, despite being a part of an enlightened, progressive society, that Jules would have a subpar life because of the ableist attitude still put upon developmentally disabled people. Ironically, no matter which choice she made, enhancements or not, Julian would've paid the price, because he would be limited by his status as disabled or as enhanced, punished for one or the other, neither of which he can control. Secondly, that she, as his mother, would be blamed for it. It is often the parents who are blamed or punished when a child is born disabled in some way. In history, when a child was born with mental or developmental issues, the mother was to blame.

Today, women with disabled and challenged children are often asked if they did anything wrong during pregnancy. In the early 20th Century, when research into children's behavioral science had only started to realize that there were physiological reasons for a child's struggles, psychologists of the time would place blame on the parent, mainly the mother, for the child's

disability. It was seen not as an unavoidable situation the child was born into, but as evidence that a mother either did not parent their child with enough care, or even with too much care. These mothers were referred to as “refrigerator mothers,” meaning that they were too cold and distant to their children for the child to develop normally (Waltz). It was seen as a sign that they were bad at being mothers, and as women were already considered inferior to men, they were both an easy scapegoat and a convenient way to explain what they had yet to actually scientifically explain. Today, the refrigerator mother has been replaced by the “autism mom,” who instead of being blamed for being a bad mother, is instead expected to do every single thing humanly possible to try and help her child achieve “normalcy,” and is then perceived as a failure when their child is not cured and grows into an autistic adult (Waltz). This attitude not only continues to place the blame primarily on women for allowing their child to grow into an adult unable to function in current society, but also excuses the fact that society has not progressed in such a way that it is more inclusive and accessible for autistic adults to function. Placing blame on parents is an easy way of avoiding change and distracting from the classist values inherent in American healthcare, as most services for autistic children are expensive, and limited in certain areas of the country. Julian’s mother was ashamed of herself, not Julian. Julian’s father saw it as a disadvantage his son would have to endure unfairly, something for which he could be faulted. His parents made the decision to have him enhanced not only to try and save him from a life of limitations and stigma, but in his mother’s case, to prove to herself and society that she was a good mother who loved her son and would not see him struggle. Of course, logically one might argue that there was nothing to fix; mental and developmental disabilities are a simple fact of life and those who have them are no lesser for it, but rather how society treats them and places blame are where such stigmas come from. But stigmas are hard to live with and parents only want what

is best for their children, so it is both unfortunate and not surprising that some people fall into the trap of blaming themselves for any issues their child might have that prevents them from being “normal.” It is therefore a problem with the society they live in, in this case the Federation, for allowing those stigmas to continue to plague communities.

Statistical Probabilities, Ableism, and Stigma

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine's interest with genetic engineering and its relationship with developmental disorders did not stop with Julian Bashir. In the season 6 episode “Statistical Probabilities,” Dr. Bashir is asked to spend some time with four patients from an institution, all suffering neurological effects from botched genetic engineering procedures. Each character represents a different basic representation of mental illness: Jack is aggressive and manic, Lauren is overly mature and does not care for boundaries or social nuances, Patrick is child-like and oversensitive, and Sarina is nonverbal. Obviously, these are not all the ways disorders might present themselves behaviorally, but it is certainly a variety of stereotypical behaviors seen in the media. Bashir tries to gain their trust and respect, by treating them as though they were any other people, but Jack is wary of it, and taunts Julian: “Mr. Normal Starfleet man, Mr. Productive Member of Society.” The “mutants,” as they call themselves in no doubt a self-derogatory way to match the bitterness they feel about their treatment by the Federation, dislike that Julian has been able to “pass as normal” for all of his life, when they have been locked away for all of theirs. They are confined to one room, not allowed to roam about in case they cause trouble or hurt someone, however, it does appear that the only one who is violent is Jack. Bashir manages to make some headway in getting them to trust him, despite their wariness to trust someone who

has a full life, allowed to remain a Starfleet officer regardless of his enhanced status. He appeals to them as adults and as people, rather than as mutants.

Throughout the episode, Bashir navigates the different stigmas that the presence of the other enhanced individuals has brought to light on the station. First and foremost, the group of enhanced people have been institutionalized all their lives, under the guise that they are incapable of coexisting with normal people. At the beginning of the episode, Dr. Loews, the doctor who cares for them at the institute, tells them that they might be able to learn from Julian and possibly use the experience to assimilate better into society, and therefore one day might be able to leave the institute. Jack doesn't believe her, and as though the writers wanted to emphasize how unlikely her statement was, Jack breaks a datapad and smashes it into Dr. Loews' hand, cutting her. An argument could be made that Jack was simply trying to prove his point from throughout the episode, that no one actually believes that they can function in society. In the brief time she is in the episode, Loews reveals two major issues with how the so-called mutants are treated. Firstly, the ableism they face being disabled by something that is considered taboo. Loews says they might be able to learn from Julian; however, Julian himself was only able to hide his enhancements by working hard to seem "normal" and "masking" his abilities well. As he says periodically throughout the series, he graduated second in his class: he could have easily been first, but he felt that would make him more suspicious. Furthermore, despite the background as to why the other "mutants" were enhanced being unclear, Julian also used to have a severe mental disability, which was effectively cured by rewriting his DNA, an action he was not responsible for, nor is an option for the group. Assuming that a higher functioning person with a disability can somehow teach a person with more severe limitations to be less disabled is extremely ableist and ignorant. If being "normal" was teachable, what makes Dr. Loews, a

supposed medical professional, think that they would not have taught themselves to be more normal by this point, having been institutionalized since childhood? And even further, what makes her think they can only learn from someone like them? Meeting Julian might motivate them, or get their spirits up about their chances to live on their own, but it more than likely will not change their disability in any way.

Another issue that Dr. Loews's presence brings up is their overall treatment as patients. She tells Julian to not "turn [his] back" on Jack, rather dramatically, as opposed to professionally explaining he sometimes has bursts of violence. She also seems thrilled to be leaving them for three weeks, and not hiding it, implying to everyone that she does not like them. How can someone who is responsible for the care of others so blatantly dislike their patients and still give quality care? Julian, being more sympathetic to their plight, manages to not only make friends with them, but also avoid any sort of negative altercations with them for the most part, by simply treating them like people instead of like mutants, or less than human. Loews' lack of compassion is only mirroring the attitudes people who are enhanced face from non-enhanced people. Specifically, the language that implies there is a "normal" and a "abnormal" type of person, which is a damaging and archaic way of describing people with disabilities, disorders, and conditions that make them divergent to what one might expect from a typical person. When viewing someone who is divergent in some way, in this case, neurodivergent, historically it may be difficult for some to see past those behaviors that make them seem different. Normalcy is a way to monopolize acceptance and respect, and an emphasis on such a divide is an easy tool to use to dehumanize those who do not fit a perceived definition. Such language is particularly damaging to individuals who struggle with disorders and disabilities, as not only are they being separated from the rest of society by such a narrative, it is often part of why ableism and

inaccessibility is accepted and therefore separates them further from being allowed to integrate with their communities. According to Dr. Thomas Armstrong, there is “no standard for the human brain,” in science, meaning that the normal vs abnormal narrative is simply that: just a narrative used to degrade and oppress a group of people meeting a certain criterion. Society leans into it because in the past and even now, there has been limited understanding of how the brain works and medical science is still learning and advancing. Because of that lack of understanding however, there is more opportunity for neurodivergent individuals to face judgment and adversity in their lives due to what neurotypicals may find different about them.

In the episode, Jack continuously refers to the group as “mutants” because they are different from the Federation’s standard of normal, which is different from the term “Augment” used to describe the enhanced people of Kahn’s time. This discourse comes from the literal separation he and the others have faced all their lives, being institutionalized and told they could try to contribute to society if they got better, despite their new cognitive issues being caused by the resequencing of their DNA, and likely irreversible. To ask someone to change themselves to the point of ignoring their genetic coding is unrealistic, and is simply something to placate Jack and the others, and maybe even to try to control their reactions and behaviors. What is interesting about the term “mutant” is that a mutation is often something that occurs by accident in nature, whereas what was done to them was intentional and a result of genetic manipulation. Perhaps he is referring to the way their DNA mutated as a result of a botched process, but alternatively, it could be viewed as a bridge between their genetic issues and the more realistic issues of neurodivergent conditions. Many such conditions have been associated with genetics in science and false research has attributed vaccines, which deal with DNA, to altering the DNA of an otherwise neurotypical child and causing their autism. While there is no true scientific basis for

this association, “Statistical Probabilities” aired in 1997; one of the popular false studies claiming vaccines would lead to developmental disabilities in children, by Andrew Wakefield, would be published the following year in 1998, so it is highly probable the episode writers would have been able to find that link being made in other scientific journals of the time (Rao, Andrade). Jack continuously refers to unenhanced members of the Federation as normal, but for Bashir he uses the phrase “pass as normal,” to imply that Bashir is a mutant like them, but is very good at passing, or “masking” his symptoms. Masking is common amongst neurodivergent individuals as a tool to try and seem outwardly typical to others, and Bashir has admitted in “Doctor Bashir, I Presume?” that he did purposefully play down his intellectual and physical abilities to seem less suspicious to his colleagues. Of course, his masking paid off, and he is allowed to keep participating in society and Jack and the other patients, who would find such a task more difficult due to the nature of their botched procedures, are locked away.

The example presented of institutionalizing neurodivergent people in “Statistical Probabilities” is not only a depiction of ableism within the Federation, it is also a form of victim-blaming. Dr. Bashir faces victim-blaming throughout his characters narrative, from being judged by his parents for being unable to keep up with other children intellectually as a child, to when Starfleet found out about a procedure that was done to him as a child and almost dismissed him from Starfleet. The other enhanced individuals in the episode face such blaming in a similar fashion: even if they do manage to “get better” from their genetic disorder, they still would be barred from joining Starfleet, practicing medicine, and presumably several other similar occupations. This is of course, a policy constructed to limit access to augmented people to avoid another rise to power like in Kahn’s era. While it might make sense for such limitations to be warranted in light of the Eugenics wars, it is worthy to note that Julian is allowed to remain a

doctor and an officer despite his status, because Captain Sisko is able to vouch for him, it is agreed that he poses no threat. Jack and the others have debilitating conditions since the procedure, so they might not function very well in some settings, but it would be simple to evaluate them psychologically to determine whether or not they were evil masterminds. And so it stands to reason that the issue is not so much a fear that they would use their positions to harm the Federation, but a fear of genetically augmented individuals in general, which therefore has facilitated limits meant to keep them out of certain spaces, like a punishment for existing. As Dr. Bashir tells his comrades during a conversation about the genetically enhanced patients at lunch:

“Giving them a chance to contribute isn’t necessarily sanctioning what was done to them. They didn’t ask to have their DNA tampered with, they were only children. Why should they be excluded because their parents broke the law?”

These people did nothing wrong. Their parents had a procedure performed on them as children, without their consent, and it damaged their genetic code. Had there been no problems, it is possible that no one would have ever known about the procedures, and like the Bashir's were almost able to, the families may have gotten away with it. But because there were problems, the children were taken and held in a facility their whole lives, being promised a chance to contribute to society if they could somehow overcome the damage that was done to them on their own, but even then there would be limits in place to control their actions and lives.

Another interesting thing the episode does is unite Dr. Bashir and the “mutants” where other characters have divided them. In the beginning of the episode, Jack resents Julian because Lowes compares the two men and how they function. At lunch, Lt. Worf expresses concern

about allowing the patients to be released into society, stating that he, like many others, does not trust them. Of course, Dr. Bashir is the exception to his opinion, to which Julian responds with poorly disguised bitterness: “I have been one all my life, first because of the resequencing, now because I’ve been *allowed* to join Starfleet.” He is not considered to be like the other augments because his procedure was a success with no lasting negative effects, but he is also barely allowed to be a member of society which excludes augmented people. Existing somewhere in between both groups, it is no wonder Julian gravitates towards befriending the patients, forming a comradeship. As the episode progresses, it is clear that Julian, despite appearing and behaving differently to the patients, cannot be separated from them; most notably, when Captain Sisko is hesitant to allow Jack and the others access to Starfleet material because he does not know if he can trust them, Julian asks him if his hesitancy is because such information is “outside the limits of what people like us should be allowed to do.” The keyword here is “us,” Julian considers himself a part of the cohort, because in all reality, he is their friend and they are all being governed and controlled by the same specific rules due to their enhanced status, exceptions or not. Perhaps, this is a way to express to the viewer that even in *Star Trek* neurodivergent people exist on a spectrum, and even when someone can mask or pass as well as Julian, they are not somehow unaffected by the ableist society around them.

Chapter Four: The Emergency Medical Hologram

The EMH and the Complexities of Autonomy

Lt. Commander Data is allowed the privilege of being recognized as a new, sentient, artificial lifeform, and his rights as a sentient being are protected by the laws of the Federation. However, Data is not the only artificial lifeform that exists in the franchise. The Emergency Medical Hologram, or the Doctor, on board the *Voyager* is a lifeform in his own right. A hologram being a projection of light and energy, there is no physical form to the Doctor besides the image of a man, its design based on Dr. Lewis Zimmerman, inventor of the Doctor's particular model of medical hologram. He is operated by a series of computer subroutines that allow him to provide efficient medical care to any organic lifeform aboard a starship in the case that the ship's medical officer is incapacitated. Such is the case in the pilot episode of *Star Trek: Voyager*, when in the process of being transported to the Delta Quadrant, *Voyager*'s Chief Medical Officer and only medical doctor is killed, and the ship is cut off from the Federation to transfer in a replacement. These unique circumstances are in some way responsible for the development of the Doctor's growth as both a character and as an individual; rather than being inactive for the duration of his existence, he is called upon to permanently replace the medical officer, stepping into the role of Chief Medical Officer, and subsequently running his program continuously, something it was not designed to do. It is surmised by the other characters that as his personality continues to change and develop, his program is also developing to cope,

allowing for more room to grow into sentience. Throughout the series, the Doctor faces discrimination based on his physical personhood, or lack thereof. Though generally open minded, Captain Janeway refuses to truly accept the hologram as an individual lifeform until the last season of the show.

Interestingly, the Doctor is both alike and unlike Data in various ways: they are both sentient artificial lifeforms, and they have both faced prejudice from those who were uncomfortable with their sentience. However, in terms of differences, Data has a physical body, and the Doctor does not. Data was also created to facilitate the discovery of new artificial life, the Doctor was never meant to be conscious. And so, the Doctor's situation is more complex than that of Data's: he comes from intersecting circumstances and background that cause him to have a varied and different experience than Data, despite their basic struggle for recognition as a person being generally the same.

The Doctor has limited access due to his physical capacity as a hologram. Because there needs to be holo-emitters in any space in order for hologram programs to run in those spaces, the Doctor is confined to only the infirmary and the holodeck for the first portion of his activation. Despite his arguments that allowing him access to other parts of the ship would be beneficial in the case of medical emergencies, and his own desire to be more socially integrated with the ship's crew, Janeway still dismisses his desire and his potential ability as unnecessary, stating it would take time and they have other more important things to worry about. She does not tell him no, but she simply puts him on the backburner, effectively invalidating his limitations and feelings. People who suffer from disabilities that affect their mobility require accommodation to have full access to spaces that an able-bodied person would be able to exist in without any such accommodations. Whether that be automatic doors, service dogs, wheelchairs and ramps,

elevators, or special building design, new technology and infrastructure is being developed as society progresses to allow equal access to physically disabled persons. However, there are many instances still to this day of disabled people being unable to access a space due to lack of accommodation and even discrimination. The Doctor, though not necessarily disabled, is nonetheless unable to go into the same spaces as his organic friends due to physical characteristics he cannot control. Though she externally supports the Doctor's journey to selfhood, allowing him to develop and explore his humanity relatively unchecked, Janeway refusing to place importance on accommodating him outside of the infirmary demonstrates her own internalized prejudices against holograms being sentient, and how she might take for granted the simple ability to enter a room easily.

Additionally, the Doctor is at first not socially accepted as a being who could have feelings or a personality. He is not known for his particularly smooth bedside manner, and he does not lend himself to endearments very easily. In *The Hologram's Handbook*, the Doctor reveals that is not due to a flaw in his initial programming, but the first signs of his sentience. He claims that he was designed to "ensure his patients care and treatment" but he struggled with accepting that as an extremely knowledgeable being, he was being asked to treat a "few ungrateful whiners with unchallenging medical needs" (Picardo, 9). He already has a sense of self, and heightened as it may be, and therefore already showing elements of a sentient being previous holograms do not upon initial activation. Is this a mistake of his programming? Is it a plot hole that was required by the show's writers in order to set up his believable transition from Emergency Medical Hologram to beloved member of the crew? Or was it a directorial decision executed by actor Robert Picardo to make a more interesting character, without copying the childlike wonderment and curiosity of Data's character? Perhaps, a bit of all three. The Doctor

was conceived as an emergency medical tool in case something happened that prevented the “organic” doctor on board any Federation vessel or station to perform their duties. In this case, the Voyager’s EMH was activated when their doctor was killed in the middle of the crisis that caused them to become lost in the Delta quadrant. His basic code, appearance, and personality is based upon Dr. Lewis Zimmerman, his creator. Dr. Zimmerman, as the viewers realize through a handful of episodes of *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager* that feature the character, is also a brash man with little to no softness about his personality. But it is this attitude of self-importance that carries the Doctor through his journey, his longing to figure out who he is and what he is, all while accepting pride in the fact that he is holographic and not organic.

Another obstacle in the Doctor’s path to becoming recognized as a person, is the fact that at this point, holograms are a widely understood and familiar concept and tool within canon and by viewers. The plots of several episodes of both *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and *Star Trek Deep Space Nine* take place in a holodeck with some sort of hologram-related drama or problem. Those holograms, for the most part, do not have sentience, nor even the knowledge that they are in fact artificial. For all intents and purposes, they are not alive. To imagine that one *could* be alive, would be a preposterous notion for anyone in the Federation familiar with the technology, and an unlikely one for the audience. But yet, the Doctor convinces the audiences with his strong and distinctive personality that he is, in fact, alive. However, the implications of this particular hologram being sentient is troubling. Much like Guinan inferred to Captain Picard that an army of Datas being built to serve the Federation would be modern slavery, it makes one wonder if one hologram has the potential to be sentient, then surely others do to, they just are never allowed to realize it. And if that's the case, then is that not a form of slavery too? Artificial life that has been dampened and controlled by the limits their masters perceived for them simply for

entertainment, or as tools like the EMH? There is of course, the other side of this argument, that perhaps the Doctor aboard Voyager is an exception to the rule, and holograms are not potentially sentient beings. The Doctor's program was advanced and was left running continuously for too long, allowing it time to surpass its original programming, an opportunity not given to other holograms, truly reducing them to photons and light. Like there are more Soong androids than just Data, if there was a second sentient hologram, it would be more compelling proof that the Doctor's experiences are not just a fluke. And as luck would have it, there actually is a second hologram that shows signs of sentience in the *Star Trek* franchise: Vick Fontaine, from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.

Unlike the Doctor, Vick Fontaine was designed to be a self-aware holographic lounge singer by Dr. Julian Bashir as part of a holoprogram he uses for entertainment. Vick is aware that he is a hologram, and that he is on board Deep Space Nine, yet he is content in his domain in the holosuites, in the 1960's lounge Julian constructed for him. Using Lt. Maddox's definition of sentience, Vick meets all the criteria: he is self-aware about being a hologram, he is intelligent and can hold a complex conversation with members of the crew, and he is apparently conscious. He is "pretty impressive for a lightbulb," astonishing the crew with his advanced knowledge and awareness that makes him "no ordinary hologram" like Julian asserts to Miles. Vick's perception about real life love and relationships helps Odo come out of his shell and get more comfortable with the idea of attempting to express his feelings to Colonel Kira. However, Vick does not struggle with the same things that the Doctor does when it comes to recognition of personhood. Julian programmed him to be sentient, and he is comfortable with his life and surroundings as a lounge singer in the holosuite. He has the privilege to be accepted as he is by those around him from the beginning. Data does not start out with this privilege, but gains it, as his physical body

allows him more freedoms than the Doctors lack thereof, and once he wins his hearing in “Measure of a Man,” he has the privilege of Starfleet officially accepting him as well. Though Data continues to have to prove himself, he has the support of Captain Picard and the crew of the Enterprise, who want him to be accepted by others, just as Julian introduces Vick to his friends as self-aware. The Doctor, however, does not have the privilege of intentional sentience, nor the privilege of unwavering support from his colleagues. He is originally a tool that accidentally became sentient through circumstances beyond anyone’s control, and though this is allowed by Janeway and the crew, his inability to cultivate friendships at the beginning of his life does not set him up for as much support as the other characters receive. Vick is confined to the holosuite, though he is content to be, and Data has overcome prejudices about artificial lifeforms by proving his sentience and being present. The Doctor has no such abilities, as the obstacles he faces are intersectional in nature: androids and holograms can be sentient, and can try to fight for their autonomous rights, but in order to do that, the Doctor must also cultivate his own relationships from scratch, and get out from under his status as a tool meant only for the betterment of the crew.

In the episode “Latent Image,” The Doctor discovers that one of his memories has been erased and tries to figure out what has been erased and why. He does not recall performing major brain surgery on Ensign Harry Kim, and upon discovery that his memories of the surgery do not exist, he and Seven of Nine discover someone has tried to erase the memory of him discovering his older memories have been erased. And if that was not confusing enough, someone on the crew has taken to deleting his personal photographs from the time of the mysterious surgery. He brings his concerns to Captain Janeway, who demonstrates equal concern. However, the Doctor is suspicious, and rightfully so: he lays a trap for whomever is continuously trying to erase his

memories and discovers there is a conspiracy amongst the crew to erase his memories. Of course, he feels violated, and more so when Janeway tells him that she “made a command decision” to protect her and the crew by deleting his memories, due to what she describes as “catastrophic damage” an incident that occurred in his lost memories caused to his program. The Doctor argues that she was wrong to just make such a unilateral decision without consulting him: “how would you react if I operated on you without your consent, without your knowledge!” But Janeway sticks to her guns believing she is doing the right thing for him and the crew.

The audience is meant to feel how unfair this all is; afterall, there is no more knowledge of the missing memories given to them than there is to the Doctor. It seems be an extreme violation of his rights as an individual, justified by the fact that the Doctor is just a tool and a hologram, and the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Out of concern, and equal ignorance to what the mysterious memories reveal, Seven of Nine comes to Janeway, and tells her she is wrong. Janeway rationalizes her decision by likening the Doctor to a replicator: a piece of technology that does what is asked of it, and functions to serve people. “As hard as it is to accept,” the Doctor is simply technology and his status as the only Doctor on board means that Janeway must treat him as such in order to maintain his programming, so that he might continue to take care of the crew medically. Seven presents an interesting counter argument: she is human and therefore, Janeway gave her the opportunity to grow and develop as both human, and also Borg. Her humanity makes it easier to take the risk of letting her individuality remain protected on the Enterprise, despite her Borg aspects making her a potential danger to the crew, just like the Doctor’s “catastrophic damage.” Furthermore, in the same way her humanity makes her like the crew, her Borg traits make her like the Doctor and even the replicator. She and the Doctor were both allowed to grow and develop their programs and discover their individuality, but

because Seven is flesh and blood she knows Janeway would more than likely never “abandon” that inclusivity when it came to her, and would continue to support her through any problems she might have, but the moment the Doctor malfunctions, his program is rewritten to simply erase the issue. Seven knows this is because he is simply a hologram, and his lack of flesh is what somehow puts his individuality below hers in the hierarchy of technological lifeforms to be nurtured. The Doctor is facing intersectional prejudices that not only derive from being artificial, but also from not being physically solid.

Janeway is not unreasonable, nor is she actively against the Doctor because of what he is, so Seven’s observations impact her. She goes to the Doctor and admits what she has done has not only been influenced by her need to protect the crew but also by her biases towards living technology. She gives him a peace offering: the chance to understand what happened. Eighteen months prior, the Doctor, Ensign Harry Kim, and Ensign Jetal were on a shuttle mission when they were attacked by an unfamiliar alien species. A member of the species beamed aboard and shot Kim and Jetal with a weapon that burned their skin and caused reoccurring shock trauma to deteriorate their nervous system over a short period of time. The Doctor manages to get them back on board in sickbay, and with the assistance of Tom Paris he assesses their situation. He has never seen this type of weapon before and the situation is deteriorating fast. He can stop the effects of the weapon, but he only has time to save one. He chooses Harry Kim, and Jetal dies. As a result, the Doctor has a breakdown in the mess about decision making, and begins to spiral, so Janeway orders the rewriting of his program to erase the memories causing him the stress. However, what the Doctor is going through is not his fault. Anyone faced with such an impossible decision, photon or organic, would find it heart-wrenching. Logically, there was no clear answer: both Ensigns were shot by the same device, experiencing the same symptoms at the

same rate, and neither one was necessarily more important to the crew than the other. The Doctor makes his decision not with logic, but with emotion. In split second decision, he chooses to let Jetal die because he happens to be closer friends with Kim than her. And now the Doctor is beside himself with guilt.

It can be argued that guilt is an integral part of life, as it is the emotion that helps one determine between right and wrong. But sometimes there is no clear right or wrong, and guilt can be felt anyway. The fact that the Doctor was so upset only demonstrates how he is alive, as he wars with himself over the decision he has made, which makes Janeway's original plan to simply erase the information from his subroutines even more morally ambiguous. He has a right to remember if he is truly sentient, which is heavily implied by his reaction. Additionally, his mental breakdown only adds to the way the Doctor is marginalized. Janeway's demonstrating ableism in a two-fold manner: first because he as a hologram is lacking a physical body, and as someone who is mentally unstable. Deactivating him and erasing the problem seems might even be akin to a lobotomy performed on a solid human, a now illegal procedure done unnecessarily to patients with mental health disorders and developmental issues in history. In the end, because of Seven's intervention, Janeway decides to let the Doctor keep his memories, as they are the ones who "gave him a soul," and it is only fair they let him keep it. She realizes that the problem causing his breakdown is a conflict between his original programming and his new consciousness. Instead of deleting the problem, they decide to sit with him as he processes, offering friendship and support, and the Doctor eventually recovers. He is supported through his mental health crisis by friends, rather than being expected to just cope. Though he does not continue to breakdown, his mind is not fully healed, and he continues to feel guilt. But he is not as manic, and he understands he is being irrational in his guilt as there is nothing he could have

done differently short of choosing to let Harry Kim die instead. Eventually, it is concern for his friends, and his reaffirmed support system in the Captain that allows him to begin to move on. She develops a fever while watching over him, and he insists she go get rest. He promises to still be there in the morning, and begins to read poetry.

If the Doctor was not sentient, he might not have ever had an emotional meltdown as he did, but if it were not for Seven's advocacy, he might never have had the chance to realize that he really does have a soul. Consent is an important issue that keeps coming up throughout *Star Trek*, especially in characters that embody the other, or who are struggling with personhood. Data has an off switch he does not feel comfortable telling people about in case they take advantage of it; Dr. Bashir feels the enhancement procedure done to him as a child was a violation of his human rights as he was not consulted and then altered irreparably. For the Doctor, the issue of consent is a little harder to pin down. He, like Data, can be turned off and on whenever anyone pleases, but his programming can also be altered behind his back, and he can be prevented from realizing his true sentience in the process. As a hologram, he is a tool, and he was literally made to serve the Voyager crew, but he feels violated by Janeway's meddling in "Latent Image" because he did not want anyone to erase his memories, nor did he even know it had happened. Part of guarantees the Federation recognizes for all sentient beings is the right to self-determination, which goes hand in hand with consent, and in this case, once he is allowed such rights directly coincides with Janeway realizing the Doctor has a soul.

Names, Identity, and Beyond

Names are a large aspect of identity, and they serve an important significance for certain characters and their own personhood. Data was given his name by his creator, his father, Dr.

Soong; but his name goes hand in hand with his brother's name, Lore. It is because of this example, and the examples he observes in human naming rituals, that he chooses to name his daughter Lal, after the Hindu word for "beloved." He wants to express his love for her regardless of whether or not he is aware of this love, and use her name to express to her that she is loved.

Dr. Bashir changes his name from Jules to Julian on his 16th birthday, to reflect the change he underwent during his genetic procedure, and the loss he feels for his original self's untapped potential. And the Doctor, who is never given a "proper" name upon his activation, is simply known as the Doctor, but is always searching for the right name that fits him, just as he searches for his autonomy. The concept of names is more troubling for the Doctor than the other characters, because he cannot seem to find the best one. He cycles through names, such as Schweitzer, Schmullus, Mozart, and Van Gogh, and none of them seem appropriate. In his mind, it is imperative that he have a name, as it is the "first basic entitlement of organic existence" that he envied upon becoming sentient (Picardo, 33). The Doctor accounts for his difficulty choosing a name due to the fact that he was not born and raised, but instead "popped into existence one day: fully conscious, fully formed, and fully educated. Ready to go," and immediately was thrust into his life as the doctor on board the ship, preventing him from taking any time to really savor his first few moments and get a feel for who he might be in his mind (Picardo, 34). Nevertheless, he feels like one's mind is intrinsically linked to one's name and identity, and his theory is not without support. Richard Hanley uses theory from René Descartes in his book *Is Data Human?* to prove that Data is human, by asserting that humans are "rational minds and our bodies are superfluous appendages to those minds" (Hanley, Weiss, 181). And in the franchise, intellect and mindfulness are certainly favored in classically artistic holoprograms and the many uses for the art of meditation. It does seem that the mind is a "locus of individuality and self-identity"

(Weiss, 182). But *Star Trek* also demonstrates an opposing philosophy: that humans are the sum of their experiences, of the morals, responsibilities, and emotions that they have throughout their lives.

In “Real Life,” the Doctor, feeling as though he is missing out on some important aspect of interpersonal relationships that may be affecting his bedside manner, creates a holographic family for himself, to simulate real life as a human with human relationships. Lt. B'elanna Torres informs him that in order to really understand family life, he must make it a more realistic program. Unfortunately, this comes with some side effects. The program begins to evolve randomly and it results in the near breakdown of the family, and the death of the Doctor's young daughter. It unfolds organically, much like reality would, without his control, and develops beyond his expectations, as well as his identity. As he goes through each terribly stressful moment experiencing a simulated “real” family, the Doctor shifts with the program, growing and learning from each instance, to be a better Doctor and a more understanding person. As it develops his program more fully, he finds it difficult to stay and watch his daughter die, counting himself lucky that he can turn off the program and never go back. With the advice from Tom Paris, he realizes that if he does not go back, he is missing out on the “true family experience:” having support and love through both good times and bad. He learns with this experience, and his identity as a hologram and as a sentient being grows.

Throughout the series, the Doctor's character brings the viewers through a transition of sorts, from what is conceived as “human” and what is beyond. This transition began with Data, when he and Captain Picard proved that life comes in many different forms, and set the groundwork for expanding the definition of human. Dr. Julian Bashir plays a role in this transition as well: his character arc demonstrates that those outside the purview of society still

have value, and can still find a purpose within it, and deserve respect regardless of their perceived atypicalities. The Doctor fulfills that transition, not only by overcoming most of the circumstances that prevented him from coming into his own sentience fully, but also by never actually completing the journey to selfhood. The Doctor never really chooses a name. In the final episode of the final season, he settles on the name “Joe,” but reveals later in *The Hologram’s Handbook* that the name never stuck. The Doctor might never choose a name that suits his identity, because he may never truly understand himself fully, but that is the point of his character. Part of life and selfhood is to continuously grow and develop and never stop, just like the concept of humanity. For the Doctor, that means he never has a name, and for the *Star Trek* viewer, it means opening the mind to things not previously considered, reconsidering what it means to be human, and who might not benefit from those current definitions. It is applying the Doctor’s never-ending journey to everyday life, in an effort to grow and expand as a society, to accommodate and accept people who are not “typical” and therefore excluded from the concept of “human.” After all, “our original programming is only the starting point” (Picardo 82). Humanity is meant to evolve and adapt, to explore itself and live outside the boundaries of preconception and definite limits.

Chapter Five: The Human Adventure Begins

“There can be no justice as long as laws are absolute. Even life itself is full of exceptions” (Justice). This is what *Star Trek* is the best at portraying: the exceptions. Data, Dr. Bashir, and The Doctor all begin as exceptions. Before them, there was no such thing as artificial lifeforms, socially integrated augments, or sentient light particles in *Star Trek*, but after them, there is a new precedence set for the future, and the viewers understanding of life and humanity has grown just a little. And that is the impact of *Star Trek* as a science fiction program with a big heart. Many have criticized *Star Trek* for its flashy effects and unrealistic plots. Orson Scott Card wrote a review in the *Los Angeles Times*, disparaging all the ways *Star Trek* and subsequent spin offs are too stereotypical to be impactful, and therefore is worthless as a science fiction program by the time Captain Picard takes the con. But what Card, and many science fiction elitists like him are missing, it is not the genre that brings viewers back again and again to the show, and it is not the plotlines which are admittedly, largely varying in scientific accuracy. It is the demonstration of casuistry and characters that lighten a spark of recognition and identification within the viewer’s mind.

Star Trek presents complex issues in almost every episode, disguising serious discussions of life within plots and subplots of aliens and exploration and space. It asks questions of the viewers, as a scenario unfolds onscreen, and requires the viewer to formulate their own opinion. *Star Trek* is a show that asks the viewer to open their minds, not just about society and morality, but about humanity, and about themselves. The entertaining aspects of the show grab the

attention while the details “engage your mind as thought experiments” looking to learn and engage as the viewer does as well (Lewis, 139). It is not about preaching what is right or wrong, so much as it is bringing awareness to something not often or previously considered, and allowing the audience to weigh all the options, to hear all sides, before leaving them on their own to find their own answers. In “Measure of a Man,” Riker makes very logical and clear points as to why Data is not sentient. He is convincing, and he is right. But he does not win, if only for the sake of Data’s longevity on the Enterprise and Brent Spiner keeping his job. But even in loss, there is no clear victor: Maddox and Picard agree that there is no real way to gauge whether or not a being is conscious, and the hearing concludes on the side of caution, ruling in favor of Data only due to the possibility of him being sentient. It is the viewers job to interpret whether or not Data does have a consciousness, and whether he is sentient. Some viewers might accept that, some might still have doubts. Others engaged with Data as a form of accidental representation; a happenstantial product of the characters portrayal, and the demand for such representation to exist in media. Dr. Bashir’s situation is also largely interpretive: there is never confirmation that his parents had him altered out of love or out of shame, or that the procedure truly changed him into someone he was not predestined to be regardless. Furthermore, the Federation makes such exceptions for Dr. Bashir, and later smaller exceptions for Jack and the other patients, but there is never any policy change put in place, and augments are still limited in society. In fact, the characters themselves seem decided and ultimately agree to disagree. *Deep Space Nine* is asking the viewers to come to their own difficult conclusions on genetic enhancements, and in turn how it applies to real life outside of science fiction.

Perhaps the most ambiguous of all is the Voyager’s Emergency Medical Hologram. The Doctor never truly resolves his personal struggle to identify himself, in name or in his soul. He

might succeed in eventually gaining the respect and autonomy he deserves, but it does not quench his thirst to know more about himself. Canonically, he never succeeds, and instead walks the long never-ending path of self-discovery forever. But in the same way the Doctor struggles, perhaps all people struggle with their humanity, never truly settling on one fixed identity. And in a larger sense, society grapples with itself every day, redefining language and accepted new norms as new technologies and discoveries are made. All of this is conveyed to the audience without bringing so much attention to the troubling controversies and anxieties of real life. And that is the beauty of *Star Trek*: it facilitates self-growth and changes lives without the viewer even truly being aware, all for the sake of learning and expanding.

Star Trek demonstrates that ableism is a barrier between divergency and personhood. Assumptions neurotypical people make about disability and neurodivergence being difficult, being an illness, and being something to cure are more harmful than any diagnosis. Lack of knowledge and understanding prevents people from feeling like they truly belong, and like they are human too. It is the concept of a “normal” that does the most damage: it indicates that there is a right and wrong way to be a person, when there is really an infinite amount of ways to live life as an individual. But language and a lack of accommodations or visibility exclude people from being recognized as “normal,” making them feel less than a person. Data, Julian, and the Doctor all experience what ableism and prejudice towards what is different can feel like when directed at a person, and each of them must overcome the hateful impact of limitations forced upon them by the Federation and the Federation’s ideals. Through their stories, viewers can begin to comprehend the importance of accepting others for who they are, instead of how they seem and behave in relation to society.

Fans face some interesting questions when contemplating *Star Trek*: what if people in the distant future explore vast space? What would happen if we met another race? How would we appear to them, how would we treat them? Will we be kind, or will we be cruel? In regards to criticism and in response to Card's review, a fan wrote a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, explaining why Card was wrong. He said he believes that "there is always a place to grow to, a behavior to strive toward, a new goal to look for," and it is because of that reason that there will "always be a place for *Star Trek*" (Everett, 189). If *Star Trek* has taught anyone anything, it is that individuality is the key to success, and in order to maintain a positive morality one must be willing to set aside what is preconceived about the self and society, by accommodating others. Without acceptance of diversity and divergency, and of what we do not yet know, we limit our understanding of the universe we live in, and the constructs we abide by, blinding ourselves to new discoveries and opportunities for betterment. The *Star Trek* viewer, like all people, longs to feel included and supported. Perhaps, it is simply because we ourselves are the exceptions that exist in the real world.

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