

# The Philosophy of Neo-Noir

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## *Blade Runner* and Sartre The Boundaries of Humanity

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*Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) combines film noir and science fiction to tell a story that questions what it means to be human, a question as old as Methuselah.<sup>1</sup> However, this ancient question still arises in 2019 A.D. within a setting that pits humans against androids. The humans consider the androids, which they call *replicants*, to be nothing more than multifaceted machines. Created on an assembly line by the Tyrell Corporation's genetic engineers, they are organisms manufactured to serve as slave labor for exploring and colonizing other planets. As manufactured artifacts, they are thought of as expendable substitutes for their human masters. Since the replicants are accorded neither legal nor moral rights, their expendability is assumed. Although these complex androids look human, act human, and are at least as intelligent as their human designers, they are manufactured to live only four years as a way of ensuring that they will never be equal to humans. Naturally, they lack emotional development, a fact that is used to identify them as replicants.<sup>2</sup>

The noir film raises some interesting questions: If artificial intelligence were placed in a body that looked and acted human, would such a machine be a human? Would a human, in turn, be nothing more than a machine? In fact, would androids differ in any important way from the humans who created them?

### Vive la Différence?

Some philosophers, like Alan Turing, argue that there is no important difference between an android and a human because the human brain is a kind of computer that processes inputs (the things we sense) and generates outputs (our behavior). They believe that computers will soon be able to imitate the input-output processing of the brain. In fact, there are com-

puter programs that can converse with humans so skillfully that it's nearly impossible to distinguish their responses from those of a human. Turing insists that, if we can't distinguish between the answers a computer gives to questions and the answers a human being gives, then the computer has the equivalent of a human mind. If, in addition, a computer has an organic body that is indistinguishable from a human body, then the computer and the human are essentially the same kind of being. In that case, someone would, doubtlessly, start a computer rights movement.

Jean-Paul Sartre disagrees with Turing's argument. According to Sartre, there's an enormous difference between a human artifact, such as a computer, and a human being. In *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, he claims that "existence precedes essence" in human beings alone.<sup>3</sup> In other words, we are first born, we first exist, and only later choose the nature or essence we will have. In choosing our essence, we differ from any manufactured thing, a thing in which essence precedes existence. Rather than use Sartre's example of a paper cutter to explain this concept, let's substitute an android. Suppose a genetic engineer decides to manufacture an android. This engineer knows what he is making; that is, he knows the essence of the android, and he knows how the android will be used before he begins creating it. In other words, the android's essence exists in the genetic engineer's mind before the android is actually manufactured. If by the *essence* of the android we mean the procedure by which it's made and the purpose for which it will be produced, then the android's essence precedes its existence.

In Sartre's view, the traditional notion of God leads us to confuse the human with a manufactured item. God is thought of, after all, as the maker of human beings. He knows exactly what He will create before He creates anyone. He knows what each human being will be before He creates him or her, before each one exists. So Sartre insists that the concept of the human in the mind of God is comparable to the concept of the android in the mind of the genetic engineer. Just as the genetic engineer creates each android for a certain purpose, God creates each human for a certain purpose. Neither the human nor the android is a free being; they are determined by their makers.

Sartre, however, was an atheist. Since there is no God, he reasoned, there isn't anyone who can determine the nature of any human being. Human nature can't be determined in advance because there's no one who knows what each human will become in advance. It's only the human being herself who can determine the kind of person she will be. We're simply what we make of ourselves through our choices and actions. In humans,

and humans alone, the fact of existing comes before an individual's own choice of the kind of essence or nature she will develop.

### Freedom and Responsibility

Although the replicants of *Blade Runner* are engineered to act and reason as humans, they can't choose their own essence. This inability is, in Sartre's view, what differentiates any manufactured being from humans. The replicants aren't responsible for their condition because they were programmed to fulfill a certain function; as members of a series, they didn't choose their essence. Disagreeing with Turing, Sartre insists that no human is reducible to a programmed, manufactured being. Instead, humans create their own nature through free choices and actions. We can choose our occupation, our level of education, our marital status, our religion or lack of one, our lifestyle, and our attitudes, beliefs, and values. Since we choose our nature, we are responsible for it. We can't blame anyone else for what we are since we can, at any moment, choose to become a new, different sort of person. We are free because we can rely neither on a god nor on society to direct our actions or to program our natures. Our freedom consists mainly in our ability to envision additional possibilities for our condition.

Once we accept our freedom, we must also accept its accompanying responsibility. Since we could have made different choices, we should assume responsibility for what we have become. Sometimes, however, we try to escape responsibility by pretending we're not free. We try to convince ourselves that outside influences have shaped our nature—God, our family, our genes, society. Sartre exposes this belief as a cop-out, claiming that the human is the sum of everything he ever chooses to do. If we choose to believe that we are determined by outside factors, we are responsible for adopting this belief. To be human means to create oneself—the emotions one chooses to feel, the beliefs one chooses to retain, and the actions one chooses to perform.

Since replicants have a maker who programs them, Sartre's view tells us that they, unlike humans, *can* justifiably blame someone else for their essence. In fact, some replicants, having the advanced Nexus-6 design, blamed humans to the point of committing mutiny. As a result, a death sentence was imposed on any that returned to earth. It would be reasonable to suppose that no replicant would want to risk the return trip. But four fugitive replicants are trying to reach their maker, a genetic engineer turned corporate big shot, to plead with him to extend their lives.

## The Voigt-Kampff Test

The first fugitive replicant we see, Leon Kowalski (Brion James), looks so human we aren't immediately aware that he's a replicant. Not only does this waste-disposal engineer look human, but he seems acutely nervous and, as he is being tested, shows unmistakable fear. If Sartre's distinction between manufactured items and humans is right, and if the humans depicted in the film are right in claiming that there's a difference between replicant and human, then it should be a discernible difference. If there isn't a discernible difference, then it isn't clear why they should be subservient to human beings.

In *Blade Runner*, the only way to test whether someone is a human or a replicant is by means of the Voigt-Kampff (V-K) test, which monitors emotional response by means of a subject's involuntary iris fluctuations, capillary dilation, and blush response. Not all emotional responses, however, are important in distinguishing between a human and a replicant. The test doesn't try to identify, for example, fear or rage. Fear and rage are basic emotions that even someone who has just four years of life can experience. Just observe a young child, and you'll know this is true. But the emotion of empathy, the power to place oneself in the position of someone else and vividly feel the emotions of that other individual, is on a different level. Unlike more primitive emotions, empathy requires maturity, a maturity that takes more than four years to develop. This emotion is exactly the emotion that the V-K test focuses on by asking hypothetical questions involving human or animal suffering. Since Leon doesn't have this kind of emotional sophistication, the test almost immediately identifies him as a replicant.

Sartre may approve of the V-K test because of the importance he places on human emotions, which, he recognizes, arise from our very being. But, since this being is the one created from the choices we make as free adult humans, we can control them. We can choose the kinds of emotions we want to feel by choosing our beliefs and choosing what we want to focus on. Of course, many people suppose that humans have little control over their emotions. If they're angry, they think, someone has *made* them angry. Sartre argued against this view since he recognized that, if we're angry, we've chosen to be in this condition. If Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is remorseful about being a blade runner, a special police officer assigned to track down replicants, he has chosen to be remorseful. Alternatively, he could choose to look at the bright side of his job, or he could simply choose

not to do it. Emotions, Sartre said, are ways in which we freely choose to perceive and respond to the world. Our inability to blame anyone else for what we are is the basis for such emotions as despair, fear, remorse, and anguish.

There's a vast difference between the emotions of an adult, who has the capacity to control his emotions, and the emotions of a child, who hasn't yet developed that capacity. Since four years is the amount of time a replicant has to live, his emotions can develop only as much as those of a four-year-old child. So the V-K test is a reasonable test to administer when trying to separate individuals who have mature emotional responses from those who have immature emotional responses.

While Sartre might appreciate the test, his version of it would focus on the emotions of despair, anguish, and forlornness, rather than empathy. Confronting life alone, without a Creator, produces the emotion of forlornness. We are forlorn, according to Sartre, when we realize that nothing and no one limits our choices. Sartre claims that the absence of God has set us free from His rules. We must then create our own values, our own rules. We're not simply the product of environmental conditioning or the genes we inherit. People end up forlorn in their futile attempts to find certainty and guidelines. We're forlorn when we discover that science doesn't have all the answers. We're forlorn when we realize the emptiness of our excuses: "I didn't have the time," "I was brought up that way," "He made me angry (or sad or happy)." "I couldn't help myself." "Everyone else does it." These excuses can't remove our freedom, and, concomitantly, they can't help us shed our responsibility. Yet many people keep making excuses for themselves because they can't bear the anxiety produced by the full awareness of their freedom and responsibility.

*Blade Runner* shows us this forlornness and anxiety through Deckard, who, Sartre would say, is attempting to escape these emotions so vital to the human condition. In a voice-over, Deckard explains that he quit his job as a blade runner because he had "a bellyful of killing." He returns only when his former boss threatens him. If Deckard were truly aware of his freedom, he would have refused, threat or no threat. But, at this point in the film, since he doesn't fully appreciate his humanity, he rationalizes that he would "rather be a killer than a victim." Sartre would see his excuse as a futile attempt to flee his anxiety. He would ask Deckard: "What if everyone accepted the job of killing others?" People who are like Deckard, Sartre says, will shrug their shoulders and answer, "Everyone doesn't act that way." The philosopher then adds: "But really, one should always ask himself, 'What

would happen if everybody looked at things that way?' There is no escaping this disturbing thought except by a kind of double-dealing."<sup>4</sup>

Sartre's next words would certainly apply to Deckard: "A man who lies and makes excuses for himself by saying not everybody does that, is someone with an uneasy conscience."<sup>5</sup> As the film continues, Deckard's conscience does become more and more "uneasy" to the point where it becomes anguished. But Sartre would admonish us against feeling sorry for him. For Sartre, anguish is a good thing to experience because it means we own up to our responsibility. Only an emotionally mature human can sincerely accept responsibility for his or her choices.

Sartre counsels us that, when we choose, we should restrict our efforts to what is under our immediate control. In other words, why waste time trying to do the impossible? Sartre thinks this realization leads to despair because we can no longer hope that we will be rescued by our Creator, by a prince charming, by winning the lottery, or by an omnipotent manufacturer. No longer hoping that someone will come along on a white horse to save us, we experience despair. Yet, in despairing about things over which we have no control, we can increase our power. This sounds odd, but our despair over knowing we must act for ourselves means that we must use our own power. Rather than focusing our energy on things beyond our control, we concentrate on what we *can* do. Deckard can't save his society by himself, but it *is* within his power to save an individual.

In sum, Sartre would approve of a test that presents various hypothetical situations and measures an individual's responses to them. Although he would substitute *forlornness*, *anguish*, and *despair* for *empathy*, the test would still gauge emotional maturity. After all, one can't be a mature person without accepting responsibility for one's choices and actions.

At the same time, the test contains an internal flaw, a major one. The problem is that many human adults *never* develop emotional maturity. Most of us can recall an adult we've met who displayed the emotions of a young child. Using Sartre's perspective, we would acknowledge that such an adult has made herself this way and is responsible for her condition, unlike the child. Yet, if an emotionally immature adult is tested to determine whether she is human, the results may be inconclusive. At best, the test can prove only that the subject is mature; it can't prove that the subject is human.

### But She Looks Human

Although the V-K test works well at the beginning of *Blade Runner*, it

might not have worked near the film's end when Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), a replicant military model, develops emotional maturity. But first let's examine another scene where the test *is* successful. Deckard is assigned by his former boss, Captain Bryant (M. Emmet Walsh), to see if the V-K test will work on the new Nexus-6 replicants, who so closely resemble human beings. Bryant, who refers to replicants in a derogatory way as "skin jobs," shows Deckard a video of the renegade replicants. Before sending Deckard to the Tyrell Corporation, owned by the omnipotent manufacturer who creates and sells the replicants, Bryant explains to him that the androids "were designed to copy human beings in every way except their emotions. The designers reckoned that, after a few years, they might develop their own emotional responses. . . . So they built in a failsafe device. . . [a] four-year life span." In other words, the designers purposefully designed the replicants so that they could never become the equal of an adult human being. This design kept them in a subservient position.

Arriving in the spacious office of Eldon Tyrell (Joe Turkel), Deckard encounters a replicant owl before he meets Rachael (Sean Young), who appears to be one of the corporation's executives. Deckard wears the kind of trenchcoat that is usually worn by detectives in film noir, and Rachael is the classic *femme fatale* of film noir. Her lips painted bright red, she wears her dark hair tied up tightly behind her head and frequently wears jackets with the kind of padded shoulders that became Joan Crawford's signature mark. As they wait for Tyrell to show up, Rachael coolly observes that Deckard doesn't seem to appreciate the work of the corporation. Deckard responds indifferently: "Replicants are like any other machine. They're either a benefit or a hazard." In Sartre's terms, Deckard thinks of replicants as things that exist only to fulfill the essence, the purpose created for them by human beings. At the same time, he is unaware that he has allowed his society to program this belief, a prejudice, into his mind.

The film makes it clear that human physical appearance alone doesn't make an individual a human being. René Descartes, a seventeenth-century philosopher, dispels this notion in seeking the essential nature of a human being. He says that, when he observes from a window human beings passing by on the street below him, he sees "hats and cloaks that might cover artificial machines, whose motions might be determined by springs."<sup>6</sup> In other words, merely looking at someone, or even interacting with someone, doesn't supply sufficient evidence that the individual is human. People often leap to erroneous conclusions on the basis of insufficient evidence.

Aware of this tendency to leap to unwarranted conclusions, Tyrell enters and tells Deckard to administer the V-K test on a human subject—Rachael. Complying, Deckard determines, after an unusually high number of questions, that she's a machine. However, she is unaware of it at this point and leaves before Deckard reveals his findings. Immediately, Deckard's view of her changes, a view that is reflected in his choice of words, as he asks Tyrell: "How can it not know what it is?" She has now become to him an object, an "it," rather than a person.

Wanting to convince Deckard that she's human, Rachael goes to his apartment with a childhood photograph of herself and her mother. But the blade runner, shattering her hopes, says that her memories are simply the implanted memories of Tyrell's sixteen-year-old niece. Although Deckard is cool to her at first, Rachael's tears awaken his deadened empathy. Uncomfortable about his unfamiliar feelings toward an inhuman "thing," he advises her to go home. In a voice-over, Deckard says: "Replicants weren't supposed to have feelings. Neither were blade runners. What the hell was happening to me?" He has now started to question the beliefs that were programmed into him by society. In Sartre's view, he has taken a step toward being more human.

Somewhat later, Deckard calls Rachael from a bar to apologize and invites her for a drink. She hangs up on him. However, she must have changed her mind because she subsequently shows up in the vicinity just in time to blast a hole in Leon's back before he can gouge out Deckard's eyes and kill him.

After Rachael saves his life, Deckard takes her back to his apartment. Never having killed anyone before, she is quite shaken up by her action. Deckard gets a drink and, in the hard-boiled tone of a classic film noir detective, tells her that it's "part of the business." He goes through the motions of life mechanically, while Rachael is anguished by her responsibility for killing someone. Hmmm . . . now who is the real human being?

Awakening from a brief snooze, Deckard hears Rachael playing the piano. Acknowledging her individuality for the first time, the blade runner tells her that she plays "beautifully." Then he tenderly kisses her face. Afraid, she opens the door and tries to leave the apartment. But Deckard, feeling a surge of sexual desire, slams the door and pushes her against the venetian blinds. The shadows cast patterns on their faces that are reminiscent of 1940s noir films. Deckard commands her to say "kiss me," and she complies. Again, he orders her to say "I want you" and to put her arms around him. His use of force prevents her from making a free choice, which is the prerogative of a human.

### Meeting Your Maker

Like Descartes, Deckard knows that, no matter how appealing, the physical appearance of being human isn't the essence of actually being human. So he treats Rachael as a parrot that lacks free choice. But, if appearance isn't the essence of the human being, what about the ability to think? Descartes argues affirmatively. His argument is depicted in the film when one of the fugitive replicants, Pris (Daryl Hannah), attempts to convince J. F. Sebastian (William Sanderson), a shy employee of the Tyrell Corporation, that, because she thinks, there's no relevant difference between her and those usually thought of as humans. She isn't like the walking, talking mechanical toys that Sebastian has created to alleviate his loneliness. To help him recognize this, she quotes Descartes: "I think, therefore, I am." But let's think about it! Is thinking enough to establish one's humanity? It does, indeed, prove that the one who thinks exists or lives, but it doesn't prove that the thinking thing is necessarily human. There may be a god who thinks, as well as thinking extraterrestrials or nonhuman animals.

Yet Sartre, who was influenced by Descartes, provides another perspective from which to view the statement "I think, therefore, I am." There can be no awareness of "I" without an awareness of others. In discovering the truth of Descartes' statement, Sartre notes that one discovers "not only himself, but others as well." Saying the word "I" implies that there are other centers of consciousness around me. "In order to get any truth about myself," Sartre continues, "I must have contact with another person." Once we acknowledge this fact, we discover a world of "intersubjectivity," for, as Sartre observes: "In discovering my inner being I discover the other person at the same time." Ironically, it's only the replicants who, through most of the film, display intersubjectivity by caring about each other. All the humans—Deckard, Sebastian, Chew (James Hong), and Tyrell—live alone, without any apparent intimate relationship to anyone else. Lacking the opportunity to develop intersubjective relationships, they don't really seem to care about each other. Intersubjectivity—where the consciousness of individuals is intertwined—is what gives rise to the feeling of empathy.

Two replicants who deeply care about each other and have an intersubjective relationship are Pris and Batty, who are lovers. Batty has accompanied Pris to Sebastian's apartment. He tries to get Sebastian to look at the replicants another way: "We're not computers; we're physical." By contrasting the replicants' physical nature with the nature of computers, Batty implies something more than that the replicants aren't merely material. Both

computers and replicants are made of material, but Batty is affirming that, unlike computers, the replicants are embodied. This embodiment is a necessary condition for experiencing emotions. Only an embodied being can have feelings. Emotions or feelings, insofar as we know them, depend on certain physiological conditions, such as having nerve endings and certain areas of the brain. They result in certain bodily effects, such as a rise in blood pressure, increased respiration or heartbeat, sweating, and so on. As organisms cloned from genetic material, the replicants are embodied, and their embodiment makes them capable of emotional experiences, unlike a computer.

Knowing that their termination dates are imminent, the lovers convince Sebastian to take them to Tyrell, hoping that he will increase their life span. Tyrell, the androids' creator, can be said to be their god. Batty treats him as such when they meet, telling him: "It's not an easy thing to meet your maker." Getting right to the point, he asks his creator to repair them so that they'll live longer. After giving Batty a technical explanation of his limitations, Tyrell informs him: "You were made as well as we could make you." Batty objects: "But not to last." Now surely Batty knows that Tyrell can't make him immortal. He simply wants to add more years onto his life span. But, beyond the innate desire to live that all animals possess, he wants to appreciate his experiences in a fuller way, a more mature way. This intention is corroborated in his last scene.

Seemingly to glimpse Batty's motive for desiring more life but knowing that he can't do anything about it, Tyrell tries to appease him: "The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long. And you have burned so very, very brightly, Roy. Look at you. You're the prodigal son." After the "god of biomechanics" exhorts his creation to "Revel in your time!" Batty kisses Tyrell on the lips. Perhaps he is somewhat grateful for Tyrell's advice, for he will soon begin to revel in the time he has left as he toys with Deckard. But, before doing so, he crushes his creator's skull and gouges out his eyes.

Batty's action shows that he agrees with a statement that Sartre quotes: "If God doesn't exist, everything would be permitted."<sup>8</sup> By killing his god, Batty is reborn, now able to create his own essence. Along with Sartre, he recognizes that no god can determine his fate. With no one to determine his fate, he alone must assume responsibility for himself. He begins to experience the forlornness that Sartre describes. Living outside a replicant's programming, he must create his own rules and continue existing on his own terms. Now he is free—but without any creator to rely on for direction. Tyrell can neither give him more life nor make him human. Batty

must save himself. At the same time, he knows despair, for no one can rescue him from the death that he knows is drawing ever closer. He can't count on anyone else. Yet it's at this point that he would meet Sartre's criteria for being human, for living in the human condition.

### An Existential Choice

Meanwhile, Deckard kills Pris, an act that is sure to increase Batty's emotional turmoil. When he discovers her lifeless body, Batty despairs deeply and kisses her tenderly one last time. However, he doesn't have much time to despair since Deckard is continuing his pursuit. Batty, who has superior strength and intellect, soon gets the upper hand—and in more than one sense, since he avenges the deaths of the two female replicants by breaking two fingers on one of Deckard's hands. Shortly afterward, Batty's own hand starts to malfunction, indicating that his termination date is very near. In defiance, he drives a long nail all the way through his hand. Turning his attention to the blade runner, he warns, as he rams his head through a bathroom wall: "Four, five, try to stay alive. Come on, get it up. Unless you're alive, you can't play. And if you don't play [you're dead]. Six, seven, go to hell, or go to heaven." Heaven is life that is revealed in at each moment; hell is being emotionally dead to life. Rather than being malicious, Batty intends to make the blade runner realize that life should be revealed in, that play is essential to being alive.

Batty then pursues Deckard, and it becomes clear that the hunter and hunted have switched positions. Deckard, enduring the pain and disability of his broken fingers, struggles hand over hand up the side of a building, finally making it up to the roof. No rest for the weary, however, since Batty appears from an opening in the roof. Running for his life, Deckard jumps to another rooftop. He miscalculates and falls short, dangling precariously off the side of a tall building.

Before continuing the chase, Batty stands with his arms crossed, apparently lost in thought. He knows that he will face the kind of anguished choice described by Sartre: shall he let Deckard die, or shall he save him? Not only has Deckard tried to kill him, but the blade runner has killed his lover. Batty is also fully aware that Deckard would have killed him had he been given the chance. In his good hand, Batty holds a dove, a real bird that contrasts with Tyrell's artificial one. Shall he side with his impaled hand, representing death, or with the hand in which he holds life, the dove?

Making the leap to the next rooftop effortlessly, Batty says to the terri-

fied blade runner: "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is, to be a slave." His words, spoken without vindictiveness, seem to be an attempt to awaken Deckard's empathy. As Deckard loses his grip, Batty grabs his hand and saves him. At last, he has freely chosen his essence by choosing to be a life giver rather than the life-taking combat model he was programmed to be.

Afterward, Batty wearily sits down, still cradling the dove, and says: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near Tannhauser gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain." His words, expressing the value of his life experiences, are all the more poignant because these are the last words of his life. At the same time that his allotted four years have expired, the dove is liberated, and Batty is freed. In these four years, he has acquired a unique combination of experiences, experiences that he both remembers and cherishes. It's not in merely seeing objects and understanding what they are that we express our humanity. Rather, our humanity is expressed in the deep emotional appreciation that we bring to what we perceive. Ironically, given Tyrell's final advice to his "prodigal son," Batty knows how to "revel" in the present moment. It is this emotional response, so unique to each individual, that gives a human his or her worth as a human being.

### The Authentic Human

Batty has become Deckard's savior in more ways than one. Not only has he saved his biological life, but he also saves his humanity. He has taught Deckard what it means to be a mature, free human being rather than an artificial one, symbolized by Tyrell's artificial, imprisoned bird. Witnessing Batty's death, Deckard muses: "I don't know why he saved my life. Maybe, in those last moments, he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life, anybody's life, my life."

The film suggests that Batty's emotional maturity, his choice of empathy and compassion, is what makes a human truly human. In the end, it's not Tyrell or any genetic engineer who can make Batty human—he must create this in himself. Being human isn't a particular DNA configuration but a state of mind, of feeling. By accepting his own death and saving the man who has been trying to kill him, he shows emotional maturity. He would have passed the Voigt-Kampff test.

Batty's love of life contrasts with Deckard's experience of life as routine,

dreary, and uneventful. He had been unable to revel in the present moment. With a new outlook on life, involving a much deeper appreciation of it, Deckard returns to his apartment to find Rachael. Instead of forcing her responses, as he did earlier, he questions her about her feelings for him, and she freely answers. The empathy that both Rachael and Batty have helped him develop leads Deckard to respect Rachael's autonomy and, thus, perceive her as an equal. They no longer have a superior/inferior relationship.

The humans tried to preserve their presumed superiority by making another group inferior. The inferior beings had been animals, but in the world of *Blade Runner*, animals have become rare. So another kind of being must substitute for animals since maintaining the illusion of superiority depends on perceiving another group as inferior. Superiority, of course, results in slavery or oppression for the group seen as inferior. Only a lack of empathy, of emotional maturity, could permit this kind of hierarchical thinking.

Emotional maturity varies in humans as well as in replicants. Some people lack empathy completely, while others are so empathetic they see no difference between themselves and others. Many individuals who look human, sound human, and have human DNA would fail the V-K test. Just think of the BTK killer! If such individuals fail the test, does this mean they're not fully human? Does the inability to feel someone else's suffering make us more like a machine and less human? There are copious examples in news reports every day about how people behave in an inhuman way. Perhaps *Blade Runner* suggests a way to assess the human depth of those who are biologically human. Since, as Sartre argues, a person can choose the kind of being he is, one who chooses against life, against empathy, and against his responsibility would have no room to complain.

As the film concludes, Batty, Rachael, and Deckard have found the freedom to be truly human. At the moment Batty feels the deep emotion that motivates him to kill his creator, he escapes his genetically engineered programming. Rachael and Deckard too find freedom from their programming—through the love they develop for each other. But someone may object that, since Deckard wasn't a replicant, he wasn't programmed. This objection doesn't take into account that many people allow themselves to be programmed by their families, their societies. *Blade Runner* and Sartre urge us to escape this programming and become authentically human.

## Notes

1. There are two issues outside the scope of this essay: Deckard's replicant status and whether androids like those depicted in *Blade Runner* are possible. The conclusion of the essay may render the first question moot. Regarding the second question, I think it highly improbable that such beings can be manufactured, although we may eventually be able to genetically alter human beings.
2. While many philosophers distinguish between a human, as a biological entity, and a person, as a being possessing certain mental states, I am using the term *human* to include both biological and psychological traits.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism" (1946), in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 13.
4. *Ibid.*, 18–19.
5. *Ibid.*, 19.
6. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 68.
7. Sartre, "Existentialism," 37–38.
8. *Ibid.*, 22. Sartre is quoting Dostoyevsky.

## John Locke, Personal Identity, and Memento

Basil Smith

In his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* John Locke famously offers an explanation of personal identity. In particular, he holds that our conscious memories constitute our identities.<sup>1</sup> Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) tests this theory of personal identity. In the film, Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), an insurance investigator from San Francisco, suffers short-term memory loss as a result of an assault on his wife, Catherine (Jorja Fox), and himself. But now, without his memories, he can hardly function. He insists that his attackers have destroyed his ability to live. Leonard asks: "How can I heal if I cannot feel time?" The question for us, however, is what can *Memento* tell us about personal identity? I address this question while attempting to show that, in some measure, Locke and *Memento* offer similar sets of messages. In particular, I argue that they both provide evidence that memory constitutes personal identity. This is not to say that they offer exactly the same messages or that the messages they agree on are not counterintuitive on many fronts. The point of the comparison, rather, is to delineate what this theory of personal identity implies and how it leads to a theory of survival without identity.<sup>2</sup>

### Locke on Personal Identity

To begin, Locke defines what he means by a *person*. He says that a person is always conscious of what he thinks. The person "can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places." But, so far, this definition does not say what personal identity is. To answer this, Locke notes that, insofar as consciousness always accompanies thinking, identity is a matter of consciousness "extending backwards to unite thought and action" (267). In other words, such identity is constituted by "being able to repeat the idea of any past action" in a series and, thus, is a matter of