

Blade Runner's Replicant Humanity: Self-Discovery and Moral Formation in a World of Simulation

Jean-Pierre Fortin

Abstract: In the postapocalyptic world of *Blade Runner*, replicants become the medium and content of a life-changing revelation: human existence has become an enslaving simulation. Humans and replicants are confronted with the challenge of (re)defining the human. The *Blade Runner* movies enact this (re)definition through the arcs of two key characters: Rachael and Officer K. Transcending externally imposed enslavement, these replicants venture into the indeterminate future, choosing to serve a good that includes and empowers others to struggle for their own liberation. The *Blade Runner* movies can be interpreted as an apology for moral formation by means of the production of grounding and redefining fictional spaces and content. To combat the global dynamics of dehumanization and ecological destruction they have generated and to which they have themselves become victim, humans must create fictional spaces in which they can remember and imagine authentic living. The desire to become human and act as a genuinely human and humane person forms the necessary precondition for and that which sustains the lifelong self-formation process that is human existence.

“How does it feel to be born?”¹

“I can’t think of myself as one of them.”²

Rachael

“I know it’s real.”³

Officer K

¹ Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Del Rey/Random House, 2017), 182.

² Larissa Lai, “Rachael,” in *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. Uppinder Mehan and Nalo Hopkinson (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2004), 56.

³ Denis Villeneuve, dir., *Blade Runner 2049*, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018. Blu-ray Disc, 1080p HD. This reference is the source of all subsequent citations of lines delivered by characters from this movie.

IN RECENT YEARS, SCHOLARS HAVE BEEN ENGAGING THE *BLADE Runner* movies to analyze the characteristics of postmodern humanity. Behind this trend lies a common conviction thus summarized by Neil Badmington: "Anthropocentrism, with its assured insistence upon human exceptionalism, is no longer an adequate or convincing account of the way of the world."⁴ Beyond overcoming the ascription of a superior status to the human typical of Western modern thought, post- and transhuman thinkers wish to move past the human itself. Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter powerfully state this point: "The term transhumanism . . . suggests going beyond and exceeding the human . . . what is nonhuman or less or more than human is less extraneous to posthumanism than humanity and the human."⁵ Posthumanism appears to presuppose that the human condition is inherently defective, problematic and devoid of or lacking in meaningfulness; a lifelong sentence, penitence or expiation bringing to mind a superior order of (in)justice and/or (im)morality. Posthumanism and transhumanism also integrate an evolutionary perspective, wherein the human is conceived not as a stable, but rather continually altered category/entity.

Transhumanism is the project of modifying the human species via any kind of emerging science, including genetic engineering, digital technology, and bioengineering. . . . The *posthuman* is, most simply, the desired endpoint of transhumanism. That is, a posthuman is a new, hybrid species of future human modified by advanced technology.⁶

In reality, though, as Aleksandra Lukaszewicz Alcaraz points out, post- and transhumanist attempts to move beyond the human often end up reasserting Western modernity's traditional notion of human subjectivity "as Cartesian, dualistic form: a white, rational male exerting power over women, nature, others."⁷ "Supporting the vision of the human and the world based in Enlightenment humanist thought," transhumanists simply reiterate the "belief in reason,

⁴ Neil Badmington, "Posthumanism," in *Routledge Companion to Literature and Science*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini (London: Routledge, 2011), 381.

⁵ Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "Posthumanism," in *Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, ed. Simon Malpas and Paul Wake (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 144–145.

⁶ Kevin LaGrandeur, "Androids and the Posthuman in Television and Film," in *Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television*, ed. Michael Hauskeller, Curtis D. Carbonell, and Thomas D. Philbeck (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 112.

⁷ Aleksandra Lukaszewicz Alcaraz, "Evolutionary Continuity between Human Person and Cyborg Person," in *Are Cyborgs Persons? An Account of Futurist Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 16.

individualism, science, progress, as well as self-perfection or cultivation.”⁸

Thus understood, transhumanism is nothing else than plain old humanism integrating technology into the human to achieve the Cartesian ideal. More promising is what David Roden calls “critical posthumanism,” defined as the attempt “to understand and deconstruct humanism from within, tracing its internal tensions and conceptual discrepancies.”⁹ Such a critical notion of posthumanism allows for a more refined analysis of Western society and history, and of humanism in particular. As Lukaszewicz Alcaraz explains,

Humanism is not only about the human self, but also about certain kinds of values, about social justice, and about the recognition of agency for creating and recreating the world and the knowledge about it. It is possible to reject white male predominance without rejecting the whole heritage of humanism.¹⁰

The present essay is offered as a contribution to the exploration of the potentialities of such critical posthumanism and/or discerning humanism through the lens of the *Blade Runner* movies (which include *Blade Runner* directed by Ridley Scott and *Blade Runner 2049* directed by Denis Villeneuve, themselves inspired by Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*). These science fiction classics (respectively released in 2007 [final cut], 2017, and 1968) constitute a most interesting medium and instrument to study the role artificiality and simulation play in the formation of authentic human personal identity and morality in times of acute social and ecological crisis. The world of *Blade Runner* extrapolates ideologies and social dynamics of the contemporary Western world and their detrimental effects, such as colonization, neoliberal capitalism, cultural, racial, gender, and sexual discrimination, oppression, and exploitation. This world has already seen human agency bring about global nuclear wars and ecological destruction. The resulting grim living conditions and prospects on earth induce a profound redefinition of humankind’s relationship to reality and, as a consequence, of human self-understanding. The concurrent development of technology enabling the perfect imitation of human existence by means of replicants (bioengineered humans created as fully-formed adults without having gone through the stages of childhood) confronts humans and their artificial counterparts with the challenge of (re)defining the human.

⁸ Lukaszewicz Alcaraz, “Evolutionary Continuity,” 17.

⁹ David Roden, *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human* (London: Routledge, 2015), 9.

¹⁰ Lukaszewicz Alcaraz, “Evolutionary Continuity,” 17.

The *Blade Runner* movies enact this (re)definition through the arcs of two key characters: Rachael and Officer K. Struggling to define their personal identity in relation to a past they know not to be their own (they have implanted memories of a childhood they never lived), these two replicants cannot avoid searching for what is objectively real and true, for what being human actually means and entails (beyond the representations of it constructed and entertained by both humans and replicants). For these characters, this life and death matter turns into an identity defining and formative quest. The search for reality and truth gives shape to who they are and become, blurring even more the distinction between natural and artificial, real and simulated humanity and, at the same time, paradoxically shedding new light on what defines the human as such. Their search for human authenticity enables them to transcend the artificiality of their own generative process to embody and perform effective human personal identities and behaviors. In and through these two figures and their life journeys, the desire to be and act as human is shown to form an essential part of human nature.

Such a study will provide moral and spiritual theologians with helpful resources to articulate the question of human nature (what being human means and entails) and formation (development and embodiment of a mature personal identity) in the postmodern secular world. The challenge of discerning what defines humanity as such has become especially pressing when the relationship of human beings to nature shows to be remote and problematic (witness the currently raging global social and ecological crises) and the reproduction of human behavior and performance by machines (AI, supercomputers, and nanotechnologies) has reached a most advanced stage. Moral and spiritual theologians can enter the realm of science fiction to explore the contemporary experience of being human and discover points of contact with the teachings of the Christian tradition on individual and collective human identity formation. The task of (re)defining the human for the 21st century is ongoing; theologians can and should join in this effort by shedding unique light on the element of (self-) transcendence inherent to human existence.

HUMANITY TEST

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (2007) follows Rick Deckard, a police officer forced out of retirement to hunt down and "retire" four rogue replicants who came to earth from off-world colonies in order to extend their lifespan (artificially limited to 4 years). Replicants cannot be killed, for though biologically alive, they are not considered living creatures in the eyes of the law.¹¹ Replicants are designed to emulate

¹¹ Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, 185–186.

human behavior and performance in every way except for emotions. To ascertain whether a given suspect is a replicant, Deckard must administer the Voigt-Kampff test assessing the subject's ability to emote by measuring her instinctive physiological response to hypothetical situations. The distinctive feature of human beings is not their physical, rational, and technical abilities, matched or surpassed by replicants, but the aptitude to feel emotions and care for other living creatures, especially non-rational animals.

In such a context, the Western (masculine) notions of personhood and rationality seem under threat. Invoking the ability to feel to reassert the distinctiveness of humankind will not reassure white males. As Jordana Greenblatt argues,

contemporary science-fiction texts of masculine crisis are mobilized by the very anxiety that successfully reasserting divisions between humanity and its doubles via feeling will paradoxically exclude white Western masculinity from the very human subjectivity, and thus personhood, that their affective flattening had previously justified restricting to the privileged social groups they embody."¹²

The irony of having to assert the human ability to emote by means of a scientifically designed test is particularly striking; if human emotional affect needs to be scientifically measured, it is not so easily perceived.¹³ As Andrew Norris notes, the Voigt-Kampff test does not measure the propensity to "empathize with (other) human beings," but the ability to "empathize with suffering creatures, or indeed any vibrant emotional life."¹⁴ More significantly, the Voigt-Kampff test is not deprived of socio-cultural determination or bias, for as Donald Palumbo observes, "the test really measures only a socially engendered, culture-specific aversion to killing or harming animals, this society's primary taboo, rather than any truly universal, innate, and exclusive—and therefore definitive—human quality."¹⁵ The

¹² Jordana Greenblatt, "'More Human than Human': 'Flattening of Affect,' Synthetic Humans, and the Social Construction of Maleness," *English Studies in Canada* 42, nos. 1–2 (2016): 48, dx.doi.org/10.1353/esc.2016.0002.

¹³ As Jill Galvan makes plain, in Dick's novel empathy becomes the object of Mercerism, a religion whose main purpose is to enable the government to exert control over the human population, not to help the latter feel and become more human and humane ("Entering the Posthuman Collective in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*," *Science Fiction Studies* 24, no. 3 [1997]: 416–418, www.jstor.org/stable/4240644).

¹⁴ Andrew Norris, "'How Can It Not Know What It Is?': Self and Other in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*," *Film-Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2013): 25, www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/film.2013.0002.

¹⁵ Donald Palumbo, "Faith and Bad Faith in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 6 (2013): 1277, doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12088.

accuracy and reliability of the Voigt-Kampff test for Nexus-6 replicants, then the most advanced generation (to which belong the rogue individuals), has yet to be demonstrated.

The character of Rachael enters the scene at this point. Deckard is sent to the headquarters of Tyrell Corporation (the organization who invented, mass produces, and sells replicants) to administer the test to a subject (Rachael). Though much longer than usual, the test establishes that Rachael is a replicant, a fact Rachael herself ignored. In an ensuing conversation with Tyrell, Deckard formulates the question running at the core of the *Blade Runner* movies, "How can it not know what it is?"¹⁶ to which Tyrell replies, using Nietzschean idiom: "More human than human is our motto." Tyrell's response reflects a basic assumption: self-awareness and the foundational role it plays in the formation of personal identity constitute properly human attributes. Deckard's question is more problematic than it seems: on what grounds does he assume replicants should know who/what they are? Self-ignorance certainly is as determinative of being human as self-knowledge, which remains a project and goal for human beings (witness Socrates listening to the Delphi oracle). In any case, the acquisition of self-knowledge presupposes knowledge of one's self-ignorance. The ability to question one's own nature and/or ontological, moral, and spiritual status forms part of what being a person entails.¹⁷

In the *Blade Runner* movies, human characters (such as Deckard)¹⁸ do not grow in self-awareness, assuming they know when in fact they are ignorant of who they are. Deckard certainly is not a model to follow; he represents failed humankind, not its future. In Sarah Hamblin and Hugh O'Connell's limpid terms:

Deckard himself is a relic of a previous time/film [that is, *Blade Runner*]; he was an agent of a security state whose work advances a capitalist, colonialist agenda through violence. As such, he is tied to

¹⁶ Ridley Scott, dir., *Blade Runner: The Final Cut*, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2007. 2 DVD Disc special edition, 720p. This reference is the source of all subsequent citations of lines delivered by characters from this movie.

¹⁷ Fiona Woollard, "The Miracle of Replicant Reproduction," in *Blade Runner 2049: A Philosophical Exploration*, ed. Timothy Shanahan and Paul Smart (London: Routledge, 2019), 63.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the thorny question of Deckard's status (whether he is in fact human or a replicant), see section "Pathway to Authentic Self and Freedom" below. At this point, suffice it to say that Philip K. Dick considered his hero to be human and the storyline of *Blade Runner* assumes that the four rogue replicants must be "retired" because they have come to earth, a place where they should not be found (replicants are designed to live and work in extraterrestrial colonies).

an earlier mode of violent masculinity bound to a destructive, developmentalist desire that is no longer viable.¹⁹

Peter Halvorsen argues that Deckard embodies fallen humanity in need of redemption granted by others. “Deckard appears like the fallen man, saved through the love he has towards Rachael; by the increasingly strong repulsion towards his own job; and finally by Roy Batty, who literally saves him from falling.”²⁰ As Graham Murphy notes, Deckard’s “love” for Rachael actually translates into sexual harassment and aggression, worlds apart from consensual romantic engagement and intercourse.²¹ Deckard is not the main agent of his own humanization, but rather the product and epitome of “the techno-scientific world of Tyrell and the cynicism and depravity this logic has generated.”²² Deckard’s humanity is unsettled and unsettling for other characters and the audience who “cannot be sure if he is ‘real,’ ‘the good man,’ what he is ‘made of,’ or if he is actually a replicant doing ‘a man’s job.’”²³ The theological overtones of this discussion cannot be missed; Deckard embodies postlapsarian humankind estranged from itself, others, nature, and God with whom it can only relate in/with violence. Deckard is so trapped within self-oblivion (*Blade Runner*’s “original sin”) that he is unaware of his own dehumanization. Deckard’s self-awareness and re-humanization can only occur through external initiative. Humanity is not a given, but rather a gift graciously offered to lost humans from without by the (non-)human other (that is, the replicant).

BIRTH PANGS OF REPLICANT HUMANITY

In opposite fashion, leading replicant characters go through traumatizing formative journeys of self-discovery. The ability to recognize their self-ignorance, intrinsic vulnerability, and process traumatic experiences forms the core of what humanizes the characters of Rachael and Officer K, and demonstrates the inhumanity of humans. The Voigt-Kampff test deeply unsettles Rachael. Assuming she is

¹⁹ Sarah Hamblin and Hugh C. O’Connell, “*Blade Runner 2049*’s Incongruous Couplings: Living and Dying in the Anthropocene,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 13, no. 1 (2020): 48.

²⁰ Peter Nicolai Halvorsen, “Religion in a World of Androids and Aliens: Life and Death in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* and *Prometheus*,” in *Science Fiction, Ethics, and the Human Condition*, ed. Christian Baron, Peter N. Halvorsen, and Christine Cornea (Cham: Springer International, 2017), 123.

²¹ Graham J. Murphy, “Cyberpunk’s Masculinist Legacy: Puppetry, Labor, and *ménage à trois* in *Blade Runner 2049*,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 13, no. 1 (2020): 98.

²² Halvorsen, “Religion in a World of Androids and Aliens,” 124.

²³ Neil Badmington, “*Blade Runner*’s Blade Runners,” *Semiotica* 173, no. 1 (2009): 482.

human, she learns she is a replicant in whom childhood memories (from Tyrell's niece) have been implanted. Questions emerge that bring her on the verge of identity crisis. What does it mean to be human? What is a replicant? How should a replicant relate to childhood memories it cannot have itself experienced?

Rachael becomes a mystery and challenge to herself. She grieves a human identity that never was hers and must learn to accept and find meaning and purpose in being a replicant (that is, an artificial form of humanity). The pain and sadness she feels over her condition demonstrate a level of empathy the human characters do not display. The revelation of the objective truth—she is a replicant—does not prevent her from craving to be (fully) human and perform genuine human behavior (the desire to be human is part and parcel of human existence). The search for her true self leads her to display unnatural behavior; she kills another replicant to save Deckard's life. The act of taking the life of a being of her own kind also—paradoxically—brings her humanity to expression; she feels guilt and knows she has committed the irreparable, a properly human experience. Rachael's relationship to her own mortality and sense of responsibility for her finite existence quickly evolve. A replicant emotionally and morally aware of her condition constitutes a serious threat to the social order not because it is an artificial form of life, but because it embodies humanity in a more authentic manner than (most) humans. Rachael's being and behavior show Deckard's inner life to be a mere ersatz of humanity, leading her to ask him whether he took the Voigt-Kampff test.

Rachael's failure to pass the test reflects the latter's gendered character. Scientific significance is granted to culturally specific standards and values. Political authorities and their legal organs invoke science as instrument and criterion to exclude individuals from the human community.²⁴ Ridley Scott's film adaptation of Dick's novel greatly reinforces Rachael's dehumanization and defeminisation by reducing her to Deckard's passive object of sexual desire.

Most of Rachael's witty, sly dialogue is missing from the film, her language and behavior passive and often characterless, highlighting her mechanical nature. . . . The blade runner essentially "reprograms" Rachael to behave like a "real woman"; as the passive eroticised object of his own active desire. . . . This Rachael drops philosophical conundrums in Deckard's lap for him to explore and discover; the original Rachael poses questions which leave Deckard disturbed.²⁵

²⁴ Emily Cox Palmer White, *The Biopolitics of Gender in Science Fiction: Feminism and Female Machines* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 93.

²⁵ White, *The Biopolitics of Gender in Science Fiction*, 98.

Ridley Scott's movie adaptation undoes Dick's inversion of the sexbot trope. Rachael's cunning mind and active agency almost entirely disappear. In the novel,

Rachael attempts to weaponize Deckard's capacity for empathy; in the fashion of a typical dark lady, Rachael entraps him by making him care for her physically and emotionally, a tactic she has employed with several bounty hunters as a means of thwarting their efforts to retire androids.²⁶

The movie adaptation therefore confronts Rachael to an even more daunting challenge of self-affirmation. Her rational capabilities and moral agency are not recognized, but rather forced into submission by the representative of law and order (Deckard), and this in the name and for the purpose of satisfying white male desire.

Later in the same scene, a climactic moment is reached when Rachael plays on the piano a piece she cannot have known beforehand. She indicates to Deckard that she did not know whether she could play; she remembers lessons but does not know if they are part of her own experience or that of Tyrell's niece. The spontaneity of her playing reflects habitual knowledge, the skills she possesses reveal how mysterious she is to herself. This part of the scene shows to be particularly problematic. How and where did Rachael learn to play piano? If she acquired such skill by means of actual practice, she can only have done so since her inception date (no more than four years before). These actual memories of learning would entirely deprive memories of childhood piano lessons of their significance; she would be aware that they are implants. If replicants possess skills such as piano playing from their inception date—which is unlikely due to the fact that replicants are biological entities, not mechanical devices such as computers²⁷—and therefore have no need for piano lessons, the latter would be meaningless to them. Rachael would then know these memories are implants. Similarly, if Rachael only has punctual memories of learning how to play piano when she was a child, she would know these memories are implants.

For memories of piano lessons during youth to operate as such, Rachael must possess a developmental notion of her personal identity. She must be able to connect the child she remembers to the adult she is now and recognize both as different expressions of her unique individuality. Developmental self-understanding supposes continuous recollection of all stages forming a single ongoing process (that is, the

²⁶ White, *The Biopolitics of Gender in Science Fiction*, 96.

²⁷ Brian Treanor, "Being-from-birth: Natality and Narrative," in *Blade Runner 2049: A Philosophical Exploration*, 74.

same human life/existence). To make Rachael believe she actually is Tyrell's niece, Tyrell would have needed to implant all of his niece's childhood memories into Rachael, not only a few snapshots of significant events. Even then, the implantation of memories does not necessarily entail the implantation of the self-identity accompanying and undergirding these memories. Memories are not external to the self, they are constitutive of human personality. The loss of identity experienced by patients suffering from conditions such as Alzheimer and dementia tends to confirm this claim. An image of a piano lesson does not constitute in and by itself the memory of a piano lesson. Rachael needs to remember it as *her* memory, as a memory of *herself* learning to play the piano when *she* was young. In Richard Heersmink and Christopher McCarroll's words: "Memory provides access to our own past experiences, it presupposes identity."²⁸ Rachael never was a child. Her personal identity and sense of self cannot be associated to experienced childhood. Rachael would know that any childhood memories she has are implants.

The real mystery resides in the fact that Rachael claims she does not know whether the memories of childhood piano lessons are hers or Tyrell's niece's. This claim supposes, argues Timothy Shanahan, that Rachael's "memories were not self-authenticating. There is nothing about a memory, per se, that identifies whose memory it is. Someone else's memories can appear indistinguishable from one's own."²⁹ If memories are generic and completely detached from the formation of personal identity, the individual will have no need for them to build her own sense of self. One cannot determine who one is on the basis of memories. "Memories prove to be unreliable guides to identity, and also largely irrelevant to the task of embracing one's current reality, who and what one is and, importantly, what one must do."³⁰ Memories would thus provide Rachael with no useful information about herself, which means she would not invoke memories to determine whether she has acquired a particular skill or not. The fact that during her conversation with Deckard she does refer to these memories as evidence of her being human demonstrates she does indeed connect them to her personal identity and self-awareness.

Tyrell's claim that memory implants stabilize the emotional life of replicants, rendering them more amenable to external control, reinforces the sense that such connection is presupposed. How could memories one knows not to be one's own bring stability to one's emotional life? These memories still provide connection to external

²⁸ Richard Heersmink and Christopher J. McCarroll, "The Best Memories: Identity, Narrative, and Objects," in *Blade Runner 2049: A Philosophical Exploration*, 96.

²⁹ Timothy Shanahan, "We're All Just Looking for Something Real," in *Blade Runner 2049: A Philosophical Exploration*, 15.

³⁰ Shanahan, "We're All Just Looking," 16.

reality, which in turn enables the individual to define herself in contradistinction to (this) external reality. While she does not find herself in the implanted memories, Rachael can still define herself in relation to these memories, insofar as they refer to something objectively real (though not experienced by her). The real concern is not to lose hold of reality, for as Brett Lunceford notes, “once the potential for memory erasure and implantation exists, one can never be certain if reality is truly reality.”³¹ Rachael’s own past is concealed under memories that do not belong to her, but which still form part of who she is and connect her to reality. Rachael’s unveiling of her true identity is only beginning. The main task for her consists of retrieving and building memories of her own, memories constitutive of who she is, as a unique and irreplaceable personal individuality.

SEARCH FOR THE REPLICANT MESSIAH

The events depicted in Denis Villeneuve’s *Blade Runner 2049* take place 30 years after those related in the first movie. The ecological situation on earth has worsened. Humankind has been saved from extinction by starvation through the engineering genius of Niander Wallace, who invented farming processes enabling the large-scale production of synthetic food supplies. Humankind also survived several uprisings of replicants struggling against their enslavement and forced labor motivated by “technological racism.”³² Replicants are used to track and retire older models (the lifespan of replicants is no longer limited to four years) who took part in the uprisings and managed to conceal their identity. This first generation of replicants whose work consists in “retiring” individuals of their own kind are the new blade runners.

Officer K, the lead character of *Blade Runner 2049*, is one such replicant bounty hunter. Replicant blade runners occupy the lowest rung of society; considered mere slaves by humans, they are loathed by their fellow replicants because they chase and kill their own. Like Rachael, Officer K has childhood memories he knows he did not live, since he never was a child. In contradistinction with Rachael, however, he does not know whether his memories refer to past events which actually occurred or fictional constructs. With respect to memories, then, Officer K’s relationship to reality is one step further remote (and hence more tenuous) than Rachael’s. Officer K cannot assume his implanted memories refer to events/experiences actually

³¹ Brett Lunceford, “The Ghost in the Machine: Humanity and the Problem of Self-Aware Information,” in *Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television*, 374.

³² W. A. Senior, “*Blade Runner* and Cyberpunk Visions of Humanity,” *Film Criticism* 21, no. 1 (1996): 5, www.jstor.org/stable/44019023.

lived by someone. This fact does not prevent him from acquiring memories resulting from actual experiences he has been having since his date of inception. These latter memories refer to objective reality (external and internal) and, therefore, act as basis for the formation of his personal identity and criterion for authentic memories. Implanted memories, however, can only indirectly relate to the individual's self-narrative; because they have not been lived, they cannot be experienced as memories (defined as the retrieval of past personal experiences in the present). Hence, Officer K should be aware of the radical distinction between actual lived memories and implanted representations of past events not experienced by himself.

The movie begins with Officer K being charged with the mission of retiring Sapper Morton, an older replicant operating a synthetic farm in the San Diego district. During their fatal encounter, Morton asks Officer K how it feels to "kill his own kind." Officer K retorts that he does not retire his own kind, for "'they' do not run." Officer K's rationale to justify his position and actions lies in the strict distinction he makes between obedient and disobedient replicants. Non-questioning subservience to humans is the absolute criterion for replicant life. As Sherryl Vint explains, replicants constitute a future iteration of an old condition: enslavement. "What the replicants emblematised, then, is the future as much as the past: they retrace a history of chattel slavery to anticipate this utter commodification of biology, of life itself, as the future facing more and more of humanity."³³

Officer K represents the perfect slave, insofar as his "entire social life is circumscribed by his labor and ongoing monitoring of his affective state to ensure his complete capitulation to this world order."³⁴ Enslaved replicants are a benefit to human society, self-determining replicants an evil to be eradicated. Morton offers a most interesting counter-argument to Officer K's position. He invokes the notion of miracle in support of his opposition to the killing of replicants. He speaks of murder (not "retirement"); the miracle he invokes (and which he does not describe in detail) leads him to believe replicants are not mere machines or a lower form of life, but free creatures endowed with (human) dignity. Theological undertones and implications are yet again easily perceivable. The character of Sapper Morton enjoys and displays self-awareness leading him to feel endowed with a dignity demanding absolute respect. This self-awareness is itself tributary of an experience of revelation induced by a "miraculous" event. Something out of the ordinary, beyond the normal course of (natural) events is needed to enable replicants (and

³³ Sherryl Vint, "Vitality and Reproduction in *Blade Runner 2049*," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 13, no. 1 (2020): 25–26.

³⁴ Vint, "Vitality and Reproduction," 32.

by implication humans) to become aware of their own nature and dignity. Human self-identification requires self-revelation, triggered by a supernatural event and/or encounter. Before leaving the site, Officer K finds a flower at the foot of a dead tree. Using instruments to analyse the ground, he discovers a buried military container.

Officer K then returns home to have dinner with Joi, his holographic life partner, also produced by Wallace Corporation. Joi is a learning digital companion made of projected light (from a fixed or portable device) who adapts herself to the needs and wishes of her owner. "She is," argues Paul Smart, "a system designed to fulfil a social function: a virtual companion that aims to act as a technological filler for whatever social, emotional, and sexual gaps exist in the lives of those who purchase her."³⁵ Officer K and Joi live as if Joi was a fully embodied replicant and life partner for him: she projects images of the meals she cooks over the actual meal he prepares for himself; he pours drinks for her, which he then himself drinks. Joi's holographic physics are adapted to synchronize with non-virtual reality, thereby set as the standard for (her) being and existence.³⁶ Joi, the "virtual person,"³⁷ emulates a real life replicant, itself an organic simulation of human existence. This subordination of holographic to organic being and existence clearly set Officer K over and above Joi as a moral subject and agent, as confirmed by the depiction of Joi as a 1950s-era loving and servile dinner-cooking housewife in a typical breadwinning-husband-returns-home-after-a-long-workday scene. Patriarchy becomes hi-tech.³⁸

In another scene of cinematographic anthology, Joi pushes the experience of simulation to the extreme of superposing herself over a female replicant prostitute (Mariette) to have sexual intercourse with Officer K. Joi is aware that the lack of an organic body prevents her from enjoying greater intimacy with Officer K. She therefore wishes to make use of someone else's body to fulfill Officer K's craving for sexual intimacy.³⁹ Joi's attempt to become vicariously organic and embodied through Mariette's services forms the apex of her desire for authentic existence. While the sexual encounter does provide physical satisfaction to Officer K, it does so at a very high cost: Joi and Mariette's dignity. The fact is, as Murphy explains, that

³⁵ Paul Smart, "The Joi of Holograms," in *Blade Runner 2049: A Philosophical Exploration*, 145.

³⁶ Wanja Wiese and Thomas K. Metzinger, "Androids Dream of Virtual Sheep," in *Blade Runner 2049: A Philosophical Exploration*, 157.

³⁷ Smart, "The Joi of Holograms," 127.

³⁸ Stephen Mulhall, "The Alphabet of Us: Miracles, Messianism, and the Baseline Test in *Blade Runner 2049*," in *Blade Runner 2049: A Philosophical Exploration*, 36.

³⁹ Timothy Shanahan, "Her Eyes Were Green: Intimate Relationships in *Blade Runner 2049*," in *Blade Runner 2049: A Philosophical Exploration*, 171.

Joi remains nothing more than a digital projection and Mariette is nothing more than a marionette . . . a cyberpunk meat puppet. . . . Joi is worse off than Mariette: like Pris and Mariette, she too is a "pleasure model," defined solely in her role as a companion and initially contained by the projection hardware attached to K's ceiling.⁴⁰

Officer K "upgrades" Joi who becomes a portable projection; she chooses to go on the roof to "feel" the rain. As they are "holding" each other, Officer K receives a phone call from Lt. Joshi, his human superior. Joi, the software, freezes to allow him to take the call. Simulated pleasures are ordered to real duties. More basically, as Smart aptly remarks, Joi's frozen stance reflects not only her artificiality, but also that of the world and movie (cinematic medium) in which she appears.⁴¹ Simulated relationships render the reality of complete loneliness and enslavement more bearable. Officer K finds meaning in making himself believe he is involved in authentic (human) relationships, even though he is aware they are simulated (with Joi) or purely transactional (with Lt. Joshi). In the inherently meaningless condition of replicant bounty hunter, self-deception appears to be a necessary condition for survival. Positive meaning can only be found in the fictional realm. This interpretation finds confirmation in the fact that Lt. Joshi acknowledges in a conversation with Officer K that she sometimes "forgets" he is a replicant. In these moments, she engages her subordinate as another human. Such "oblivion" enables humanity and humaneness to come to expression in the context of human-replicant as well as replicant-replicant interaction. Human existence requires a space (stage) in (on) which it can be embodied and performed.

Rachael's remains are found inside the military container; their analysis reveals she had been pregnant and died while giving birth. The miracle to which Morton referred is the fact that replicants can be children. As bioengineered humanoids, replicants are living beings who cannot be reduced to dead artifacts made by an external agent. Morton's sense of awe cannot be accounted for by interpreting the act of giving birth as the confirmation of this fact. Considering that all known living entities are capable of reproduction (not necessarily sexual in kind), replicant reproduction does not require going against or beyond the natural order. Adult living beings regenerate themselves continually by replacing the cells making up their bodies (except for certain specific types such as neurons). Reproduction into a distinct individual is an extension of the ability to regenerate oneself. Replicants are moreover specifically designed to replicate human

⁴⁰ Murphy, "Cyberpunk's Masculinist Legacy," 101.

⁴¹ Smart, "The Joi of Holograms," 129.

beings, including the latter's reproductive organs. Inasmuch as it can be naturally expected, replicant reproduction therefore is not in itself miraculous (especially in light of the fact that Tyrell had succeeded in enabling replicants to reproduce biologically). Wallace's struggle and/or inability to recover and master this technology does not entail that replicant reproduction is miraculous per se, but rather that the performance of natural biological functions is rendered more difficult in more ecologically challenged living conditions (prevailing in *Blade Runner 2049*).

Morton's state of wonder must be kindled by something else. Lt. Joshi perceives in replicant reproduction a direct threat to the social order, based on a strict separation between human and replicant; she orders Officer K to locate and "retire" the child. Officer K then finds himself in unknown moral territory, for he "never retired something that was born." To be born entails having a developmental story, completing a journey of personal formation (from child to adult) where psychological, moral, and spiritual identities are forged in the crucible of lived experience. Born replicants would have pasts and selves of their own to remember. The search for the missing child leads Officer K to an orphanage where one of his "childhood" memories comes to life. Trusting this memory, he retrieves from an old furnace a small wooden horse with an engraved date. Officer K begins to wonder whether he is the "miraculous" child, the one who concealed the precious wooden horse. He needs to determine whether the memory he has was lived or fabricated.

MEMORY (RE)CONSTRUCTION

Following Joi's suggestion, Officer K pays a visit to Dr. Ana Stelline, the most reputed memory implant designer, who will later in the story be revealed to be Rachael and Deckard's child. His simulated life partner encourages him to unveil the truth; her reality depends on his, the more human he is, the more human she feels vicariously.⁴² This scene offers a most interesting foray into the development and persistence of human identity over time. Officer K enters the research facility to find Dr. Stelline in a luxurious forest. Walking toward him, she then makes the entire forest disappear to reveal herself alone in an empty sealed room. Her compromised immune system forces her into "a life of freedom behind glass." Dr. Stelline has been living in a sterile chamber for more than twenty years (she was placed in it at the age of eight). A child used to crowds, she grew into an adult living alone, relying entirely on her childhood memories and the power of her

⁴² Heersmink and McCarroll, "The Best Memories," 102.

imagination (assisted with advanced technological tools) to create a world for herself and a past for others.

Some scholars have inferred from this state of affairs that Dr. Stelline is one more instance of a powerless woman trapped within the clutches of patriarchal capitalist neoliberalism. Graham J. Murphy thus argues that "Ana is like every other woman in the film: she is contained by capitalist mechanisms and proves largely immobile."⁴³ Similarly, Sherryl Vint claims that "posthuman possibility for hope lies not in Deckard and Rachael's child, inevitably isolated in her closed world of artificial memories."⁴⁴ While such readings do bear some truth at a literal level, they forego fundamental elements and dynamics of the *Blade Runner* world. In the latter, isolation from all sources of contamination is a luxury very few can afford. In *Blade Runner 2049*, Niander Wallace is never seen outside his mansion; thanks to his affluence and influence, he does not need to go outside or anywhere himself. He literally fabricates the agents who accomplish his will (the character of Luv is the quintessential embodiment of this truth). For the privileged, isolation from other humans and nature is the necessary condition for an existence free of external constraint and contamination. Such isolation can only be ensured by means of the detrimental alteration of the living environment and conditions of others. Dr. Stelline's artificially sterilized living conditions require that germs and contaminants be pushed out into the external environment. Dr. Stelline's isolation may thus not so much reflect her subjugation to the prevailing world order, but rather the high level of privilege and power she actually enjoys.

Shanahan further notes that Dr. Stelline, "the only character in the film presented as having scaled the summit of educational achievement," does not display sexualized behavior and is not the object of other characters' sexual desire. "Instead, she is presented as animated by a Buddha-like love for all sentient beings, be they human or replicant."⁴⁵ Shanahan's interpretation finds confirmation in Officer K's conversation with Dr. Stelline. Seeking assistance with a case, he asks her questions as she crafts a new memory (a childhood birthday party). To Officer K's "Why are your memories so authentic?" Dr. Stelline replies that she deeply empathizes with replicants, forced to perform tasks humans do not wish to accomplish. In Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, empathy precisely is that which singles out humans and shows to be extremely difficult to measure; the Voigt-Kampff test neither is easy to administer nor its results reliable. Dr. Stelline's clear empathetic stance asserts her humanity and ability to (re-)humanize other individuals and the world around her.

⁴³ Murphy, "Cyberpunk's Masculinist Legacy," 104.

⁴⁴ Vint, "Vitality and Reproduction," 33.

⁴⁵ Shanahan, "Her Eyes Were Green," 175.

Her condition constrains her to enter the simulated space to create and find a sense of reality. In a world where natural life has been detrimentally affected by human agency to the point of global destruction and possible extinction, the sterility of the research lab may be the only setting in which (human) life can be granted a future. If science and technology have been used as instruments to destroy the world, they can also be used to rebuild and give it life. The impact of human activity on the natural world is such that the latter cannot sustain itself without further human intervention. Human intervention in the course of natural events is a moral responsibility human beings must assume, for good or ill. Dr. Stelline operates under a logic not unlike that undergirding the actions of Niander Wallace; this latter character's invention of synthetic farming techniques literally saved humankind from extinction. This success led him to upgrade replicant technology with a view to perfecting humanity and disseminating it across the universe. Theologians will hear echoes of the biblical doctrine of dominion/stewardship, assigning a special role in the economy of creation to human beings, that of gardeners and shepherds for other species. In the present context of global ecological crisis, the question is not whether human beings should further alter the non-human environment, but rather how they should intervene so as to reduce their detrimental impact and, more positively, assist natural recovery and growth. Determining which and what use should be made of technoscientific developments to protect and enhance biodiversity and the harmonious coexistence and flourishing of all forms of life is most relevant in the current social context and for theological reflection (witness Pope Francis's teaching in *Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum*).⁴⁶

Dr. Stelline gives life by crafting representations of past events acting as psychological anchor and emotional buffer for the replicants who receive them as implants. "If you have authentic memories," she tells Officer K, "you have real human responses." According to Dr. Stelline, human agency flows from a robust sense of self and reality, itself grounded in life defining memories. Memory is the human person's access and link to herself and reality; without it, no one and nothing is and feels human and real over time. Officer K then asks Dr. Stelline if she inserts elements of real memories into those she designs, to which she replies that this practice is forbidden by law (which by no means entails she did not do it). The scene reaches its apex with Officer K's query about the distinctive features of memories of events that actually took place. Dr. Stelline first refutes a common misconception: what makes a memory real is not the level of detail,

⁴⁶ See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, chapters 1–3 and *Laudate Deum*, chapters 1–2.

but emotional depth and breadth. Experiences endowed with emotional richness and complexity (nuance) requiring careful unpacking and interpretation thus form the suitable foundation for a robust personal identity grounded in reality. The scene concludes with Dr. Stelline visioning (with the help of a device) Officer K's fateful childhood memory and confirming that someone (she does not say whom) actually lived it.

Following Stephen Mulhall, this particular scene consecrates Dr. Stelline's status and actions as a scheming mastermind.

K is reduced to a kind of pilot-fish or barracuda; his operator (i.e., Ana) reconstructs her own broken family and inaugurates her own messianic mission, by implanting a lethal misrecognition of himself. In short, K has been enslaved by means of quasi-memories deployed by a great but self-aggrandizing artist.⁴⁷

Dr. Stelline would thus have manipulated Officer K in order to reconnect with Deckard, her father. Mulhall takes a further step to claim that Dr. Stelline acts as stand-in for director Denis Villeneuve. Dr. Stelline's art of memory making translates and transposes the art of movie-making within the movie itself.

Her memory-maker and memory-scanner blend image-capture, analysis, and editing; her end product resembles cinematic projections; and their implantation into K induces traumatic discontinuities. . . . Ana goes proxy for Villeneuve . . . she represents the director of the film she inhabits, or at least that director's conception of his role.⁴⁸

For this suggestive reading to be compelling, a few amendments are required. Dr. Stelline only creates "memories," she does not implant them in actual replicants; Wallace Corporation takes care of this latter task. Dr. Stelline could not know or control which particular replicant will receive the memories she produces. More importantly, Dr. Stelline cannot provide replicants with authentic memories, for the representations of past events she produces are neither real (except for those like Officer K's fateful remembrance) nor actually lived by the individuals in whom they are implanted. Replicant recipients may produce memories involving these representations, but the representations themselves cannot operate as memories. Moreover, Dr. Stelline could not have known or controlled beforehand the plan sketched out and enacted by Deckard to prevent her from being identified and located (which involves alteration of genetic records). She may therefore not know the identity of her biological parents;

⁴⁷ Mulhall, "The Alphabet of Us," 46.

⁴⁸ Mulhall, "The Alphabet of Us," 46.

Blade Runner 2049 does not provide sufficient evidence to reach a conclusion (which Mulhall inaccurately presupposes). If Dr. Stelline is indeed manipulating Officer K to pursue an agenda of her own (that remains to be confirmed), she does so with limited knowledge and ability to influence the course of events, not as an omnipotent mastermind.

RECKONING WITH (ONE'S) REALITY

Officer K leaves Dr. Stelline's lab strengthened in his belief that he is the "miraculous" child. He no longer feels like a slave, but rather a free person. This new affirmative sense of self causes him to utterly fail the "baseline" test he must take at the end of every workday. This test determines whether the emotional life of replicants remained stable and under human control; it acts as both a measuring and conditioning tool. Catherine Payne and Alexandra Pitsis aptly summarize:

K passes the first test when his existence adheres to taking orders and retiring obsolete replicants without question. At the point where he is submerged in his own journey and thinks about being human—being born and having a soul—he fails the second test.⁴⁹

To avoid being "retired" on the spot, Officer K chooses to tell his superior he has found and eliminated the child. This lie saves his life; his superior grants him forty-eight hours to stabilize his inner self and successfully pass his next baseline test. The ability to lie bespeaks of the enjoyment of positive freedom; Officer K values his life more than his duty to disclose the truth, to which he has been thoroughly conditioned.

The analysis of the wooden horse leads Officer K to Las Vegas where he meets with Deckard who confirms being the father of Rachael's child. The conversation comes to an abrupt end when Wallace Corporation agents attack them and capture Deckard. In the fight, Officer K is grievously injured by Luv, Wallace's personal assistant, the most advanced (female) replicant. Luv also "retires" Joi by destroying Officer K's portable projector, the only remaining support for the simulated life partner, ending his virtual romantic relationship. Left for dead, Officer K is rescued by the replicant resistance, whose leader actually accompanied Rachael when she gave birth and took care of the child. Officer K's sense of self and purpose are shattered when he learns that the child is a woman.

⁴⁹ Catherine Payne and Alexandra Pitsis, "On Nature and the Tactility of the Senses in *Blade Runner 2049*," *Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture* 3, no. 1 (2018): 67, muse.jhu.edu/article/701300.

Officer K is then confronted with a most human challenge: accepting the fact that he is not “special,” not the “chosen one,” only a replicant located at the lowest level of a social order denying him dignity and rights. He no longer is allowed to serve as bounty hunter. He must decide what to do with his life in light of the (hard) truth that his future definitely is not filled with promise. Wallace Corporation wants to dissect the “miraculous” child to discover the secret of replicant reproduction and satisfy Wallace’s desire to colonize the universe (in Wallace’s transhumanist view, replicants improve and will ultimately succeed non-bioengineered humankind). The replicant resistance perceives in the “miraculous” child a long-awaited Messiah who will lead their army to complete liberation from subservience to humankind and self-determination. The replicant resistance’s messianism correlates with a Jewish (not Christian) understanding of this category. Replicants do not need to be redeemed from an original sin or from sins of their own, but rather freed from enslavement to human civilization. They need a powerful political and military leader who will guide them to successfully reclaim their legitimate status and influence over their own destiny. In contradistinction (as mentioned above), humans need to be liberated from the self-induced self-oblivion (Deckard) or arrogant self-sufficiency (Wallace) to which they have irremediably become prisoners or fallen prey. They must receive external assistance from a Christlike figure (Dr. Stelline) to regain contact with their humanity and learn to live authentic lives.

PATHWAY TO AUTHENTIC SELF AND FREEDOM

Overcoming suicidal ideation (another very human experience), Officer K finally identifies the “miraculous” child. He then opts for a course of action clearly demonstrating he neither is the slave of humans nor the pawn of the replicant rebellion. Incurring injuries that will ultimately cause his death, Officer K frees Deckard by attacking a convoy and killing Luv. After intimating to him that he must now live as if he had just died, Officer K takes Deckard to Dr. Stelline, whom he knows to be his daughter. Officer K finds freedom in the reunification of a father with a daughter he barely knows. Officer K dies on the stairs leading to Dr. Stelline’s lab, enjoying the beauty of light snowfall and placing his hope in a love that proved capable of sacrificing everything to give life to someone else.

Sean Guynes compellingly argues that *Blade Runner 2049* operates the deconstruction of messiah narratives to reaffirm the dignity and purpose of anonymous existence (human and replicant). The movie, he argues, offers

a brilliant examination of “chosen one” narratives, a strong reminder in an arguably self-centred age that we have only a small part to play

in the revolution we seek to shape, that our shaping of the future is as movers in the assemblage, part of a whole.⁵⁰

The truth is, continues Guynes, that “K—the ostensible hero for the past 2.75 hours—is not needed for the revolution to continue.”⁵¹ The breakdown of (lone) messiah narratives substituting for collective community-forming and empowering stories of liberation is the necessary precondition for the affirmation of a truly empowering collective good, enacted by everyone.⁵² Human and replicant existence ought to be defined not as a self-generating movement, but rather as a contribution to a longstanding tradition, that is, an ongoing process spreading over space and time well beyond the confines of an individual existence.⁵³

Over against Ridley Scott’s repeated affirmations that Deckard is a replicant (for which no definitive evidence is provided in *Blade Runner*, despite the hints deliberately inserted in the final cut), Denis Villeneuve’s *Blade Runner 2049* makes a much bolder and inclusive statement if and when Dr. Stelline embodies the harmonious integration of human and replicant (by having a human father and a replicant mother). Deckard’s dream about a unicorn and the miniature unicorn shaped origami sculpture (appearing in *Blade Runner*) left by his colleague Gaff do not demonstrate he is a replicant. Memories of fictional beings can be no less real and formative than memories of externally existing entities. Deckard may have shared this dream with Gaff at some point in the past; they were coworkers for a long period of time. Timothy Shanahan has shown that all arguments attempting to demonstrate that Deckard is or must be a replicant fail.⁵⁴ In a recent publication, Shanahan describes the current *status quaestionis* as follows: “In Dick’s (1968) novel, Deckard is presented as human. *Blade Runner* provides clues that he might be a replicant, but never makes that explicit. BR2049 is even more non-committal. . . . A more reasonable view is that there is no knowable truth of the matter about whether Deckard is a replicant.”⁵⁵ If Shanahan’s assessment is sound, nothing prevents us from exploring the implications of Deckard’s humanity for Dr. Stelline’s status and existence. Dr. Stelline’s immuno-suppressed condition finds a proportionate cause in the fact that she is

⁵⁰ Sean Guynes, “Dystopia Fatigue Doesn’t Cut It, or, *Blade Runner 2049*’s Utopian Longings,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 13, no. 1 (2020): 146.

⁵¹ Guynes, “Dystopia Fatigue,” 147.

⁵² Guynes, “Dystopia Fatigue,” 147.

⁵³ Guynes, “Dystopia Fatigue,” 148.

⁵⁴ Timothy Shanahan, *Philosophy and Blade Runner* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁵⁵ Timothy Shanahan, “What Am I to You? The Deck-a-rep Debate and the Question of Fictional Truth,” in *Blade Runner 2049: A Philosophical Exploration*, 241–242.

a human-replicant hybrid. The same fact naturally invites one further inference: Dr. Stelline could be infertile (hybrid infertility is observed in nature). Dr. Stelline's infertility would confirm that biological reproduction itself does not constitute the miraculous revelation replicants seek. This confirmation is rather found in the result of biological reproduction: the child. The fact that Dr. Stelline was a child demonstrates that replicants can acquire lived memories of their own articulated in the form of a quest for and journey of self-formation and narration. This latter claim remains valid even if Dr. Stelline's immuno-suppressed condition results from the fact that both of her parents were replicants—that is, artificially generated and for this reason deprived of full viral and bacterial resistance. Humanization, whether of a biological human or replicant, identifies with a developmental process whose agent and product is the self in formation.

The simulation of human life becomes natural when it humanizes. When it pursues and fulfills its true purpose, the artificial does not operate as the opposite or a substitute for nature (which then only leads to the death and destruction permeating the world of *Blade Runner* and critically threatening ours), but as the expression of nature endowed with the power to generate and (re)create itself. In the persons of Rachael and Officer K, we find characters confronted with the very real and human challenge of deciphering who they are and are called to be in most exacting and dehumanizing conditions and situations. As they embark on this quest, they break down oppressive self-understandings and reorient themselves toward reality and truth outside themselves, in what turns out to be highly traumatic experiences. For both Rachael and Officer K, this free act of self-transcendence comes to form the substance of a meaningful human existence, empowering them to give life.

Transcending externally imposed enslavement (through human engineering and strictly controlled living conditions and testing), these replicants venture into the open realm of the indeterminate future, choosing to serve a good including others and empowering them to struggle for their own liberation. These two replicants undergo personal transformations enabling them to experience human existence as a "miracle," that is, a gift revealing the dignity of the person, endowed with the ability to give shape to her own identity. In the face of overwhelming "objective" evidence that they are no more than sophisticated (albeit living) artifacts, they choose to hold on to their hope of becoming human. They come to experience the joy and hardship of love and are eventually challenged to make decisions determining the overall significance of their lives. Rachael and Officer K grow into individuals able to commit themselves to causes greater than their own persons and for which they freely give their lives. In and through the characters of Rachael and Officer K, we are led to

understand, as Payne and Pitsis accurately observe, that in “the end, there is no difference between humans and replicants; what connects them is ‘not text, but texture’ (nature) or the perception of something larger and uncontrollable”⁵⁶ to which they responsibly order themselves and their lives.

Out of their responsible search for truth and reality, new life is born and a future open for humankind. In contradistinction with Dick’s novel, the *Blade Runner* movies do provide examples, in the characters of Rachael and Officer K, that “faith is a positive quality in that it enables humanity and individual human beings to survive regardless of the reality they inhabit.”⁵⁷ A new future, where humanity (natural and artificial) stands united to confront the serious challenges of the times, is foreshadowed. The core issue never was the non-humanity of replicants, but the inhumanity of humans. The real task is to re-humanize humans. The *Blade Runner* movies follow an essential insight and purpose Dick had assigned to his novel. As Jennifer Rhee shows,

The novel, through its multiple uncanny confusions, redefines the human not through dehumanizing and excluding the android other nor constructing and affirming the radical alterity of the android, but instead through acknowledging the deep inhumanity of the human. . . . What matters at the end, then, is Rick’s acceptance of his own inhumanity, in that it marks his refusal to dehumanize android others (even while killing them), his refusal to participate in a certain kind of boundary-making.⁵⁸

The task of responsibly searching for, defining, and owning one’s own personal identity in relation to authentic human others and reality (natural and artificial) is part and parcel of what being human entails. Posthumanist and transhumanist attempts to get past and/or beyond the human by means of evolutionary biological and technological improvement are misled/mistaken in that they presuppose that humans have actually been authentically human and that human nature is inherently defective (to be improved). The *Blade Runner* movies intimate that the reality may rather be that the current state of global social crisis, dehumanization, and ecological devastation—so compellingly depicted and enhanced in the movies—reveal that the tasks of defining and assuming authentic personal human identities remain, for humans, a challenge to be taken on. Operating as a lens

⁵⁶ Payne and Pitsis, “On Nature and the Tactility of the Senses,” 68.

⁵⁷ Palumbo, “Faith and Bad Faith,” 1288.

⁵⁸ Jennifer Rhee, “Beyond the Uncanny Valley: Masahiro Mori and Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*,” *Configurations* 21, no. 3 (2013): 327–328, doi.org/10.1353/con.2013.0022.

emphasizing negative trends and dynamics of Western colonizing capitalist society and their devastating effects, the *Blade Runner* movies can be interpreted as an apology for moral formation by means of the production of grounding and redefining fictional spaces and content. Living in protective seclusion, Dr. Stelline retrieves and builds human history through the production of representations of “past” events, which can be used by their recipients to forge lived memories, themselves the foundation of authentic personal identity and existence. Amid the ruins of collapsing civilization and nature, human existence as journey from purposeless self-deception to hopeful trust has resumed. In a way Tyrell Corporation could not have foreseen, Rachael and Officer K do indeed demonstrate that replicants can be “more human than human,” summoning both human and replicant to humanize themselves and one another by embracing their shared cause and follow Dr. Stelline’s lead in working at building history and tradition enabling humans and replicants to give expression to authentic human responses.

To combat the global dynamics of dehumanization and ecological destruction they have generated and to which they have themselves become victim, humans must create fictional spaces in which they can remember and imagine authentic living. The desire to become human and act as a genuinely human and humane person forms a necessary precondition for and that which sustains the lifelong self-formation process that is human existence. In this respect, the *Blade Runner* movies form ideal conversation partners to reference magisterial documents such as *Laudato Si’*,⁵⁹ *Fratelli Tutti*,⁶⁰ and *Laudate Deum*,⁶¹ in which Pope Francis urges all humans (and Westerners in particular) to undergo a spiritual conversion enabling them to relinquish their destructive ways of relating to themselves, others, and nature and embrace integral development and ecology so as to learn by means of mutually formative interactions with all other creatures (dialogue) how to be human and faithful in this world. Magisterial teaching and literary fiction join forces to summon humanity to reckon with its own dehumanization and begin the long work of re-humanizing itself and healing nature. The human and non-human other (natural and artificial) can act as the Good Samaritan (Pope Francis) and miracle (*Blade Runner*) revealing and teaching humans who they truly are and are called to be. **M**

Jean-Pierre Fortin, PhD, is Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Director of Field Education and Pastoral Formation at the Regis St. Michael’s Faculty of Theology in Toronto, Canada.

⁵⁹ See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, chapter 6.

⁶⁰ See Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, chapters 2 and 6.

⁶¹ See Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, chapters 1, 2, and 6.

Listening to the challenging voices of Indigenous peoples, racialized communities, and trauma survivors, as well as literary classics and contemporary works of science fiction, he strives to articulate and live out inclusive and transformative Christian faith and theology. He is the author of *Grace in Auschwitz: A Holocaust Christology* (Fortress, 2016) and his current book project is entitled *Evolving Grace: Spiritual History of a Christian Doctrine* (Fortress, 2024).