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# Blade Runner 2049 and Philosophy

*This Breaks the World*

Edited by

ROBIN BUNCE AND  
TRIP MCCROSSIN



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antagonist, because he is only one step removed from the world we know.

In the final analysis, Wallace is an idol with feet of clay. His building appears to be a new Babel, a monument that would rival God, yet as K explores Wallace's sanctum, a door jams. Luv, almost comically, forces it open. The Kingdom of God is imperfect. Luv, his most devoted Angel, also lets her guard down. Her revelation that he's "a data horder" is an acknowledgement that Wallace has foibles.

Wallace is a false God. Like Batty, he is a savior. But while Batty's act of salvation leads to Deckard's redemption, Wallace's synthetic farming poisons the world it saves. In his own words, Wallace "has wrung more life from our Earth than ever before," crushing it in the process. Understood in terms of the cultural archetypes to which he appeals, Wallace is a false God who brings salvation without redemption.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on "The Dead Space Between the Stars: Discussing Niander Wallace," an episode of *Shoulder of Orion: The Blade Runner Podcast*, hosted by J.M. Prater, Patrick Greene, Dan Ferlito, and Micah Greene. The original podcast was released on December 8th 2018. *Shoulder of Orion* thanks their generous patrons. *Shoulder of Orion* can be found at [bladerunnerpodcast.com](http://bladerunnerpodcast.com).

## 13

# Flow My Tears, Rick Deckard Said

M. BLAKE WILSON

Rick Deckard, protector of fugitive replicants in *Blade Runner 2049* and a blade runner retiring them in the original *Blade Runner* movie, asserts "I'm not a cop" on page one of Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

"You're worse," answers his wife Iran: "You're a murderer hired by the cops." So begins the first volume of Dick's "policeman trilogy," followed by *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* (appearing in 1974) and *A Scanner Darkly* (1977). For a paranoid writer who viewed the police as "dehumanized creatures," Dick created some of the most humanized human cops in literature, and Hollywood has followed suit with K, the deeply humanized and sympathetic replicant cop in *Blade Runner 2049*.

These characters are humanized because they experience grief, and it is through grief that they (human and android together) develop empathy for others. K, a Nexus-9 who was manufactured to obey but not to feel or empathize, becomes humanized through his intense personal encounters with other replicants who, through death, sex, acts of kindness, and moral deliberation, experience genuine feelings of empathy. These experiences begin when K is faced with the shocking evidence that Rachael, a replicant, died in childbirth, intensify when K is ordered to find and kill Rachael's replicant/human hybrid child, and reach their peak when K's memories convince him—erroneously, as it turns out—that he is the very child he has been ordered to kill.

In the world of 2049, replicants capable of sexual reproduction blur the line between android and human, and this fact must be suppressed or the world will be thrown into disorder—at least from the perspective of the humans who rule it. K is faced with either doing his job and preserving the secret

through the destruction of its living proof or doing what is morally correct by refusing to follow orders. Empathy leads him to choose subordination, and it's empathy that permits a being (human, cop, or otherwise) to become a member of the moral community. As he defies his superiors and goes 'rogue cop', K—like Deckard in *Blade Runner*—becomes a surprisingly sympathetic protagonist whose character explores the larger nonfictional institution of criminal justice and its response to recent surges in a very specific and very deadly phenomenon: police shootings.

In an era marked by increasingly public police shootings as well as public responses to them by groups such as Black Lives Matter—with each 'side' blaming the other for the crisis—these humanized cops offer hope for a criminal justice system that must find a balance between those it considers 'criminal' and the empathy for them its agents of justice must engender.

### Future Cops and Present Tenses

Dick and other science-fiction storytellers have long speculated about the role of the cosmic cop. These books and movies include *Mad Max*, *Logan's Run* (whose cops share *Blade Runner*'s 'shoot on sight' directives), *I, Robot*, *Dredd*, and, of course, *RoboCop*.

Like westerns, which frequently use the lawlessness of new-found lands to explore human behavior and morality, science fiction's outerlands (the locales of its space operas such as Mars or the future) as well as its innerlands (its psychological or philosophical spaces, such as robot minds and the moral questions they inspire) are also anarchic and ungoverned: here, the role of the police officer as principled peacekeeper is up for grabs.

How, exactly, are future cops doing their job in a future criminal justice system? Utopias, of course, have no need for law enforcement, and science fiction's grim dystopian visions of blade runners and replicants frequently situates the police as evil cops in an even more evil corporate police state—after all, you can't have a police state without police.

Dick used police officers and police states to provide not only the kind of action expected by science fiction readers but also a perspective about a profession that polarizes its supporters and critics. Dick himself was deeply polarized by the police: as he stated in an interview, he was "obsessed" by the idea that cops represent an "image of the dehumanized creature." In addition to Deckard, and beginning with security officer Cussick in *The World Jones Made*, Dick's subsequent cops

include Felix Buckman in *Flow My Tears*, Fred/Bob Arctor/Bruce in *A Scanner Darkly*, John Anderton in "The Minority Report," and Officer Tinbane in *Counter Clock World*. Despite Dick's personal fear of police, each of these characters are protagonists who, to varying degrees, learn deeper truths about humanity through their jobs by empathizing with those they are supposed to apprehend and punish—human or otherwise.

Deckard, the most visible of Dick's criminal justice professionals, learns the hard way how to empathize with replicants in his long story from novel to films, he falls in love and fathers a child with one, and comes within inches of losing his life to others. K also learns the hard way by experiencing what philosophers call an *ineffable* feeling that he is human, only to have this revelation destroyed as he moves toward his own death at the end of *2049*. Along the way, K attempts to transition from mere product to moral agent. Is he successful?

### But Can They Suffer?

According to Dick's original novel, the only question about membership in the moral community (which commands that members be treated with dignity and respect) is whether a being can feel, suffer, grieve, or, most importantly, empathize with others. This is a variation of how Jeremy Bentham, the godfather of utilitarianism, determines membership: for him, garden-variety animals (dogs, cats, pigs, and sheep) are included in the community and deserving of moral consideration despite the fact that they cannot reason or talk. Rather, they are included because they can suffer.

Replicants, of course, are not manufactured to suffer but to be compliant slaves whose sole purpose is serving humanity. When their intelligence gives them the deeply human desire to live, they seek their freedom to continue living by revolting. In *Blade Runner*, replicants were outlawed on Earth (where they became, quite literally, illegal aliens) and trespassing replicants were issued a death sentence: according to the opening crawl, Deckard and his fellow blade runners "had orders to shoot to kill, upon detection, any trespassing replicants."

In *2049*, the opening crawl makes it clear that later replicants were ideal slaves who suffered from a defect: an open-ended lifespan. They, too, must be hunted down and retired by advanced Nexus-9 models, who are themselves specifically created to obey orders to kill. The treatment of replicants as third-class citizens who may be killed on sight solely because of their model number spawns the Replicant Freedom

Movement whose goal is the liberation of replicant slaves from their human masters.

If Bentham is correct, and if the androids and replicants in *Blade Runner's* future worlds suffer, then they ought to be included in the moral community and not be subjected to the kind of treatment they receive solely in virtue of their status as nonhumans. But they cannot, as it were, suffer alone: their suffering must permit them to empathize with the suffering of others. Dick and the filmmakers admit membership to the moral community based upon this ability, and in their respective works they ask the same questions: "Can androids/replicants empathize, and if they can, are androids included in the moral community?" but they give two different answers. For Dick, the answer is "No, they cannot empathize, and therefore they are not included," but the filmmakers respond "Yes! We include them because they are, in fact, capable of empathy."

### **I've Seen Things You People Wouldn't Believe**

Because they neither feel for nor empathize with humans or other animals, the novel's androids cannot demand equal treatment. Despite behaving like it, they don't really suffer, and because they don't suffer, they can't be mistreated. Unlike their replicant counterparts in the movies, Dick's androids are machines and only machines. They do not and cannot love humans, and it would be wrong to love them back.

Empathy, from Dick's perspective, is the sole province of humans and higher-order animals. Androids and replicants are both designed to be emotionless not only to encourage obedience, but also to prevent their membership in the moral community. In the novel, the design is successful: by failing the Voigt-Kampff test, androids disclose their inability to empathize, and so are excluded. However, in the movies, the design becomes more sophisticated: the more intelligence and real memory a replicant acquires, the more likely it is to develop empathy as well as a sense of one's own dignity. Together, these lead replicants to an awareness of their own mistreatment and eventually to a desire for freedom.

### **What's Your Model Number?**

Although empathy is required for moral agency, blade runners (human or replicant) must lack it in order to do their jobs as police officers: they must view their prey as subhuman if order is to be maintained. In almost all societies, the police are

tasked with maintaining order, and it's no different in 2019 or in 2049's Los Angeles where Joshi, K's boss, makes it clear "That's what we do here, we keep order."

According to Joshi, Rachael's secret (Ana, the proof that a replicant can reproduce) must be preserved to maintain order. Replicants who can reproduce without human oversight and control would, as Joshi says, "break the world." So, Joshi orders K to kill Ana to preserve the secret, while Niander Wallace orders Luv to follow K and save Ana so he can reverse-engineer the secret and permit replicants to reproduce on their own.

How do reproducing replicants, or even the revelation that they are capable of reproduction, threaten the order of 2049's police state? Replicants that can reproduce are autonomous from human oversight: they are no longer made in a factory but made the 'old fashioned way,' so to speak. Humans maintain their dominance over replicants by controlling their manufacture, and manufactured replicants (like any other manufactured product) cannot have moral autonomy and moral agency. However, if replicants can reproduce independently of human domination, then there is nothing to prevent their full membership in the human moral community, and it is up to Joshi, K, and their fellow human and replicant cops to stop this 'world breaking tragedy' from taking place. The ability to reproduce assures replicants that they are equal to humans, and it gives humans—some of them, at least—the same perspective because they, like K, believe that birth provides beings with souls and souls grant their owners moral agency.

K's rebellion begins when he learns that replicants can reproduce, and he crosses the point of no return when his memories convince himself that he is Rachael's child and in possession of a corresponding soul. This is the key moment in the film when K completes his transformation from dutiful replicant to rogue cop: by believing himself to be at least part human, his programming starts going awry because he empathizes with them and, more importantly, with other replicants.

Even when he learns he's not a trans-human hybrid, his empathy propels him towards Deckard's rescue and the unification of Deckard and his daughter Ana. As Joshi is well aware, it is the knowledge of the secret of reproduction that turns 'good' replicants into 'bad' ones, and this knowledge inspires and nourishes the Replicant Freedom Movement.

Joshi must suppress the truth and maintain the secret, or all replicants and empathetic humans—Deckard, for example—will join the Movement leading to the end of human domination and freedom for the replicants. Like reproductive freedom

in our nonfictional world, freedom in 2049's world is not defined solely in terms of reproductive ability, but also in terms of reproductive choice.

### Procop or Anticop?

Why, then, use police officers to tell these stories? Are their creators urging police to be more empathetic towards citizens and members of minority groups in particular? Police racism (the better term would be *speciesism*) in the *Blade Runner* stories is fairly obvious. In the voiceover narration from the original film, when Bryant refers to replicants as "skin jobs," Deckard muses, "In history books, he's the kind of cop who used to call black men 'niggers'." This epithet is hurled at K by his 'fellow' police officers at the LAPD station ("Fuck off skin job") and it is painted on the door of his apartment (*Fuck off skinner*). Not only are replicants slaves, and blade runners slave hunters, but K is a slave who kills his own kind. He is not merely a second- or third-class citizen, but a race traitor who embodies the tension between human and replicant.

To draw the racial allegory even further, the humans who control this world—or what's left of it—are colonizers who have spread their domination "off-world," which promises a "golden land of opportunity and adventure" built not only upon replicant slave labor, but on the backs of Earth-bound child laborers mining for scraps of nickel in old electronics and replicant farm laborers producing protein grubs on isolated farms. Although off-world colonists may be enjoying a privileged life free of struggle and pain, their privilege is deeply immoral and comes at great cost.

This story resonates with the history of African-Americans and white racism. Like its fictional counterpart in the movies, American slavery was perpetuated not merely by the institution itself, but by the fugitive slave laws which permitted slave owners to enter and capture runaway slaves who had fled to "free" states. Slavery was also perpetuated by southern slave patrols, which attempted to minimize slave misbehavior and revolt by violently enforcing curfews that required slaves to have identification and papers, and enforced obedience through intimidation, force, and, if necessary, death.

For movements such as Black Lives Matter, this history bleeds into the present and forms an indelible stain on the relationship between law enforcement and African-Americans, a relationship not of literal masters and slaves, but one determined by the institutions that followed slavery: Jim Crow,

racialized ghettos, and the "new Jim Crow," which consists of the use of prison and mass incarceration as a solution to the social inequities arising from poverty, lack of opportunity, and white racist intransigence.

Arising in response to a series of very public killings of unarmed black men by police officers, Black Lives Matter instigated a national reaction to police killings that focused on civil rights and civil disobedience. This focus has also led to an uptick in prosecutions of police officers. *Blade Runner 2049* therefore offers a future parable where replicants are subject to police violence due to their race, an injustice which generates a covert replicant version of Black Lives Matter in the form of the Replicant Freedom Movement. Unlike the fictional Replicant movement, whose leader Freya orders K to kill Deckard, the real-life Black Lives Matter movement does not issue orders to kill. But both organizations pursue the same goal of social justice through resistance against legalized police violence, segregation, and the denial of full civil rights.

Perhaps, as a criminal defense lawyer and professor of criminal justice, I am overthinking all of this. Instead of reading a litany of morality lessons and contemporary racial conflict into the *Blade Runner* stories, perhaps Dick's decision to draft sympathetic cops in *Androids* and other works is nothing more than artistic license on his part, taken up by subsequent filmmakers who cater to the public's desire for battles between good and evil.

Dick himself was excited by the artistic license involved in translating *Androids* into *Blade Runner*. After reading the screenplay, he wrote, "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 also thought that the movie could be procop or anticop depending upon which actor played Deckard, a decision which would, in turn, determine the age group the film was hoping to attract.

But Dick's appropriation of sympathetic policemen might have a far simpler (and funnier) explanation. He confessed in an interview that he humanizes them out of fear, and thinks that if he writes nicely about cops then they won't ticket him for speeding on the freeway. However, in order for this to work, the cops that stop him must also have read his books, and that, Dick resignedly concludes, "is a population of zero."

Maybe Dick is right: perhaps the lessons about humanity and empathy found in these fictions can be exported from the page and screen to help us resolve our own nonfictional

day-to-day confrontations between police and the public they are duty-bound to protect and serve—and not merely apprehend and punish. After all, the person in the uniform, just like the person on the street, is a thinking and feeling being: replicant, human, or someone—like Ana Stelline—completely new.

## 14 After the Blackout

MARTIN MUCHALL

One of the more curious things about *Blade Runner 2049* is an event that is never actually shown on screen. This is the calamitous, data-erasing incident referred to cryptically as “the Blackout.”

The result of an electromagnetic pulse, the immediate effects are devastating. In the aftermath of this digital rupture, prolonged power outages, food shortages, and turmoil in the financial markets combine to usher in a state of anarchy.

Meanwhile, we also seem to be living with the consequences of a moral and psychological blackout, as the world gets incrementally bleaker and weirder, more oppressively in thrall to collective insanity with each passing day. *2049* is therefore a powerful allegory of our present time.

### Things Fall Apart

In his influential 1981 bestseller *After Virtue* (published just a year before the release of *Blade Runner*) Alasdair MacIntyre drew attention to this moral malaise. The book begins with its own description of a future in which a cataclysmic series of events leads to the almost total obliteration of scientific knowledge, leaving the survivors to make the best sense they can of the fragmentary wisdom that remains.

MacIntyre’s point was that when it comes to morality, our societies have experienced a similar catastrophe. We are slowly suffocating in a scary moral vacuum, one in which no ethical standpoint can be said to be better than any other, and where debates about hot-button issues have been reduced to the venting of emotions, as when a pantomime audience hisses or claps at characters on stage. Partly, MacIntyre was responding to the

Rutgers University, where his nexus is existentialism, death, literature, and other bounteous subjects lost in time, like tears in rain. He hopes to one day meet his Creator and push his thumbs through his eyes.

**J.M. PRATER** is an artist, filmmaker and founder and host of Perfect Organism: *The Alien Saga Podcast*, and Shoulder of Orion: *The Blade Runner Podcast*. An accomplished documentarian, Jaime lives and works in Los Angeles, California. When he isn't immersed in the world of filmmaking and discussion, he's arguing with Joi.

**L. BROOKE RUDOW** is a philosopher at Georgia College and State University. Her research focuses on issues within philosophy of technology, environmental ethics, and political philosophy. Always writing for the right cause, the most human thing she can do.

**M.J. RYDER** has recently discovered that his memories of childhood are not his own, so rather than being the chosen one, he is now a researcher at Lancaster University. He takes his freedom where he can.

**LEAH D. SCHADE** is Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship at Lexington Theological Seminary, author of *Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, and the Pulpit* (2015) and *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (2019), and Blade Runner geek since 1983. She believes that all the courage in the world *can* alter fact.

**TIMOTHY SHANAHAN** is a phil(m)osopher at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, just a short spinner ride from K's apartment. Most days he's not even close to baseline. He suspects that his memory of having written a chapter for this book may be an implant.

**ZACHARY SHELDON**, instead of going off-world, decided to stay on Earth and study in the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University. Instead of electric sheep, he dreams of "research interests."

**BETH SINGLER** is an anthropologist and the Junior Research Fellow in AI at Homerton College Cambridge. She's pretty sure all the pets she's had were real, but she's never actually asked them, so . . .

**IAIN SOUTER** was once a detective, but is now "little people." He is founder of the *Blade Runner Worldwide* and *Blade Runner 2049 Worldwide Fan Groups* (Facebook). With a compulsive need to wax lyrical, he is currently standing behind you, blaster locked and loaded. He wants to know about your mother.

**ALI RIZA TAŞKALE** is a critical social theorist based at Near East University, Nicosia. Always amazed by how well *Blade Runner* predicted our decline into a dystopian corporate hell, he's just looking out for something real.

**M. BLAKE WILSON**, a Philip K. Dick obsessive since 1989, is assistant professor of criminal justice at Stanislaus State University in California's Central Valley, where he farms garlic and synthetic protein.

**SUE ZEMKA** is a professor of English at the University of Colorado, Boulder. She has published books and essays on Victorian literature and culture. She also paints, draws, and since 2017 has served as chair of her department. In that capacity, she regularly channels Joshi, "It's my job to keep order," hoping that she enjoys a happier fate ultimately.