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[Smith on Hanley, 'The Metaphysics of Star Trek'](#)

Review published on Tuesday, June 30, 1998

Richard Hanley. *The Metaphysics of Star Trek*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. xviii + 253 pp. \$18.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-09124-9.

Reviewed by Anne Collins Smith (Susquehanna University) **Published on** H-PCAACA (June, 1998)

Richard Hanley's *The Metaphysics of Star Trek* is an engaging examination of certain philosophical issues raised within the *Star Trek* universe. Its title, however, is overly broad; it would be more correctly titled, *The Twentieth-Century Applied Metaphysics of Star Trek*. The earliest reference in the bibliography is an article written in 1950; the next earliest, 1960. The vast majority of sources are from the 1980's and 1990's. There is nothing wrong with this focus; it is simply a limitation that should be noted.

The book focuses on applied metaphysics rather than pure metaphysics, as the author notes in the introduction; thus, metaphysical topics are explored insofar as they touch upon people's everyday lives. The book is divided into two sections, each of which is again subdivided into three. The first section, "New Life, New Civilizations," concerns the "nature and proper treatment of life, wherever it may be found" and addresses issues involving alien life forms and artificial personhood. The second section, "Matters of Survival," deals with "unusual processes and transformations" undergone by people in the *Star Trek* universe, including the use of the transporter ("beaming"), drastic personal alterations, and time travel.

The discussion of alien languages is very well done. Not only does Hanley demonstrate problems with the way in which *Star Trek*, especially TNG, has dealt with alien languages (particularly in "Ensigns of Command" and "Darmok"); he also uses those problems as a starting point to introduce the reader to current issues in philosophy of language.

I was less pleased with his discussion of Data's personhood. Hanley assumes that the burden of proof in the argument lies with those who would prove that Data is not a person, claiming, "I have not offered any positive arguments for machine intelligence, but I don't have to" (p. 75). I wanted to see sound, interesting arguments intended to convince the reader that Data is a person; instead, it is asserted that such arguments are not necessary, for reasons which I do not find compelling. Nonetheless, his discussion of Data offers accessible and informative introductions to issues such as free will and intentionality.

The discussion of the transporter is fascinating, as the author proposes a number of surprising interpretations. This chapter would be especially useful for sparking classroom discussions. Hanley's introduction of the religious view of death as one approach to what happens during transport is an interesting tactic, but it is marred by sloppy research. Religious views are weakly extrapolated with expressions such as "presumably" and "apparently"; a hypothetical position is labeled "the standard Christian view" based only on a difficult passage from St. Paul which is variously interpreted by a number of denominations. I found this vagueness especially irritating in a book where contemporary metaphysical positions are presented with precise quotations and biconditional definitions.

The discussion of personal identity and its survival when individuals are fused or split is also interesting, though I have a problem with his definition of personal identity, especially in his discussion of Riker's fission in the TNG episode "Second Chances." He points out that since Riker-1 and Riker-2 are not equal to each other, neither one can be equal to the original Riker, and thus concludes that the original Riker ceased to exist at the moment of fission. I would argue, however, that Riker-1 is the original Riker *plus* a certain set of experiences, while Riker-2 is the original Riker plus a *different* set of experiences. Does that mean the original Riker ceased to exist? No more than I have ceased to exist since the moment I began typing this review; each of us is our original self at whatever starting point you choose, *plus* the set of experiences (and their effects upon us) that have happened since.

Hanley's discussion of time-travel raises numerous problems of causality and informs the reader of a number of contemporary theories; it also, alas, demonstrates why many *Star Trek* episodes that deal with time travel don't do it very well.

On the whole, I found this an insightful book with some limitations. In a sense, the book is similar to the show; its very imperfections make it a good springboard for discussion. I would consider using it for a class connecting philosophy with *Star Trek* or science fiction or popular culture, but I would want to back it up with a more comprehensive text drawing on the whole history of philosophy.

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