

International Chess grandmasters, masters and devotees of the game were shocked as I.B.M's Big Blue computer defeated Gary Kasparov, arguably the greatest human chess player in history. The victory of an 'artificial intelligence' over the reigning World Champion of chess in May of 1997, a first for any computer, resurrected the centuries' old debate of 'man versus machine' and has given new impetus to the ongoing study, in the science of robotics, of the creation of machines that can think and feel. Cinemas have been packed around the globe by filmgoers who paid out billions of dollars to be entertained and, indeed, frightened, by the 'artificial life forms' exhibited in such films as I' Robot and Terminator. The apparent coming triumph of robotics over human labour can best be demonstrated by a cursory visit to any modern automobile plant, where human beings have been replaced on the assembly line by very highly skilled and far more cost-efficient robots. Of course, this raises a multiplicity of issues, including massive job loss in what once was a highly labour-intensive industry, questions about the innate value of human labour and moral concerns about the possibility of 'creating artificial intelligence' that achieves cognition. "*Cogito, ergo sum,*" ("I think, therefore I am.") posited by the great rationalist Rene Descartes as the fundamental determinant for existence, could philosophically underpin an even more revolutionary reality: the existence of machines that cannot only ratiocinate but also emote. (Hooker <http://www.wsu.edu>) However, the issue of whether such machines deserve those precious fundamental rights heretofore reserved to the human species alone will be worthy of consideration in the not-too-distant future. And, thankfully, this topic, with its profound ethical considerations, has been given a thought-provoking examination in

the recent film Blade Runner. In this film, the leading character (a human) has been employed to hunt down and destroy androids that are attempting to live longer than their preprogrammed 'shutdown point' or death. The film carefully examines the ethical and moral issues that are involved in the creation of living beings, be they mechanical or organic and convincingly argues that any creation, whether it be human or machine, that can advance a claim to be capable of independent thought, is, by Descartes' definition, alive and therefore entitled to the same precious and fundamental 'rights' accorded in theory to humankind.

The film Blade Runner refers to these artificial life forms as "replicants", a derivative of the verb "to replicate" which is defined as "to copy, to duplicate, to reproduce". (<http://www.theFreeDictionary.com/replicate>) The word "replicant" is taken to mean any machine that is capable of feeling and can demonstrate self-awareness. In biology the verb is used to describe the process of reproducing or making an exact copy of genetic material or cellular life. In order to successfully apply the Cartesian thesis that thought equals existence to artificial or other 'non-human' life forms, the definition must be extended to every case, no matter how extreme, because as the future unfolds, no one can say without fear of successful contradiction, that such creations will be impossible or that artificial thought devices might not actually achieve self-awareness.

This problem of ethics is explored in the film Blade Runner. The film is based loosely around the novel of Do Androids dream of electric sheep? by Philip K. Dick. The film starts as a group of replicants (robots constructed by man to fulfill certain needs) head to earth to track down their creator. The main character of the film Deckard (played by actor Harrison Ford) is hired to kill these replicants before they do any damage, which

as of yet they have not done. In addition to this, the life span of the replicants is rapidly running out because they were programmed with a limited life span. They desire longer life from their creators. Humanity does not take them seriously because they are deemed to be lifeless objects devoid of cognition or emotion. At the end of the film, the revelation that the human protagonist Deckard is also a replicant very effectively drives home the ethical issues involved in the wholesale extermination of replicants. One can feel the angst and shame and confusion when Deckard learns that the reality of his existence is radically different from what he had thought. It almost harkens back to the early Greek tragedies as the protagonist discovers something unconscionable in or about himself – in this case Deckard, like St. Paul on the Road to Damascus, must come to terms with his former job function as exterminator of his own kind.

The point of the film is that if a form of intelligence claims it can feel or think, then humankind is obligated by fundamental ethical considerations pertaining to life and liberty, to protect its existence as opposed to controlling the brain and mind of the creature. It does not matter if it actually thinks like a human; the fact that it claims cognition and awareness is sufficient in itself to endow the creation with those rights heretofore held as the privilege of humankind alone.

This is just one moral implication that should be considered – as indeed it has been in Ray Kurzweil's The Age of Spiritual Machines. In his work, Kurzweil discusses life forms constructed by humans and how they may be controlled. A divide will be created between those who are original creations and those who were made in a laboratory or factory. In the society predicated by Blade Runner, where there are many jobs requiring replicant labourers, “these engineered beings may be happy in such a

society, but they will most certainly not be free. They will have been reduced to the status of domestic animals.” (Kurzweil 3) In Blade Runner, the divide between a free human and a living machine which is enslaved is first created in the factory. It is the fact that these replicants were built in a factory, and not born of a female, which permits the construction of that rationale for slavery that thereby excuses the subjugation of these creatures to mindless work and condones the arbitrary control of every facet of their existence – including the predetermination of their lifespan. Over the gates of the extermination camp at Auschwitz, the Nazis posted the horrific and murderously deceitful maxim: “*Arbeit macht frei*” (Work makes one free). (Rosenburg <http://history1900s.about.com>) But for these factory creations, there is no hope of ever achieving freedom – not even an illusory promise. This is the moral issue that Kurzweil addresses in his work.

However, one could argue: Who cares? As long as these machines do the job we tell them to do, then there is nothing wrong. In this context we are not discussing whether a toaster should be burning toast or not. There is a huge difference between a toaster and a machine that is engineered to feel, think, and even have a date with death. An analogy can be drawn with the controversial issue of the cloning and genetic engineering of humans. It is a sad commentary on human history that in the past human beings who were different in certain ways from the majority were made outcasts, enslaved and even exterminated because of their differences. One can find overwhelming and irrefutable proofs of this behaviour as evidenced in the American slavery experience and in the Holocaust. The same could easily happen for constructed machines who many would argue do not have a soul, were not created by God and

therefore do not deserve any special consideration or treatment. (Awodey poetry.about.com) Have we as human beings bettered ourselves by employing these strict definitions as to who and what deserves rights?

The answer is no but throughout humankind's history we have been taught (but perhaps have not learned in our hearts) this bitter need to broaden our perspectives and to be less xenophobic and eschew racism. This is the lesson at the heart of the film Blade Runner. Before the movie was released, science fiction films were more on the fantastic side of things and gave a very generic view of a future world. But this *Film-Noir* has presented new ideas and raised new issues on what it means to be human as well as exposing for rethought the very definition of life itself. Many theorists who have seen this film have come away with new ideas and awarenesses they did not have before. For example, Mary Jenkins took from the film that "the most shameful tradition of Western civilization is our need to deny we are animals." (Jenkins <http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca>) The point she is making is that human beings considered themselves superior to all animal life by postulating the 'divine spark', which ostensibly renders us innately superior to our simian friends. We separate ourselves from nature as opposed to embracing it. So, humankind would have it that we humans are greater than animal and android alike. But even so, Jenkins says, the creators of the replicants in the film still "act like so called animals anyway. People can do horrible things to others when they believe they are superior in some way. Blade Runner just puts these issues out on the table. (Jenkins <http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca>) Jenkins and many writers like her feel that creating machines that can think and feel would not make the world a better place; rather,

it would only permit more racism and slavery. That is because human beings would inevitably look at these androids as tools rather than sentient beings.

But this happens often in life when something is created. Divisions will be made no matter what. The only solution to this problem is for the person to be aware that just because something has a different background does not mean it cannot feel and does not have a fundamental claim to just treatment. In Blade Runner the examples of humanity's racism are played out for all to see. In one instance in the film:

“Resch's recommendation for Deckard to go to bed with a female android and then kill her (his "grainy, hardened smile remained") is a gross reminder of the cold-blooded atrocities of which humans and humanity are capable.” (Dick 111)

Phillip Dick believes that the horrors in the real world are justified through an “enforced alteration of reality”. (Dick 115) But when we witness that Deckard cannot kill the female android after being with her, the obverse side of this coin is exposed in that he reveals some empathy that he cannot ignore. Despite this, he cannot escape his training:

“He is unable to see out of the 'reality' in which he has existed for so long in which androids are a dangerous threat to the 'true humans'. It is Deckard and Resch, the supposed defenders of humanity, who are in fact the ones who are destroying it, and this is largely done with the help of the false psychiatric tools that they use to confirm their version of reality.” (Dick 112)

It is often the tools of technology, religion and politics that help human beings to reassure themselves and buttress their beliefs. However these tools may be found to be invalid with the hindsight of history. For example, prior to the Civil Rights and the Women's Rights movements, there were academic/psychological studies which proved

that African-Americans and women would always score lower than white male Americans in intelligence testing. (Rosenberg <http://history1900s.about.com>) It is little wonder that most Universities during that time (before the 1960's) were constituted almost exclusively of white males. And like the studies of the 1960's, the *Voight-Kampff* was used in Blade Runner as a means of finding out who is human and who is not. The test is designed to examine eye movement and the heart rate of the individual when questions are being asked. Such questions included past histories of the person. A replicant would have had their memories programmed into them thus making them artificial and not real. But here is the problem. Stephen Rowley, Professor in Cultural Studies at New York University says, "Perception is reality. Our memories of the past are infected with our experiences. There is no objective reality but only the reality that can be perceived." (Rowley <http://home.mira.net>) While the memories of the replicant did not actually occur, they are very real to that robot. What will be required for human beings when and if we meet such life forms is that we do not perceive them as something to control. However, history shows that it is unlikely human beings will be so generous in thought. Because North America and much of the world view things in terms of economic profit, it would be almost impossible for a human to see past the dollar value usage of the android. William Timberman offers a salient reflection on this dilemma:

"Attempts to selectively re-engineer all of Creation are still comfortably beyond the limits of technology, but should a more capable technology someday become available, it isn't difficult to imagine a future General Motors or Pentagon willing to experiment with it. The likelihood of such a future, and the moral fatigue which accompanies it, are among the true horrors of modern life"(Timberman 33)

The idea that those human beings are the only ones capable of awareness and feeling is flawed. It is usually based on the premise that God created human beings and gave every human a soul, a spirit of infinite life. Therefore replicants can never be equal to man because their deaths are meaningless because they never meet God nor grace the steps of heaven. However the idea of God is a human perception and so are the memories that the replicants have. That is not to say God does not exist but rather that the 'divine will' is most often the justification used when others are subjected to work or conditions of existence that are deemed unfit for one's self. This is inherently dangerous because if one perceives oneself to be modeled upon God and the mold has been broken, then others cannot be like God, which denies equality, and "without equality there is no peace" (Timberman 10). From the replicants' perspective, there is no hope for a heaven and no meaning in prayer to God. They are told from the time they are brought into the world that they are nothing more than "atoms and the space in between" (Blade Runner). At least the 'said' human beings in the film can tell themselves they are beyond the replicants in some way, yet they can never prove it. But in Blade Runner it is the replicants who are more mature than the elitists. They understand the racism and hatred brought upon them and the only way to destroy it is to act in an opposite manner. As Roy Batty, the leader of the replicants, looks back on his life before he dies, he jokingly says: "I've done nothing that the god of robots wouldn't let me into heaven for." (Blade Runner). From his perspective there is no reason to extend 'inalienable rights' to others for he has never experienced any towards himself. At the end of the film when he has a chance to kill his assassinator Deckard, he does the opposite and saves Deckard's life instead. He still chooses life over death and mercy over slavery because he knows what it

is like to be a slave and to “live in fear is to be a slave” (Blade Runner). If he cannot change the way the world works, he can at least change the life of the individual.

In the conclusion of the film, it is revealed that Deckard is a replicant after all and that the replicants may have indeed the ability to breed with each other - something that was not known by the creators. A connection could be made to Bill Joy’s article on Why the future doesn’t need us where he says:

“We have yet to come to terms with the fact that the most compelling 21st-century technologies - robotics, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology - pose a different threat than the technologies that have come before. Specifically, robots, engineered organisms, and nanobots share a dangerous amplifying factor: They can self-replicate. A bomb is blown up only once - but one bot can become many, and quickly get out of control.” (Joy <http://www.wired.com>).

Because these androids would be perceived as ‘toasters’, the ramifications of self-procreation are not examined. And as Deckard, so sure of his humanity, was surprised to learn he was a replicant, the future may be a place where humanity is the minority and androids are the majority. If human beings do not acknowledge that replicants deserve the rights we North Americans take for granted, then we risk the same historical patterns of generalization, slavery, hatred, racism, and genocide all over again. While it is human people who are the designers of the androids, it is ultimately human society that creates the individuals and is it worth taking that risk? But this time we may risk annihilating the entire human race. For if a machine that thinks, feels, and looks like a human does not have the same rights as a human, humankind might well wake up one day to find its own rights abolished. While Roy may have forgiven Deckard for his actions, more often than not humans choose a more ignoble but self-interested course. If human beings are to contend with this possibility, perhaps we should each recognize our own similarities with

each other to prevent racism and xenophobia from spreading. So when the day emerges that replicants walk among us, there will no need for the *Vioght-Kampff*. For if Roy can achieve a “heavenly state” as he puts it, then surely somewhere in his creators’ universe, there exists that heaven. (Blade Runner)

It has been a novel experience arguing that fundamental human rights ought to be extended to all life forms that can express cognition or emotion. It is an unusual position to advance, but it is not inapt to observe that the history of the progress of humankind is very much a history of ‘have-nots’ becoming ‘haves’ and taking their rightful place with the rest of their fellow sentient beings. If the suppositions of Blade Runner are even remotely consonant with the realities of the future, we must greatly broaden our horizons and our very definition of life itself. Films like this, which widen our perspective, are not only enjoyable to watch but may even be prophetic.

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