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The Being of Replicants

Michael Wheeler

It's a common observation that *Blade Runner* inspires us to reflect on what it means to be human. The principal cause for such reflection is, of course, the cast of replicants – the bioengineered humanoid creatures originally produced by the Tyrell Corporation to work on off-world colonies. As the opening, scene-setting text famously informs us, following a bloody off-world mutiny by a group of Nexus 6 replicants, the creatures are declared illegal on Earth and are hunted down and terminated ('retired') by special police known as blade runners. Against this backdrop, the replicants repeatedly engage our thoughts and emotions by blurring the distinction between the human and the non-human. Confronted by an event such as Rachael's distressed reaction when Deckard exposes the truth about her 'memories' or Roy's poetic dying speech, we ask ourselves one of those stubborn and demanding existential questions: 'what does it mean to be human?'. Unsurprisingly, this is a question that philosophers through the ages have tried to answer, and one historically influential response comes from the controversial German thinker, Martin Heidegger, most notably in the pages of his ground-breaking 1927 text, *Being and Time*. Of course, Heidegger didn't know anything about replicants. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, we can use his ideas to see the blurring of the human and the non-human in *Blade Runner* in a new and productive light.

In thinking about the nature of replicant existence, it might seem that the place to start is with physical or biological constitution. For although replicants are, as the film's preamble tells us, the result of 'advanced robot evolution', they are, for the most part at least, *organic* creatures, just like us. It's true that the biological body parts of individual replicants are standardly genetically engineered separately and only later assembled into a whole. (At one point, we meet Hannibal Chew, an employee of the Tyrell Corporation whose job is to genetically engineer replicant eyes.) But, in *Blade Runner 2049* (if you haven't seen the sequel – *spoiler alert*), even that difference in origin stories is left behind. It turns out that Rachael, a prototype Nexus 7 replicant, was deliberately engineered so as to be able to become pregnant and indeed went on to have a child with the blade runner Deckard. Bearing in mind the ongoing debate over whether Deckard is replicant or human, that child is, from an origin angle, either a reproductively generated replicant or a reproductively generated replicant-human hybrid. Either way, this is the (current) end point of a trajectory in which the sorts of differences between replicants and human beings that one might pick out from a physical or biological perspective are shown to be negotiable and subject to erosion.

As it happens, Heidegger wouldn't have been very interested in the points just made, because he thought that if one's goal is to understand the character of human existence, it's no good rummaging around in physical or biological facts. Rather, one needs to provide a

disciplined philosophical interpretation of the distinctive way of existing, or being, that human beings as such realize. Heidegger had a term for this distinctive kind of being; he called it *Dasein* (a German term translated literally as 'there-being'). So what is *Dasein*? If we look around at beings in general – from particles to planets, ants to apes – it is human beings alone (Heidegger thought) who are able to encounter the question of *what it means to be*, and it's that encounter with the meaning of existence (more on which below) which is the mark of *Dasein*. Now, although Heidegger himself believed that, as a matter of fact, only human beings have the way of being of *Dasein*, he certainly didn't rule out the possibility that other beings could, in principle, make the grade. So, in the present context, we might wonder whether replicants qualify. Can replicants, like human beings, encounter the question of the meaning of being? In other words, are replicants *Dasein*? Answering this question will give us an insight into the blurring of the human and the non-human in *Blade Runner*.

Let's remind ourselves of a few facts about replicants. These will be important in what follows. The Nexus series of replicants are designed to be stronger, more agile and more intelligent than human beings, but are not endowed with our emotions, which is why spotting a replicant involves a test that targets non-verbal emotional responses. However, by the time we reach the Nexus 6 series, the designers have become concerned that the replicants will develop certain emotional responses through experience and so will be immune to the test. To head off this situation, Nexus 6 replicants are given a strict four-year lifespan. Moreover, to prevent the replicants' newly developed emotions from making them unstable, a practice begins of implanting the creatures with false memories that are designed to provide, as Eldon Tyrell puts it, 'a cushion or pillow for their emotions'. This practice is brought to the fore in the case of Rachael, the prototype Nexus 7 replicant mentioned previously, who, unbeknownst to her, has been given a set of 'memories' copied from Tyrell's niece.

How do these characteristics of replicant being bear on whether the creatures are *Dasein*? Here we need to pause to identify the underlying structures that explain why *Dasein*, as a way of existing, has the precise character that it does. This is the principal task of *Being and Time*, and it has to be said that it's a very long book. So here I'll make do with just two key phenomena that Heidegger discusses, namely *heritage* and *death*. Let's start with heritage.

As I grew up, I was inducted into a particular culture and thereby into certain pre-established ways of making sense of things. Thus the current significance of my laptop comes from its role as an entity with which I am working in the practical context of my study, in order to write an article on *Blade Runner*. That activity is being carried out for the sake of my being a philosopher, that is, for the sake of a particular way in which I make sense of myself in my culture. And that way of being points to other culturally conditioned aspects of my existence, such as being a professional academic, a job that I do, in part, for the sake of my being a care giver. The precise networks of significance in which things make sense will vary from culture to culture. What is shared, however, is the fact that every individual with the way of being of *Dasein* will experience life as an unfolding series of situations in which she finds things mattering to her in relation to some set of pre-established, culturally conditioned patterns of meaning. One can think of all this as the way in which a creature with the way of being of *Dasein* *collects up its past*, where 'past' refers

ultimately to the cultural history of one's group. For Heidegger, this is what it means to say that Dasein has a *heritage*.

Now recall the rupture that Rachael experiences, when she learns from Deckard that she is a replicant, one whose implanted early-life 'memories' have been copied from the experiences of a human being. One cannot do justice to the severity of this rupture merely by observing that Rachael has discovered that she possesses a large number of false memories. Rather, in Heideggerian terms, her realization is that she has no heritage. The world of meaning in which Rachael has apparently been largely at home – the world that so far has determined how things matter to her – is now a strange and alien place in which she is not at home, and indeed into which she has never been genuinely inducted. This realization is traumatic, of course, but it also marks the beginning of a positive transition in Rachael's self-understanding. To articulate that transition, we need to understand how Heidegger thinks about the phenomenon of death.

Heidegger points out that, among all the genuine possibilities that confront me in life, the possibility of my own death is peculiar in that, from the perspective of my experience, it must remain *only* a possibility. After all, once my death becomes actual, *I* am no longer. Crucially, for Heidegger, when I confront death in this way, my own existence as a human being is brought into proper view. So, being aware of my death as a possibility is one way in which I encounter the Dasein-defining question of what it means to be. Death here is best characterized as the possibility of a world without me (the possibility of my not being in the world). And this possibility may be revealed to Dasein through a particular kind of anxiety, one that is not directed towards some specific object or event (e.g. being anxious about an exam), but which occurs as a state of mind in which I no longer feel at home in the world, in which the world is unintelligible. Thus, in experiencing a world from which I am, in a sense, absent, the possibility of a world without me (in which I do not exist) is revealed to me. Call this a state of existential anxiety. Rachael's state, when Deckard reveals the truth about her, is just such a state, as indicated by the fact that Rachael's replicant emotions are no longer cushioned by the implanted 'memories' that helped give her an illusory heritage.

Now, here's the crucial point. Heidegger claims that existential anxiety is a route to what he calls *authenticity*. 'Authentic' here does not mean genuine as opposed to fake. It means *owned by me*, in roughly the way that I might own (take forward as mine) a decision made by a committee on which I have sat. Ownership here also means to take control of, in the way that I might take ownership of implementing that committee's decision. In other words, the defamiliarization of the world that occurs in existential anxiety provides an invitation to me to take ownership of my life and the ways in which things make sense to me. Rachael, having experienced such anxiety, ultimately takes that invitation to authenticity (to own her being), as we discover when Deckard returns to his apartment at the end of the film to find her waiting for him and ready to flee with him.

Elsewhere in the film, the issue of authenticity is approached from a different angle. Just ahead of his pre-programmed death, the Nexus 6 Roy catches the hand of the blade runner Deckard when the latter falls from a high building. Before he falls, the injured Deckard endures a moment of hanging by his fingertips from the edge of the building. Given Deckard's helpless and fear-ridden state, and given Roy's impending death, one might have

expected Roy to have taunted Deckard with something along the lines of: 'that's what it feels like to be about to die'. But what Roy actually says is this: 'that's what it is to be a slave'. In other words, Roy points out that living in fear of one's own death as a fixed event is to live *inauthentically*, that is, without genuine ownership or control of one's existence, a state strikingly mirrored by Deckard's helpless dangling over the edge of the building. Roy's predicament is such that he is never able to hear the call of authenticity.

To be clear, *Bladerunner* works by *blurring* human and replicant being, not by *assimilating* the latter to the former. Thus Rachael's existential anxiety is driven not by the discovery that she has a heritage that she hasn't ever questioned, as might be the case for a human being hearing the call of authenticity, but by the discovery that she has no heritage. And that means that, *strictly speaking*, Rachael cannot be Dasein, because she fails to meet a necessary condition for realizing that way of being. There remains, then, a distance between the replicants and us. But, in the moment in which one empathizes with Rachael's sense of existential homelessness, or indeed with Roy's sense of a lack of ownership of his life, that distance is problematized until the phrase 'strictly speaking' can sound unbelievably hollow. The key point I want to make here, however, is this: the search for overlaps and disconnections between the replicants and us is most illuminatingly conducted not at the level of physical or biological constitution, nor at the level of feelings and emotions considered merely as experiences, but, as Heidegger would have it, at the level of the most fundamental structures that determine the ways in which lives are made meaningful. And that explains why *Bladerunner* engages us, challenges us and touches us.