Philosophy and *Blade Runner*

Timothy Shanahan

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In memory of my mother, about
whom only good things come to mind

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Preface

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* has been called the most visually dense, thematically challenging, and influential science fiction film ever made. It is routinely ranked among the greatest science fiction films of all time.[1] It has been uniformly praised for its stunning depiction of a technologically advanced but grim dystopian society of the near future. Occasionally it is recognized that the greatness of the film goes much deeper than just its impressive visual achievements. Rachela Morrison (1990, p. 2) notes that, 'in the immodest guise of a noir/science fiction thriller,' *Blade Runner* is essentially 'a philosophical film' that 'leaps from impeccable intricacies of *mise-en-scène* to questions about the nature of man, God, beast, the meaning of existence, and the workings of the universe.' Paul M. Sammon likewise observes that: '*Blade Runner* … addresses universal human concerns, not only what is human and what is real, but who am I, and where is my place in the universe, and why am I here, and why am I being exploited, and why am I not fighting against that?'[2] Yet despite the occasional recognition that *Blade Runner* is a deeply thought-provoking film, its considerable potential for eliciting novel perspectives on classic philosophical issues has so far been underappreciated.

My aim in this book is to invite readers to explore the philosophy *of Blade Runner* and to explore philosophy *through Blade Runner*. The first chapter provides background information about the film that will later prove useful as we explore its philosophical themes. Subsequent chapters consider a range of perennial philosophical issues that arise from reflection on specific scenes within the film, including human nature, personhood, identity, consciousness, freedom, morality, God, death, and the meaning of life. An epilogue responds to the challenge that a work of *fiction* cannot provide significant insights into

'the real world.' Although this entire book can be read as one long argument to the contrary, in the epilogue I will make this argument more explicit. However, we should not expect definitive answers to the questions we will consider. *Blade Runner* is, after all, a film, not a formal philosophical treatise, and thus is open to multiple interpretations. As Scott Bukatman (2012, p. 16) observes, '*Blade Runner* … effectively undermines interpretative certitudes' by producing 'an inexhaustible complexity, an infinity of surfaces to be encountered and explored.… [U]nlike many contemporary films, *Blade Runner* refuses to explain itself.'[3] I consider this a significant strength of the film that makes it ideal for prompting philosophical reflection. This book contains my reflections. In the end, of course, you must reach your own conclusions. Thinking about *Blade Runner* is a fine place to start.

Reading a book like this is obviously no substitute for viewing a film (and vice versa). If you have never seen the film, do not deny yourself this pleasure any longer. If you have already seen the film, now would be an excellent time to watch it again so that the details are fresh. Doing so will help you to better appreciate the discussions that follow, and will make recognition of the various scenes to be referenced more immediate. So put down this book, watch the film (again), enjoy its multifaceted brilliance, and meet me in Chapter 1 after the credits roll.

Timothy Shanahan
Los Angeles 2014

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1 Introduction

'Do you like our owl?'

(Rachael, to Deckard)

The Film's Basic Storyline

The philosophical issues *Blade Runner* raises are complex, but the film's basic storyline is relatively simple and easily summarized. An opening crawl provides essential background information for the story about to unfold:

> ***Early in the 21st Century, THE TYRELL CORPORATION advanced Robot evolution into the NEXUS phase – a being virtually identical to a human – known as a replicant.***
>
> ***The NEXUS 6 Replicants were superior in strength and agility, and at least equal in intelligence, to the genetic engineers who created them. Replicants were used Off-world as slave labor, in the hazardous exploration and colonization of other planets.***
>
> ***After a bloody mutiny by a NEXUS 6 combat team in an Off-world colony, Replicants were declared illegal on earth – under penalty of death.***
>
> ***Special police squads – BLADE RUNNER UNITS – had orders to shoot to kill, upon detection, any trespassing Replicants.***
>
> ***This was not called execution.***
>
> ***It was called retirement.***

Los Angeles, November 2019. Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is an exceptionally effective ex-blade runner who had quit because, as he laconically narrates, he'd had 'a bellyful of killing.'[1]

He is coerced into resuming his former occupation by Capt. Harry Bryant (M. Emmet Walsh) of the LAPD. His specific task is to retire four rogue replicants that staged a mutiny Off-world, killed the crew of a shuttle, and then made their way to Los Angeles – for reasons as yet unknown. After meeting with the replicants' creator, Dr Eldon Tyrell (Joe Turkel), Deckard eventually kills two of the replicants, Zhora (Joanna Cassidy) and Pris (Daryl Hannah), and is saved from his own death at the hands of Leon (Brion James) by a beautiful experimental replicant named Rachael (Sean Young) with whom, incidentally, he is falling in love. The film's action climaxes in a rather one-sided battle between Deckard and Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), the relentless, exuberant, and extremely dangerous leader of the rogue replicants. Rather than simply killing Deckard, as he easily could, in the end Batty saves him, and then just before expiring delivers a poignant reflection on his own brief life. Deckard returns to his apartment where Rachael declares her love for him, and together they (attempt to) flee the city. The credits then roll over a pulsating Vangelis soundtrack as the audience is left to ponder what it has just seen.

Androids, Replicants, and Humans

Ridley Scott judges *Blade Runner* to be unusual as films go: '*Blade Runner* works on a level which I haven't seen much – or ever – in a mainstream film. It works like a book. Like a very dark novel' (Knapp and Kulas 2005, p. xiv). This is hardly surprising given the film's genesis in Philip K. Dick's 1968 dystopian science fiction novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* In his biography of Philip Kindred Dick ('PKD' to his legions of fans), Emmanuel Carrère (2004, p. 131) attributes Dick's writing of *Electric Sheep* to his desire to extol the glory of the human being: 'But to extol the glory of the human being, Phil first had to define and flesh out the opposite of the human, which for Phil was not the animal or the thing but what he called the "simulacrum" – in other words, the robot.' Androids, robots, and

other human simulacra populate his writings, including *Electric Sheep*. As Dick explains, '*Sheep* stemmed from my basic interest in the problem of differentiating the authentic human being from the reflexive machine, which I call an android. In my mind android is a metaphor for people who are physiologically human but behaving in a nonhuman way' (Sammon 1996, p. 16).

Intelligent aliens, rebellious robots, and synthetic humanoids are, of course, staples of science fiction. The idea that we might someday come face-to-face with non-humans that are virtually indistinguishable from human beings is an irresistible plot device of innumerable science fiction stories. In typical fashion, Dick takes this interesting idea, twists it a bit, and thereby makes it even more intriguing. In 'The Android and the Human' (1972), published four years after *Electric Sheep*, he imagines a dramatic confrontation between a human being and a robot wherein an important truth is revealed to both of them – and by implication to us:

> Someday a human being … may shoot a robot … which has come out of a General Electrics factory, and to his surprise see it weep and bleed. And the dying robot may shoot back and, to its surprise, see a wisp of gray smoke arise from the electric pump that it supposed was [a] beating heart. It would be rather a great moment of truth for both of them. (Dick 1972, p. 187)

The 'great moment of truth' in this case would *not* be the realization that things are not always as they seem (which is hardly news), nor even that one could mistake a robot for a human (an idea that so much science fiction has taught us to expect), but the rather more disturbing prospect that humans and robots could *themselves* be mistaken about which kind of being they are – that one's grasp of *reality*, even of something seemingly so immediate and incorrigible as *what one is*, could be utterly mistaken. As Dick (1978, p. 260) confides in an undelivered speech, 'The two basic topics that fascinate me are "What is reality?"

and "What constitutes the authentic human being?"' He considered these two questions at bottom to concern the same fact: 'Fake realities create fake humans. Or, fake humans will generate fake realities and then sell them to other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves. So we end up with fake humans inventing fake realities and peddling them to other fake humans' (Dick 1978, pp. 263–4).

Electric Sheep Transmuted

Although *Blade Runner* inherits its narrative DNA from *Electric Sheep*, it is better described as a *transmutation* than as an adaptation of PKD's novel. If that novel could talk, it might with some justification say to Scott's film, borrowing a line of dialogue from J. F. Sebastian (William Sanderson), 'There's some of me in you.' The differences between the book and the film are many. Although some of these differences do not matter for our purposes, others are important. Identifying them may help us to make sense of some otherwise puzzling aspects of the film.

In the novel's post-World War Terminus environment of 1992 (2021 in later reprints), healthy humans are encouraged to emigrate to the Off-world colonies to preserve the human gene pool. As an incentive, each émigré is given an 'andy' (that is, android) as a personal servant. Those humans left on earth are either radiation-induced genetic defectives (such as J. R. Isidore, the counterpart of J. F. Sebastian in the film), or those too stubborn to leave (such as Rick Deckard). Most animals perished from the effects of radioactive fallout. The owls were the first to go, followed by most of the rest. Real animals are scarce and prohibitively expensive for most people to own. Possessing a real animal therefore confers significant social status on its owner. Most have to settle for realistic artificial animals ('animoids') while longing for the real thing. This theme is echoed in the film in the question about a tortoise posed to Leon by blade runner Dave Holden (Morgan Paull), Deckard's keen interest in whether the Tyrell Corporation's owl is real (despite Eldon Tyrell's enormous wealth

and power, it isn't), the questions about calfskin wallets and the like posed to Rachael during her Voight-Kampff test, and in the artificial animal bazaar (Animoid Row) where Deckard follows up on clues to Zhora's whereabouts.[2]

In *Electric Sheep*, Rick Deckard is a freelance bounty hunter hired by the San Francisco Police Department to retire rogue androids – a distasteful job that he is resigned to do for the sake of earning enough money to purchase a real animal. When his real sheep dies of tetanus he replaces it with an artificial sheep realistic enough to fool his neighbors; yet he still longs for a real animal. After he finally retires enough androids to purchase a real Nubian goat, Rachael spitefully pushes the animal off the roof of his apartment building. Deckard is distraught until wandering in a desert outside the city he is delighted to chance upon what he takes to be a living toad, and triumphantly brings it home, only to have his wife flip open a control panel on its belly, revealing it to be an electric toad. Deckard is crestfallen but resigned. Real humans, like Deckard, dream of owning real animals, even toads, upon which they can confer their love and affection. Do androids similarly dream of loving and caring for artificial animals? The implication of Dick's sharp differentiation of humans and androids is an unequivocal 'No.' Humans need to express love, affection, and empathy for others. Androids do not and cannot.

This point bears on what is perhaps the most significant difference between the novel and the film. Whereas in the film the replicants are claimed by Tyrell to be 'more human than human,' in the novel the androids are emphatically *less* human than human. This is an issue about which PKD and Ridley Scott strongly disagreed. After reading an early script for *Blade Runner*, Dick reported that:

> The main difference between what Ridley views this all in terms of and what I view it all in terms of is as follows: To me, the replicants (or androids, if you will), are deplorable because they are heartless, they are completely self-centered, they don't care what happens to other creatures. To me this is

> essentially a less than human entity for that reason. Now Ridley says he regards them as Supermen who couldn't fly. He said they are smarter than humans, they are stronger than humans, and they have faster reflexes than humans. That's rather a great divergence, you see. We've gone from somebody who is a simulation of the authentic human to someone who is literally superior to the authentic human. So we've now flipped this. Now the theme of the book is that Rick Deckard is dehumanized in his job of tracking down the replicants and killing them. In other words, he ends up essentially like they are. Ridley said that he regarded that as an intellectual idea and he was not interested in making an esoteric film.[3]

The androids in *Electric Sheep* lack a capacity for love, compassion, and especially *empathy* – for humans, for animals (one of the androids uses scissors to nonchalantly snip off the legs of a living spider, much to the horror of J. R. Isidore), and even for each other. The film takes the opposite perspective in this regard in that at least some of the replicants seem more empathic toward one another and even toward some humans than do the humans themselves. In the novel Deckard is dehumanized by tracking down and killing androids. In the film Deckard is ultimately humanized by his encounters with the replicants. The differences could hardly be starker.

Dick also was not pleased with what he gleaned from an early script of Scott's film. In an essay published in a cable television guide in early 1981 (as compensation he received one year of free cable TV service) with the title, 'Universe Makers … and Breakers' (perhaps slyly suggesting that those constructive and destructive roles were played by the author and filmmaker, respectively), Dick offers sarcastic praise for the upcoming movie:

> Ridley Scott, who directed *Alien* and who now intends to bring into existence a $15 million film based on my novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, confessed to an interviewer from *Omni* magazine that he 'found the novel too

> difficult to read,' despite the fact that the novel appeared as a mass-circulation paperback. On the other hand I was able rather easily to read the screenplay (it will be called *Blade Runner*). It was terrific. It bore no relation to the book. Oddly, in some ways it was better…. What my story will become is one titanic lurid collision of androids being blown up, androids killing humans, general confusion and murder, all very exciting to watch. Makes my book seem dull by comparison. (Dick 1981, p. 104)

Despite his initial reservations, Dick eventually underwent a total conversion. Eight months before the film hit theaters he wrote to Jeff Walker at The Ladd Company to express his unbounded enthusiasm for the upcoming film, of which he had by then seen a preview: 'I did not know that a work of mine or a set of ideas of mine could be escalated into such stunning dimensions. My life and creative work are justified and completed by BLADE RUNNER. Thank you … it is going to be one hell of a commercial success. It will prove invincible.'[4] Sadly, Dick died on 2 March 1982, a few months before the film's release.

From Workprint to Final Cut

One of the unusual characteristics of *Blade Runner* that makes it so fascinating to study is that to date *seven* different versions of the film have been released.[5] Most of the differences concern technical audio/visual aspects that are insignificant from the point of view of the story itself. But some of the differences *are* significant and therefore are worth commenting upon here.

In early March 1982 test audiences in Denver and Dallas were shown what has come to be called the 'Workprint' version of the film. Most descriptions of this event insert the word 'disastrous' at some point to emphasize how disappointing the filmmakers found the chilly reception of their meticulously crafted creation. This version ends with the elevator doors closing as Deckard and

Rachael attempt to flee the city. On questionnaires distributed after the screenings many in these audiences reported that they found the film difficult to understand and moreover were put off by what they considered to be the film's slow pace and ambiguous ending. As Ridley Scott later observed, 'On first viewing, it [*Blade Runner*] may have been a lot to take in' (McDonagh 1991, p. 71). Thus chastened, a slightly altered version was shown in San Diego in May 1982. In this version, Roy Batty is shown making a telephone call to see if Hannibal Chew (James Hong) is in the Eye Works, and later shows Deckard reloading his blaster after firing at Batty in Sebastian's decaying apartment building. Those added details (later removed) did little to address the problems revealed in the initial test audience screenings. To make the story more easily understood, Scott added voice-over narration in which Deckard, in a classic *film noir* detective's world-weary voice, provides background details and explains the significance of the events as they unfold.[6] In addition, a new ending was added in which Deckard and Rachael flee the city and drive off in Deckard's car over sunlit mountain roads. This version also reveals that Tyrell had told Deckard that Rachael, unlike the other replicants, did not have a built-in termination date. These new features were intended to make the story easier to follow and to provide the happy ending American audiences expect.[7] The resulting Theatrical Release opened in movie theaters in the US on 25 June 1982, followed by an International Cut (showing more graphic violence) that opened in theaters in Europe and Asia later that year.

Despite these attempts to make the film more audience-friendly, some film critics and science fiction fans still found fault with it. Film critics generally felt that the film's impressive visual achievements overshadowed what they considered its lackluster story. They also found the tacked-on happy ending incongruent with the visual and thematic motifs of the rest of the film. That summer science fiction fans were presented with a number of less challenging movies to entertain them. *Blade Runner* opened the same month as *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial*, *Star*

Trek II: The Wrath of Khan, a remake of *The Thing*, and the fantasy-action film, *Conan the Barbarian*. The feel-good movie *E.T.*, in particular, proved immensely more popular among film critics and science fiction fans alike than the dark, existentially challenging *Blade Runner*. Robin Wood (2003, p. 161) tartly explains audiences' and film critics' preference for *E.T.* over *Blade Runner* as 'expressing a preference for the reassuring over the disturbing, the reactionary over the progressive, the safe over the challenging, the childish over the adult, spectator passivity over spectator activity.' In one of the few (mainly) positive reviews of *Blade Runner* at the time, Hiawatha Bray (1982, p. 97), writing in *Christianity Today*, wrote that, 'This isn't a family film, and it's not for the squeamish. But of all the summer's releases, only *Blade Runner* is truly adult in its thoughtfulness and complexity.'

Despite its cool reception at the box office, the film's stature slowly began to rise thanks to the newly emerging home video market. The broadcast of a slightly less graphic version of the film on network TV in 1986 led to greater video rentals and laserdisc sales. Ironically, one of the factors that may have been off-putting to theater-goers – the film's extreme visual density – encouraged multiple close viewings at home on VHS and laserdisc, permitting scenes to be paused, reviewed, and pondered more carefully. It was slowly acquiring the status of a cult classic.

The next event in the film's evolving reception was serendipitous. In September 1989, Michael Arick, a film preservationist searching the Warner Brothers film vault in Hollywood for a large-format print of the 1962 Natalie Wood musical *Gypsy*, stopped short when he noticed a film canister marked: 'Technicolor. London. *Blade Runner*. 70mm print.' Assuming that this must be the International Cut, he placed it in storage in an off-inventory vault. When the film was subsequently screened on 6 May 1990 at the Los Angeles Cineplex-Odeon Fairfax Theater, he and others in the audience who were expecting to see a familiar version of *Blade Runner* were shocked to find themselves viewing the quasi-mythological Workprint version

that had long been thought lost or destroyed (Sammon 1996, pp. 331–2). The screening met with an enthusiastic response. Audiences reacted the same way a year later to subsequent screenings at the NuArt Theater in Los Angeles and at the Art Deco Castro Theater in San Francisco.

Sensing an opportunity to capitalize on renewed interest in the film, Warner Brothers decided to re-edit and re-release it. The voice-over narration and the happy ending were jettisoned. The film now ended (once again) with the elevator doors closing as Deckard and Rachael attempt to flee the city.[8] Advertised as 'The Original Cut of the Futuristic Adventure,' *Blade Runner: The Director's Cut* debuted in September 1992. As Ridley Scott explained his decision to cooperate in bringing out this new edit of his film:

> I felt the released cut [that is, the Theatrical Version] was over-explanatory. The Deckard (Harrison Ford) voice-over became a disturbing factor. The happily ever-after ending was always silly and really worked against the nature of the 'beast'. *Blade Runner* is a *film noir*, where the happiest ending one can hope for is at least philosophical and may even leave you wondering about the fate of the two characters – certainly a bitter-sweet ending. (Bahania 1992, p. 87)

This version is also notable for the insertion of a brief scene in which Deckard, while dozing at his piano, has a dream-like reverie of a unicorn frolicking through the woods. The inclusion of this scene has generated enormous speculation and is discussed in detail below.

With some remaining continuity problems resolved, some dialogue slightly altered, and many scenes digitally adjusted or re-shot, *Blade Runner: The Final Cut*, the definitive version of Scott's brilliant neo-noir science fiction film, was shown in limited theatrical release in October 2007. A Five-Disc Ultimate Collector's Edition box set including the Workprint (WP), Theatrical Release (TR), International Cut (IC), Director's Cut