

IB Extended Essay**May 2020****The Examination of Personhood within the *Blade Runner* Films**

Research Question: “How do the *Blade Runner* films explore the behaviors and characteristics that define a person?”

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Introduction

What does it mean to be human? The literal answer to this question is provided by Hank Green in *Personhood: Crash Course Philosophy #21*, where he states that “Human is a biological term, to be human is to have human DNA, to be of the species of *homo sapiens*. Personhood (moral) is what really matters, as being a person is to be accepted as a part of the moral community, to be considered on the same level” (Greene). The concept of personhood and to be part of a moral community is based upon the existence of criteria that either includes or excludes certain beings from personhood depending on their characteristics. The criteria is established by philosophers regarding the basic characteristics necessary for personhood, and multiple opinions exist regarding what the criteria are.

For the purpose of this essay the primary criteria are established by Mary Ann Wallen, a twentieth century philosopher who focused on abortion, who frames personhood through a checklist of five psychological characteristics. These characteristics are known as the “Cognitive Criterion” (Greene). The five elements of the Cognitive Criterion are outlined below in a quote from Mary Ann Wallen’s essay “ON THE MORAL AND LEGAL STATUS OF ABORTION”:

- (1) consciousness (of objects and events external and/or internal to the being), and in particular the capacity to feel pain ;
- (2) reasoning (the *developed* capacity to solve new and relatively complex problems) ;
- (3) self-motivated activity (activity which is relatively independent of either genetic or direct external control) ;

- (4) the capacity to communicate, by whatever means, messages of an indefinite variety of types, that is, not just with an indefinite number of possible contents, but on indefinitely many possible topics ;
- (5) the presence of self-concepts, and self-awareness, either individual or racial, or both.

The first of these criteria focuses on the acknowledgement by the individual in question of the occurrences around them and what the potential effects of those occurrences are. This includes the awareness of danger, and inherently the fear of harm that comes with that danger. The French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre describes consciousness in his essay “Being in Nothingness” through asserting that “What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that there is someone there; it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I cannot in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense - in short, that I am seen" (347). This connection of the mind to a harmable body through the concept of tangible pain separates persons from animated machines who do not have a concept of pain other than as the damage that causes that pain. This consciousness of pain and the fear of that pain imbows personhood through requiring greater awareness of the individual of the environment in which they exist.

The second criterion focuses on the ability to develop reasoning to solve problems the individual encounters throughout their time being conscious. This criterion requires that the individual in question is able to develop ways of wrestling with the challenges they face, not using methods that they were born with. This development is in essence learning, transcending the primitive and instinctive impulses and addressing the environment of the individual using methods learned in prior interactions with that environment. Transcending primitive desires and

needs is also connected to the third of Wallen's criterion, which requires the individual to be capable of activity for the sake of one's personal desires. The desires in question are not the primitive desires that all living things possess and are not desires the environment forces those individuals to have, such as the desire to eat and reproduce or to run for fear of being harmed. The self motivated desire referred to here is the desire to do things that are irrational for the satisfaction of a value or belief. An example of such a desire would be the desire to worship a deity of one's choosing without being forced by another individual or being. The ability to complete an activity with no personal or sensual gain other than having known the activity was completed is irrational, and hence separates a person from a programmed entity which completes actions only to fulfill what is required of it.

The fourth criterion of Wallen's criteria is the ability to communicate in a way that is comprehensible by other beings in the environment. Communication can be in any form to qualify the being for personhood, as long as that communication can be comprehended by the other members of that species in the environment at the minimum. Examples of this communication that have been established within the human population are affection, language, and art. These mediums of communication make interactions between persons possible, regardless of whether those interactions are simplistic or complex. The fifth criterion is the presence of self concepts and self awareness, which requires that the individual have rules by which they govern themselves within their environment. These rules or morals are not an awareness of danger or self gain, but rather a desire to commit certain actions and avoid committing other actions for the purpose of having fulfilled a personal commitment to either oneself or the society of which one is a part of or seeks to be a part of. Goals and self betterment

are also encompassed within this criterion and require that the being abides by the criteria they set for themselves or adopt for themselves.

Wallen's Cognitive Criterion will be used in this essay to examine the use of cinematography in the *Blade Runner* films to suggest that the replicants are deserving of personhood. The examination will use the methods of the New Criticism lens as defined by Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today*, which are using evidence in the form of images, symbols, characterization, and setting that are physically present in the film in order to indicate intention on the part of the production team (137). Within the replicants are human in all physical characteristics with the exception of the human DNA and the ability to reproduce. However the social structures of the society in which the replicants exist deny them moral consideration and relegate them to lives of servitude and in many cases slavery. The behaviour of many if not all of the replicants within the film is similar to that of the humans within the film who do receive moral consideration by society. Throughout both films replicants who are essential to the narrative are portrayed in situations that demonstrate their characteristics as being in line with the Cognitive Criterion which indicates a desire by the creators of the films to indicate that the replicants are deserving of personhood. **The *Blade Runner* films use cinematography to indicate that the replicants, although unhuman, are deserving of personhood through their possession of the necessary characteristics.** This essay will use screenshots from both *Blade Runner: 1982 International Theatrical Version* and *Blade Runner 2049* to validate this claim through highlighting elements within both films of cinematography and their potential connotations as outlined by Nicholas Kuhar in "Introduction to Filmmaking eBook". These connotations will be used to examine the pursuit of indicating that replicants are deserving of personhood within the *Blade Runner* films.

Analysis of the Films

Blade Runner: 1982 International Theatrical Version Analysis



Figure 1



Figure 2

The first of Wallen's Cognitive Criterion for personhood is present in Deckard's pursuit of the replicant Zora in the first *Blade Runner* film which begins shortly before 56:18 and ends shortly after 58:05. Rick Deckard is the protagonist of the first *Blade Runner* film, and in the narrative of the film he is tasked as a blade runner with identifying and "retiring" or killing four replicants who returned to Los Angeles without being permitted to do so by the humans who manufactured them. To "retire" a replicant is to end their life, but is referred to as "retirement" because the term equates the replicants machines instead of cognitive beings. During this scene Deckard brandishes a firearm as shown in Figure 1 at where he aims the firearm at Zora. Through the use of a wide shot in Figure 2 Zora can be seen crashing through a department store window which shows her desperation to escape Deckard as a result of her fear of his intent to kill her. Similarly, in Figure 3 Zora is shown being shot by Deckard while running in a medium shot with the addition of a cloud of a substance representing blood. The simultaneous spray of blood and expression of pain on Zora's face indicates that she is experiencing pain. This pain and the fear of it she experiences when Deckard pursues her fulfills Wallen's first criterion as the pain and fear affirm her consciousness as a being within her environment.



Figure 3



Figure 4

The second Cognitive Criterion is visible in Roy Batty's ability to learn the game of chess in the first *Blade Runner* film. At 01:16:42 Roy Batty is learning the game of chess and examining a running game between his maker, Eldon Tyrell, and J.F. Sebastian who Roy is staying with at the time. Roy learning how to play the game as shown in Figure 4 proves to serve his priorities when he uses what he has learned about the game to place Tyrell's king in check in order to force Tyrell to meet with J.F. Sebastian, who Roy Batty will accompany. In Figure 5 at 01:22:00 Roy tells J.F. Sebastian the move to make, and Roy shown in a low light shot with unmotivated light on his face. The low light suggests that Roy knows he is exploiting J.F. Sebastian (shown in Figure 6) in order to get to Tyrell and the unmotivated light indicates he possesses knowledge regarding chess that surpasses the knowledge possessed by J.F. Sebastian. Roy's ability to surpass what he has been taught by J.F. Sebastian indicates his ability to use reasoning to better understand his environment, which fulfills the second of the Cognitive Criteria.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Roy Batty's ability to engage in self-motivated activity is represented in the first *Blade Runner* film through angle and mise en scène. As the film nears its conclusion, Deckard has killed all of the replicants except Roy Batty, who switches the role of hunter and hunted by pursuing Deckard through an old building until Deckard leaps to another building. As Deckard is about to fall to the street below, Roy grasps Deckard's arm and lifts him up to the rooftop as shown in Figure 7 at 1:45:31. The low angle shot of Roy lifting Deckard denotes the power Roy has in the situation compared to Deckard and emphasizes the element of choice that is present in the action (Kuhar 2). Deckard's intention to kill Roy makes saving him from his death an irrational action for Roy to complete, if Roy did not intend to complete a personal goal by saving Deckard. Roy's goal is to tell Deckard that all of Roy's memories will be lost when he dies after living a short life of four years. While reminding Deckard that all life has unquantifiable value, Roy is holding a dove as a symbol of peace which he releases when he dies. Roy's power to choose to complete the irrational action of sparing Deckard demonstrates his ability to partake in a self-motivated activity to be at peace with himself in a nonphysical way fulfills the third of the Cognitive Criterion for personhood.



Figure 9

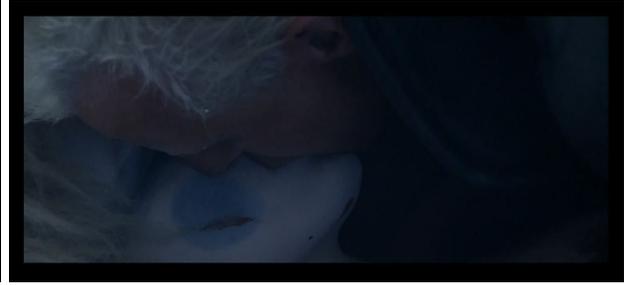


Figure 10

The capacity of Roy and Pris to communicate is visualized in the first *Blade Runner* film through their ability to share a kiss. Both Roy Batty and Pris are replicants pursued by Deckard and they find shelter in the home of J.F. Sebastian. They share a kiss as shown in Figure 9 in a close up shot at eye level angle at 01:15:13. This basic shot allows the characters of Roy and Pris to be seen just before sharing a kiss, a communication of the affection between them. Roy and Pris never tell each other that they have affection for one another within the film, and their actions communicate their sentiments for them. Shortly after Pris is killed, Roy kisses her dead body as shown in Figure 10 in an extreme close up with low light at 01:35:05. This shot highlights how deliberate Roy is in his kiss, which implies it is a final symbol of his affection and care for her instead of a sensual act. Roy and Pris communicate affection for one another through the symbol of a kiss, and in doing so they both fulfill the fourth of Wallen's Cognitive Criteria.



Figure 11



Figure 12

The replicant Rachel's struggle to align with her self-concepts is denoted through the use of lighting and shot size. Rachel is a replicant who is in a romantic relationship with Deckard and who kills a replicant Deckard is hunting who is about to kill Deckard. Rachel is emotionally uncomfortable with killing replicants while Deckard is not yet uncomfortable, and she tells Deckard she is not "in the business". As she makes this statement in Figure 11 at 01:04:06 she is shown in an extreme close up shot with side lighting. The side lighting indicates that she is conflicted about the morality of killing a replicant as the action does not align with her self concepts. The primary function of the extreme close up shot is to contrast with the regular close up shot with side lighting in Figure 12 at 01:04:41. The function of the side lighting is the same, however the slightly wider shot suggests that she is feeling further detached from Deckard as she decides that killing replicants is morally wrong by her standards. Rachel's discomfort with killing indicates her possession of a set of self concepts that govern her actions, which fulfills the fifth and final of Wallen's Cognitive Criteria.

***Blade Runner 2049* Analysis**



Figure 13



Figure 14

In the second *Blade Runner* film, *Blade Runner 2049*, the protagonist Officer K's ability to experience pain is highlighted through the use of close up shots and mise en scène. The replicant Officer K as a blade runner is tasked with retiring or killing older replicant models and

in doing so receives a laceration on his arm. As he tends to his injury in Figure 13 at 00:16:54, Officer K is shown in a close up shot featuring his reflection in a mirror. The function of mise en scène in the form of a mirror is twofold in that it both satisfies the necessity of Officer K being able to see himself to tend his wound and allows the viewer to see Officer K's facial expressions via the close up shot as he tends the wound. His facial expressions as portrayed through the combination of Figure 13 and Figure 14 at 00:17:01 indicate that he is experiencing some level of pain as a result of his injury. This capacity of Officer K to feel pain as a replicant indicates his awareness of his environment and its ability to harm him through pain, which fulfills the first of Wallen's Cognitive Criterion.



Figure 15



Figure 16

The replicant Officer K's ability to use reasoning is emphasized through shot size and angle in *Blade Runner 2049*. Replicants are unable to reproduce, with the only exception being Rachel, from the original *Blade Runner* film, who gave birth to her and Deckard's child. Officer K is tasked with retiring this child and in his hunt for anomalies in the genetic code of children born on the date the child was born he finds two sets of DNA that are identical. When Officer K sees the data of the boy and girl with matching DNA as shown in Figure 15 at 00:57:57, he recalls that it is not physically possible for two beings to have the same DNA. Officer K is shown in an extreme close up low angle shot as he uses reasoning to determine his next steps in Figure 16 at 00:58:02. The use of an extreme close up focuses the attention of the viewer on

Officer K as he surmises that the only way there can be two sets of the same DNA is if one of them is fake and was never a being at all. The use of a low angle reaffirms Officer K's ability to use his intelligence to have power over the hunt at that point. The ability of Officer K to use creative problem solving to address the challenges he faces fulfills the second Cognitive Criterion.



Figure 17



Figure 18

The replicant Luv's ability to engage in self motivated activity is highlighted through the use of angle and lighting in *Blade Runner 2049*. As the film nears its conclusion, Luv and Officer K engage in hand to hand combat until Officer K is stabbed with one of the knives Luv is using. After she removes the knife as shown in Figure 17 at 02:23:18, Luv steadies Officer K in order to kiss him in a high angle close up shot with unmotivated side lighting in Figure 18 at 02:23:22. The use of unmotivated lighting on only Luv's face aligns with the intention of the director, Denis Villeneuve, to have the light in the scenes originate from the characters, as the humanity of the characters provides both the light and beauty in the otherwise bleak scenes (Nash). The high angle makes Officer K appear to be below Luv which indicates she has power over him in this situation. When she kisses him against his will in Figure 19 at 02:23:24, the high angle persists, emphasizing her power over him which she follows up by stating "I'm the best one". As she has succeeded in defeating K, it is irrational for her to kiss him, and she performs the action to fulfill her own desire to assert her dominance over K. This active choice on her part

to assert dominance over Officer K for her own purposes is an irrational self-motivated action which fulfills the third Cognitive Criterion.



Figure 19



Figure 20

Officer K's ability to communicate is demonstrated through the use of rack focus and mise en scène in *Blade Runner 2049*. Officer K's significant other is an artificially intelligent hologram called Joi who accompanies Officer K within his home. Near the beginning of the film Officer K purchases a device that allows Joi to go with him outside of his home as a gift to her. When Officer K presents this gift to Joi in Figure 20 at 00:19:29 he is in a rack focus medium shot as he extends the package to her. The cinematographer for *Blade Runner 2049*, Roger Deakins, stated that "Denis (Villeneuve, the director) and I wanted to do as much as possible in-camera and we insisted when we had the actors, at least, all the foreground and mid-ground would be in-camera" (Tapley). This sentiment is evident in the use of rack focus to draw the viewer's attention to Officer K as the giver of the gift and the device as a prop serves as a symbol of Officer K's desire to be in constant contact with Joi. The device as shown in Figure 21 is Officer K's method of communicating to Joi that she is so important to him that he wants to be with her always. Officer K's communication of affection through a device satisfies Wallen's fourth Cognitive Criterion for personhood.



Figure 21



Figure 22

Officer K displays his ability to establish self-concepts and live by them through his transformation from inaction to action which is displayed through angle. After Deckard has been captured and Officer K learns that he is not the son of Rachel and Deckard, Officer K falls into inaction as he has realized that he has no predestined purpose, while he is shown in a low light high angle close up shot in Figure 22 at 02:17:51. The high angle symbolizes the feeling of powerlessness that he experiences regarding the narrative that is progressing around him (Kuhar 3). His impetus for his transformation to action is in the form of the gun shown in Figure 23 which brings him to realize that he has the freedom to do whatever he chooses to with his resources. His acknowledgement of this freedom is exemplified in Figure 24 at 02:18:29 with a low angle shot with rembrandt lighting on the face of Officer K. The rembrandt lighting denotes the moment as pivotal for the subject as they undergo decisions regarding their own life and death, along with the life and death of others (Sijll 196). Officer K, as he is faced with deciding his own future for the first time since his life began. The low angle denotes the freedom he has through the power to direct his own actions, which he utilizes to attempt to free Deckard from Luv. His realization of freedom as a self concept supports his personhood, as “Freedom is the source from which all significations and all values spring. It is the original condition of all justification of existence.” (Beauvoir 24). His freedom to choose what is morally important to

him defines the moral code by which he strives to live, fulfilling the fifth Cognitive Criterion for personhood through his choice to take action to save Deckard.



Figure 23



Figure 24

Conclusion

Through cinematography the replicants prove themselves to be as deserving of personhood as the humans in both societies through their ability to interact with their environments and those around them dynamically. Earning the moral consideration of the community may not be achievable for the replicants in the films as the humans around them may never fully accept them as being worthy of personhood. However as they have in both films, the replicants can engage in actions and thought processes that make them worthy of personhood according to Mary Ann Wallen's Cognitive Criteria. Their possession of the concepts of fear and freedom also qualify them by the standards put forth as necessary for personhood by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir respectively. The continued acts that the replicants engage in continue to affirm their personhood, whether or not it is affirmed by those around them, and they always will have freedom provided they continue to realize that the actions they carry out determine who and what they are, regardless of whether they were born or manufactured.

The end result of analyzing the *Blade Runner* films and their characters is the conclusion that it is not a label that defines personhood, but rather actions carried out frequently. The films

bring this conclusion to bear by showing the personhood of the characters through cinematography instead of openly stating they deserve it, because it is something no being deserves. Personhood must be earned through struggling not to survive, but to actively live, to take each interaction as an opportunity to extend beyond the primitive desires and urges that all humans or humanoids have and yearn for something of greater weight than a need. The *Blade Runner* films enforce the concept that the greatest success is not to survive the longest, but to spend one's time alive as fully as possible through striving to not to be, but to experience, and to have the freedom to shape those experiences and in doing so shape one's personhood.

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