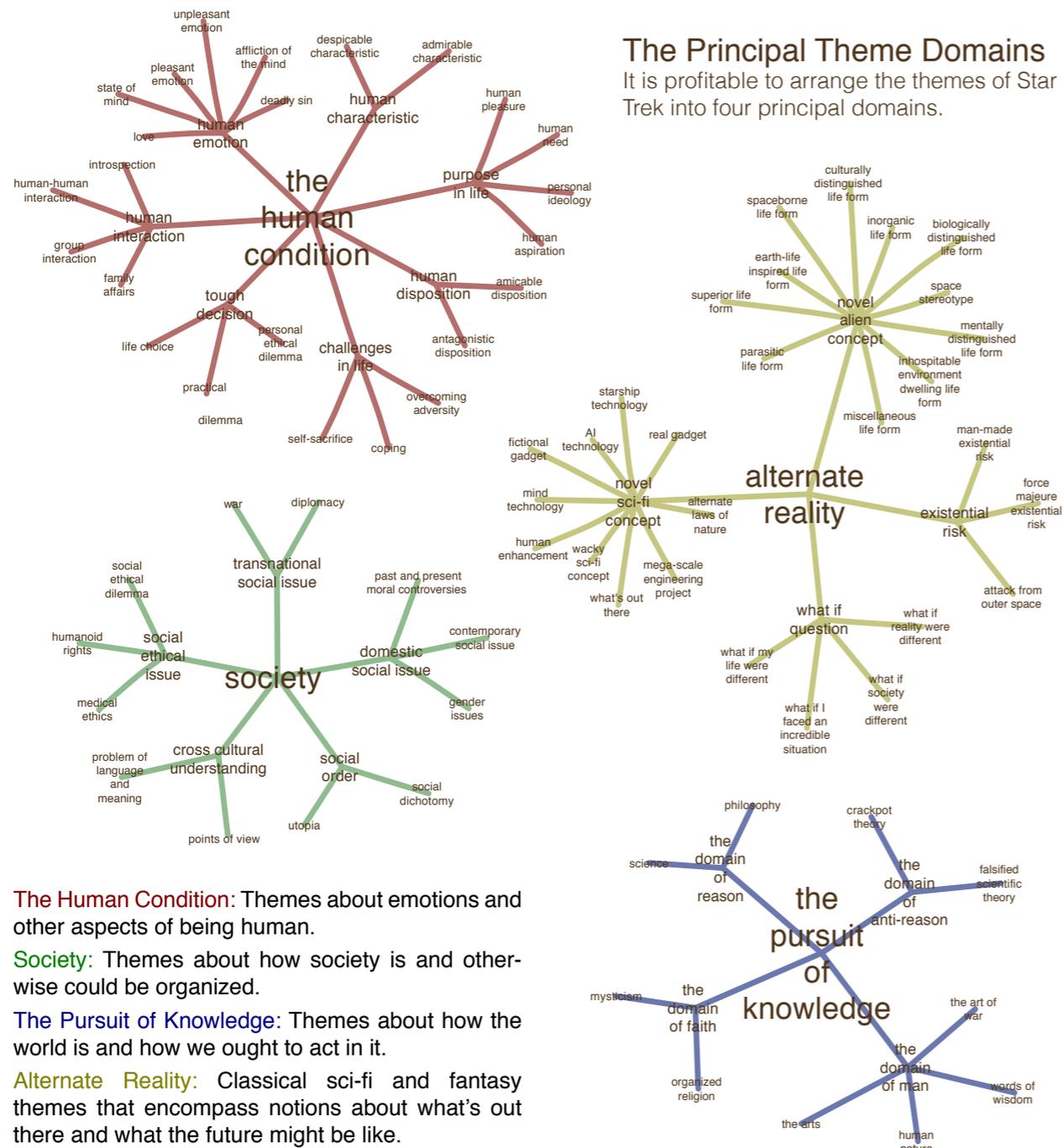


# The Themes of Star Trek

A theme in fiction is loosely defined as an idea, concept, or message that the author of a story wishes to convey. Themes may sometimes be summed up by a single word or phrase, such as “love”, “betrayal”, or “coping with aging”. Here we have recorded and categorized the themes of Star Trek and explore them in depth.



- The Human Condition:** Themes about emotions and other aspects of being human.
- Society:** Themes about how society is and otherwise could be organized.
- The Pursuit of Knowledge:** Themes about how the world is and how we ought to act in it.
- Alternate Reality:** Classical sci-fi and fantasy themes that encompass notions about what's out there and what the future might be like.

## What's in a theme?

Stories often carry messages that the author (consciously or subconsciously) wants to convey. We call these “themes”. Sometimes themes are easy to describe with tolerable accuracy in one succinct phrase, for example: “be wary of strangers”.

In popular stories the message is generally more nuanced and we cannot summarize it adequately in a short statement. The story might for example illustrate that, while we should be prudently wary of strangers in certain situations, trust is also a virtue and we must not allow ourselves to become xenophobic in general. In this case we prefer to identify a suitably narrow domain of the problem that is discussed: trust in strangers.

Perhaps the story does not limit itself to discussing “trust in strangers”; perhaps it compares the way we place trust in strangers to the way we place trust in family, friends or our child's math teacher. The story then carries several additional themes: trust in family members, trust in friends and trust in math teachers. But these are merely examples and it is clear that such a story has a broader scope still. We choose to summarize the theme as “trust in people”.

We say that “trust in people” is a generalization of “trust in strangers” which in turn is a generalization of “be wary of strangers”; a story about “trust in strangers” is also a “trust in people” kind of story etc. Trust, however, is not always discussed in terms of the way one person trusts another. The theme could instead be “trust between friends” or “the burden of being trusted”. We make one further generalization and say that all these examples are simply stories about “trust”.

For the purpose of statistical analysis and categorization of stories, we find that it is convenient to introduce two further generalizations. The theme “trust” is said to be in the domain of themes about “human dispositions” which in turn is in the domain of “the human condition”. We make these definitions because they are practical and they define the natural contexts in which trust is most often discussed.

It is, of course, possible to discuss trust in ways that do not fit comfortably under the label of human dispositions. For example the cold war and such political brinkmanship is (among other things) a matter of trust between nations. If we ever find that it is needed to describe a story, we will prefer to call the

theme “trust between nations”, a subset of “transnational social issues” and, in turn, a theme about “society”.

We can equally well remove humans from the picture altogether and make a story that discusses trust as a mathematical concept in game theory. The sequence of generalization that we would choose for the theme of such a story (it has not yet become necessary) would be “trust within game theory”, a subset of “math” themes, “science” themes, “the domain of reason” and “the pursuit of knowledge”. Few blockbusters center on any of these last themes, but we sometimes spot them as minor components in interesting science fiction stories.

Our imagination has been strained to its limits over the wording for some of the more generalized theme domains. We are confident, however, that most of them can be readily understood from examples, and a detailed exposition of the top levels of generalizations to be found on the succeeding pages. That is, so to speak, our choice theme for this chapter.

## Theme weight

Even with suitable generalization we find that it is seldom possible to pick a single theme for a story such as a Star Trek episode. More often we find twenty. They are not equally important, however, and we use the following three distinctions:

Minor theme: Any topic of interest that is discussed, even briefly.

Major theme: A topic that is prevalent throughout most of the story or seems to be an important part of the conclusion.

Choice theme: What we really think is the purpose of the story.