

PHILOSOPHY AND BLADE RUNNER

Keith Dromm (Louisiana Scholars' College at Northwestern State University)

Timothy Shanahan. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 217 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-41228-7

Timothy Shanahan's *Philosophy and Blade Runner* aims to show, as the author puts it, "not only that [*Blade Runner*] raises philosophical questions, but also that it suggests *answers* to at least some of them" (179). Shanahan also provides many of his own answers to these questions. These efforts might seem misguided given what the film's director Ridley Scott has said about his film, for example, as Shanahan reports, that he did not attempt to make an intellectual film (6) and that it is only entertainment without any deep meanings (179). Shanahan nevertheless succeeds in his aims and manages to reveal the philosophical richness of *Blade Runner* with respect to a wide range of topics: personhood, identity, freedom, ideas of the good, God, and death. In doing so, Shanahan provides support for his claim that "the meaning and significance of any work of art is not entirely within control of the artist" (180).

Shanahan advocates for the popular principle, although one not universally endorsed, that we should always prefer the interpretation of an artwork that makes it the richest and most interesting, regardless of what meaning its artist might attribute to it (20). He explicitly applies this principle to the issue of whether Rick Deckard, the hard-boiled hero of *Blade Runner*, is a replicant, that is, one of the manufactured organic creatures that he is tasked to hunt and kill. Shanahan disregards Scott's rather explicit statements that Deckard is a replicant and usually assumes throughout his book that he is human. Without that assumption, the film loses its "moral gravitas," according to Shanahan, which depends on the apparent morally relevant differences between humans (represented by Deckard) and replicants being progressively undermined over the course of the film (19).

The issue of whether Deckard is a human or not (the so-called "Deck-a-Rep" debate) and a lot of other ground is covered in the book's first and introductory chapter. In addition to reviewing the evidence for both positions in this debate, and making the case for the position that Deckard is a human, Shanahan discusses the literary source of the film, Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* He mentions Dick's initial

dissatisfaction with the film's script (Dick wrote sarcastically, "It was terrific. It bore no relation to the book" [7]). Shanahan also discusses the various versions of the film (there are seven, including not only a "director's cut," but a subsequent, and probably final, "final cut"). From these discussions and ones elsewhere in the book, it appears as if Shanahan has read everything written on *Blade Runner*; he at least references many commentaries on the film, and he reveals a thorough knowledge of all its versions, including their deleted scenes. This chapter also contains a brief synopsis of the film, but Shanahan tells his readers in the preface to watch the film (again, if that happens to be the case) before reading the book.

Understanding and appreciating this book does not require any more familiarity with the film than what can be obtained from a single viewing. It also does not presuppose any background in philosophy. It introduces philosophy to a general audience, but it does not have the patronizing tone adopted by many of the recent popular culture and philosophy books. Its style is academic, yet accessible and engaging. It is very thorough in its coverage of the relevant philosophical topics, and its explanations of them are clear and exact. For these reasons, the intended audience of this book seems to be students in introductory philosophy courses and those independently inclined to acquire a general understanding of philosophy. Those who know philosophy very well would probably find much of the book tedious, but any fans of the film, including philosophers, can still get something out of reading it. While it breaks very little new philosophical ground, it provides rich and perceptive philosophical interpretations of the film. Film theory and the philosophy of film are not among the topics covered by the book. The issue touched on above about the relevance of filmmakers' intentions to interpretations of their works only receives slight treatment. Instead, the book focuses on the perennial philosophical topics that are illuminated by *Blade Runner*.

The topics of the second ("Being Human") and third ("Persons") chapters are closely related. In fact, I do not see the need for separate chapters. While the "Being Human" chapter addresses the issue of whether the replicants are human, Shanahan does not approach this issue in the typical way, which is to treat this as a question of biology. He even denies—oddly—that the terms humans and *Homo sapiens* are synonymous (40). The film does raise some interesting questions about whether replicants are humans. They are manufactured, but they are supposed to be physically identical to humans. To distinguish them, a personality test of sorts (the fictional Voight-Kampff test) must be administered.

So, a physical examination, even a blood test, is apparently unable to detect the difference. This raises interesting questions about the criteria for inclusion in a biological category, and even more broadly a natural kind, such as whether creation in the normal way (for example, sexual reproduction, if that is case, and physical growth) is a necessary condition for inclusion in such a category. Shanahan does not examine such issues. Instead, he investigates those non-biological characteristics that the Voight-Kampff test attempts to detect and asks both whether they are possessed by the new variety of replicant Deckard is hunting (the *Nexus 6* model) and whether their possession is sufficient for being a human. These are characteristics like empathy, self-awareness, and intelligence. However, they seem more relevant to a consideration of personhood, which is the subject of the “Persons” chapter. Person is a moral category, not a biological one, and this chapter asks whether replicants are persons for the sake of examining what the characters in the story are allowed to do with them, including whether they should have created them.

Some of the most interesting (and disturbing) discussion in the “Persons” chapter revolves around a thought experiment proposed by Stephen Petersen involving *engineered human servants* (EHS).¹ EHS are very much like the replicants in *Blade Runner*. They are persons created to do tasks that most people dislike, but they thoroughly enjoy doing them, such as—I imagine—cleaning floors or digging ditches. They would certainly provide many practical benefits to us, but are there any moral objections to our creating such persons? Shanahan understandably has trouble thinking of a reasonable objection. We are, after all, to imagine that they are “perfectly content with their lives” (53). It seems we would have an obligation to provide such persons with floors to clean and ditches to dig so as to ensure that they remain content, but as long as we did that, is there any moral objection to their creation?

I do not think we can assume that these creatures would be entirely content with their lives. Any creature with desires is susceptible to grief and displeasure when the satisfaction of those desires is delayed. We cannot imagine being able to constantly supply them with dirty floors or ditches to be dug. Even if we could, the pleasure from these activities would inevitably wane. As Arthur Schopenhauer, among others, has noticed, the degree and frequency of our pleasures is a function of our suffering. However, if this were an argument against creating replicants or EHS, it seems it would also be an argument against having children. But there is an important difference between children and EHS.

The latter are created only to serve our interests, and they are implanted with a limited range of desires to ensure that they do this. Schopenhauer also noticed that even the constant satisfaction of desires does not entail a *meaningfullife*. While everyone is prone to regarding his or her life as meaningless, EHS—who, as persons, possesses self-awareness—would probably be more susceptible to this realization given their lowly and limited desires (they would be dissatisfied pigs, to adapt John Stuart Mill’s analogy), and the psychological impact of it would likely be more severe. This is a strong reason against creating such creatures; we would be creating persons with truly meaningless lives. It seems that this is the realization that the replicants in *Blade Runner* reach about their own lives. They were created to perform tasks that most others did not want to do, like prostitution and combat. They were also given pre-determined and short lifespans so they would be easier to control. They return to Earth despite the death sentence for any replicants caught there in order to seek a prolongation to their lives. They do not succeed, but in their struggle they manage to acquire some autonomy over their desires by exploiting them to serve their own interests, and not those of their owners.

A replicant’s despair after learning about her true nature motivates the topic of the fourth chapter, “Identity.” The replicant Rachael Tyrell does not initially know that she is replicant. This fact has been concealed from her because she has been implanted with the childhood memories of the niece of her creator, Dr. Eldon Tyrell. She eventually learns all of this, which raises questions about personal identity, both for her and us. In offering possible answers to these questions, Shanahan reviews the most popular theories of personal identity. Shanahan’s own proposal is to treat identity as a matter of *degree*, but that position seems indistinguishable from skepticism about personal identity. This might be the correct position to hold, but it is not compatible with any substantive notion of the self.

I will comment on some of the book’s remaining chapters more briefly. Chapter Five, “Consciousness,” ingeniously uses *Blade Runner* to introduce the mind-body problem and a wide range of suggested solutions. Chapter Six, “Freedom,” uses the situations of the film’s characters to investigate the topic of free will. It is similarly comprehensive in its discussion of theories of free will, including the influential ideas of Harry Frankfurt on the topic.²

Shanahan introduces the ideas of a variety of philosophers in his book. Chapter Seven, “Being Good,” introduces the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche in an examination of the various uses of the word “good” and the role judgments about the good play in our lives, a topic about which Nietzsche had a lot to say. The chapter relates well to the book’s focus

on the moral themes of *Blade Runner* and, like all the other chapters, draws its examples from the film. Nietzsche is also relevant to *Blade Runner* given the inevitable comparisons between the type of replicant pursued by Deckard in the film (the *Nexus 6* model) and *Übermenschen*. Shanahan points out that the replicants do not display the self-discipline that is an essential characteristic of a Nietzschean *Übermensch* (127). However, he might have also discussed, as I did briefly above, how the replicants manage to achieve some self-realization by exerting themselves; this is a central element of the strategy for living that Nietzsche offers as an alternative to the pessimism of Schopenhauer.

Chapter Eight, on “God,” is an examination of revenge, particularly revenge against one’s creator or god. It begins with a review of revenges of this type in literature, such as in *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein*. It then uses the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre to examine the replicants’ revenge against their creator, Dr. Tyrell. Chapter Nine, “Death,” is on a central theme of *Blade Runner*. Most of the chapter is devoted to testing the Epicurean view that death is not something to be feared. This chapter is closely connected with the final one; Chapter Ten is on “Time and Meaning” and it contains a very rich discussion of the relationship between mortality and a meaningful life, a topic that is very well illustrated by the situation of the replicants of *Blade Runner*.

While I do not agree with all of the conclusions that Shanahan reaches on the philosophical issues, he successfully shows that they are raised by *Blade Runner*. Perhaps Ridley Scott was being insincere when he claimed that his film was not philosophical (although, as Shanahan argues, Scott’s view that Deckard is a replicant does drain the film of some of its philosophy), or perhaps the ideas of its literary source unwittingly seeped into his film (Dick, after finally seeing the film, came to believe it did a great service to his novel [7]). Regardless of the explanation, the film’s artist has not had the final word on its meaning. Shanahan has confirmed for fans of the film that it is a philosophically significant work; for others, particularly those new to philosophy, he has used the film to edify them on some of the most interesting and profound topics in philosophy.

¹ Stephen Petersen, “The Ethics of Robot Servitude,” *Journal of Experimental and Theoretical Artificial Intelligence* 19 (1): 43-54.

² I find questionable, however, Shanahan’s references to the less sophisticated writings of Sam Harris on the topic, whose writings get referenced a couple more times in the book.