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Knowledge and Mortality in Blade Runner and Genesis 2-3

Abstract

Definition of humanity's limits is a paramount concern for both the Hebrew creation myth of Genesis and the film *Blade Runner*. The film works as an interpretation of the biblical account by presenting replicants as having gained knowledge without being able to extend their lifespan. In this sense, they have abilities and limits that parallel those of the first man and first woman in Genesis.

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"We are sinful not only because we have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, but also because we have not eaten of the Tree of Life." - Franz Kafka

Introduction

The moniker most often applied to Genesis 3:1-24 in the Christian tradition is "the fall of man." Thinkers from Augustine to Luther to, perhaps most persuasively of all, Milton, describe the dynamics of this story in terms of humanity's failure to follow the will of God and of the subsequent disgrace that accompanies such disobedience. Milton calls the Eden story a "fortunate fall" because Adam and Eve's failure allows for later redemption through the work of Christ.¹ In most interpretations throughout Christian history, human action only matters as a counterpoint to God's action. In other words, while "the fall" story purportedly centers on humans, most reflections about this story are must more theological than anthropological.

It seems clear that Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* draws from the Genesis account. Many interpreters have seen correspondences between Scott's film and the biblical text, and I do not mean to recapitulate those parallels.² My argument is much more specific. The film can be viewed as an interpretation of the Genesis story in which the focus turns from the character of God to the nature of humanity. Although the film alludes to issues concerning divinity, especially with the portrayal of Eldon Tyrell, deity plays a muted role. Scott's film reads the biblical

text as a discourse on humanity rather than an exposition about God's interaction with humanity. In what follows, I first present a reading of Genesis 2-3 that asks about the myth's depiction of humanity and then come back to the film to see how it uses the Genesis story in its own investigation of human existence.

The Two Trees of Genesis

"Of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it, you shall die" (Gen 2:17). What's at stake in Genesis 2-3 is the truthfulness of this statement. Yahweh says it in 2:17, Eve repeats it to the serpent, with slight variations in 3:4 (she adds the admonition "nor shall you touch it" and takes out "in the day that you eat of it").³ The serpent blatantly contradicts it, saying, "You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (3:4b-5). In order to put this rhetorical conflict to the test, Eve does eat the fruit, and, in the aftermath, it seems that the serpent was closer to the truth than Eve and God were. Her eyes are opened, she does not die, and she becomes more like God. The "fall story," undoes the apparent blissfulness of Eden, where Adam and Eve walk naked without shame. While the eating of the fruit usually has been read as a degeneration of the human condition, one could argue - especially when comparing Adam and Eve to replicants - that chapter 3 presents a more desirable status of humanity.

In chapter 2, Adam and Eve experience an existence not too far removed from that of half-aware automatons. The logic of the text tends to be difficult to delineate, and the Hebrew narrative remains deliberately ambiguous, but one can trace some broad outlines of Eden-life. Some of the distinctives of chapter 2 only become clear when put into conjunction with Yahweh's speech in chapter 3, so it is necessary to bounce between the Eden story and the Fall story.

Chapter 2 closes with a statement that exemplifies the innocence and bliss Adam and Eve display: "And the man and his wife were both naked and they were not ashamed" (2:24). Obviously sexuality and lack of inhibition loom large in this characterization, and Augustine was not wrong to find hints of sexual transgression in chapter 3 as Adam and Eve clothe themselves to cover their nakedness.⁴ To sidestep the question of sin for a moment, how one can valorize the innocence expressed in 2:24? What can innocence mean if Adam and Eve do not know good from evil? Or how can "not ashamed" have positive connotations in the absence of cultural norms that serve as the framework for shame?

The first two humans have remarkable child-like qualities. They resemble toddlers, who show no qualms about jogging around the back yard naked and who tend to eat any food or semblance of food put near them. One can imagine an analogy to Adam and Eve's situation in Eden, thinking about them as children. Suppose a parent were to lay out a smorgasbord of good, healthy food and put in

the center of the table an enticing cake. Just before leaving the room, the parent says that the child can eat everything on the table except for the cake. Should the child eat the cake, the parent will severely punish the child. Few parents, I suppose, would be astonished that, upon their return, the child dug into the cake.

What makes the Genesis story so difficult to understand, however, is that this analogy ultimately breaks down, given that Eve knows that eating the fruit breaks a command and will have undesirable consequences. Unlike the child with the birthday cake, she engages in reasonable discourse concerning the prohibition. Whereas the child might fear the consequences and yet cannot weigh the benefits of instant gratification against the detriments of punishment, Eve hesitates not because of fear but because she knows she must obey. A strong implication of the text, though, is that while Yahweh has told the humans that they will die, they cannot possibly understand the full implications of death. Eve, then, remains a paradoxical moral agent. She fully understands what she must not do but has not gathered the ability to comprehend the underlying positive reasons for obedience.

After Eve and Adam's disobedience, the text devolves into a cacophony of denials, rationalizations and blame.⁵ Yahweh curses all three earthly characters - Adam, Eve, and the Serpent--for their various roles in what Yahweh clearly perceives as a punishable act. Given Adam and Eve's marginal status as moral agents, though, I would argue that these punishments harsh and almost vindictive.

The story ends with Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Traditionally and popularly, Yahweh's barring of Adam and Eve from the garden has been viewed as their ultimate punishment. The text, however, gives a very different reason for Yahweh's action. Once Yahweh realizes that Adam and Eve have eaten, he scrambles to set a limit on their mortality. "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now so that he may not reach out his hand and also take from the Tree of Life, and eat and live forever..." (Gen. 3:22, translation mine). The ellipsis captures the incomplete sentence in Hebrew. Since the humans have gained knowledge, they seemingly have made it half-way to godhood. The only item left to complete their transformation into deity dangles on the Tree of Life. This tree appeared in 2:9, and grows in the middle of the garden, seeming close to the Tree of Knowledge. Although Yahweh had not previously barred the humans from eating from the Tree of Life, the situation has changed since their eating from the forbidden tree. In an almost panicked voice, Yahweh realizes the danger and takes quick action to bar the possibility of humans' securing immortality. Once the humans have left Eden, Yahweh places a flaming messenger at the door to make sure that his realm - the immortal one - stays secure.

Most interpreters, as I mentioned earlier, see Genesis 2-3 as a lesson about the broken relationship between Yahweh and humanity. It is equally concerned, as I have tried to show, with defining human limitations. This myth of origins places

humanity squarely between the animal and godly realms. Unlike animals, humans communicate directly with Yahweh, and by eating the fruit they have attained God-like knowledge of good and evil. To keep them from moving beyond this middle status, however, Yahweh gives them mortality. Humans cannot eat from both trees. If one reads the story not as an act that bequeaths heinous consequences to the heirs of the first couple but rather as definitional of human capabilities, it presents an insightful commentary about human nature. Humans are circumscribed by moral knowledge combined with an awareness of mortality. The combination of these two define, at the very outset of the Hebrew Bible, both the capabilities and the limits of humans.

To see the power of this narrative and what traditional interpretations miss by focusing on the fall, one can fruitfully engage in a counterfactual (or rather, countermythical) imaginative exercise. What if Adam and Eve had never eaten the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge? Would we still recognize them as humans? Probably not. To live in a world unaware of the vicissitudes of good and evil would be unrecognizable as human existence. Suppose they had eaten from the Tree of Life while abstaining from the Tree of Knowledge? Then, not only would they live in ignorance, they would do so in perpetuity. Again, such an existence would be completely foreign to any understanding of lived humanity. They would be, at best, replicating a human experience. Given these countermythical musings, one cannot

imagine that Edenic life could be a paradise that many humans would either want to or be able to vicariously experience.

***Blade Runner* as Reworking of the Genesis Myth**

As I stated at the outset, parallels between the characters in *Blade Runner* and in the Bible abound. But much variation exists in different writers' drawing up these parallels. Roy has variously been seen as a Christ figure, a Satan figure, and Adam. Depending on which of these one chooses, Deckard functions as Adam or a disciple. Either Rachel or Pris could fit the Eve role, and Tyrell stands in for Yahweh.

The problem with any of these allegories is that they constrain the narrative of the film or relate only to particular episodes. Roy explicitly identifies with Lucifer when he paraphrases Blake to Dr. Chew ("Fiery the angels fell...") and fits with some traditional pictures of Satan in his torture of Chew and his taunting and tempting of Deckard. By the end of the film, he has moved beyond Satanic qualities and explicitly alludes to Jesus by driving the spike through his hand. Neither of these typologies, though, plays a prominent role in the majority of screen time, and they seem rather minor points of contact. The same could be said for any other biblical typology one might proffer. If, however, Scott's film serves as an

interpretation of Genesis 2-3, the bounds of allegory are loosened, and the strictures of one-to-one correspondence do not act as a constraint on the film's narrative.

I would argue along with Stephen Mulhall that the film is "obsessed" with the question of human nature, "obsessed in the way the leader of the replicants is obsessed with his quest for life, for a life which is on a par with that of human beings."⁶ Like the Eden story, what's at stake for each of the characters in the film is the wrestling with what being human means. But more specifically, like Adam and Eve, humanity finds itself in the dialectic between knowledge of good and evil and the strictures of mortality. My analysis of the film, building upon my comments about the Genesis myth, will look at the characters of Roy, Deckard, and Rachel, all as beings that must struggle in between these two poles.

Roy

Roy most obviously follows the paradigm for human existence presented in Genesis. As a replicant, he, like Adam, is created at the pleasure of another (Tyrell Corp.) and his function is to obey the commands (or programs) of the one who created him. Both the epigraph to the film and the replicants themselves designate Roy, Pris, etc. as slaves, which makes their situation more desperate than that of Adam and Eve, but like Adam, their function is to serve. In this sense, all the replicants are Adamic. Not only are they Adamic in their place in a hierarchy, they also have no parentage to learn from. In the opening scene of the film, Leon fails

the Voigt-Kampf test when questioned about his mother. Like Adam, he has no mother, no human progenitors to inculcate him into humanity. By leading the replicants to Earth, Roy acts out his quest to test the boundaries of his creator's strictures.

Somewhere on his journey, Roy gains knowledge. His closing speech, often quoted, fills in the knowledge he has gathered in hindsight: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe." But clearly this knowledge, while enlarging his awareness about the universe fails to satisfy his true desire--more life. The scene in Tyrell's bedroom highlights not only the striving for life but the terrible burden knowledge brings. Soon after Roy enters, he crassly accosts Tyrell by saying, "I want more life, fucker." But in an abrupt shift, just before he weeps and caresses Tyrell's head, he confesses, "I've done questionable things." The bold assertion for life runs parallel to an awareness of the disobedience of such an assertion. Roy's final speech ultimately designates him as a human in bringing together knowledge and immortality. When says, "Time to die," he recognizes that humanity equals mortality.⁷

Rachael

If Roy's humanity depends upon his coming to grips with mortality, Rachael's dilemma centers upon the ramifications of knowledge. Unlike Roy, she has knowledge thrust upon her after Deckard administers the Voigt-Kampff test.

That test resembles the test that Adam and Eve face with Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in Eden. One possible motivation of Yahweh is to experiment with Eve and Adam to see what they will do. When Tyrell urges Deckard to test Rachael, he, like Yahweh, wants to determine how well his creation will succeed. Because it took Deckard 100 questions to ferret out that Rachael was a replicant, Tyrell finds her impressive. However pleasing such results might be to Tyrell, they are devastating to Rachael.

Deckard's question after the test is instructive, "How can it not know what it is?" Knowledge of good and evil, in both the film and in Genesis, is equivalent to self-knowledge. For Rachael, finding out that she is a replicant makes her question all her previous thoughts about her past and her existential status. Paradoxically, after finding out that she is a replicant, Rachael begins to gain a greater humanity. After she shoots Leon, she and Deckard return to his apartment and she is visibly upset by the experience. Deckard tries to comfort her by saying, "Shakes? Me too. I get 'em bad. It's part of the business." To this Rachael responds, "I'm not in the business. I am the business." This conversation demonstrates that one's origin as a replicant is irrelevant to the ability to act humanly. This conversation, and the film in general - like Genesis - argue against free will as a defining characteristic of humanity. The programming of Rachael, similar to the

programming of Adam and Eve, does not prevent a replicant from deciding to become human.

Deckard

Ridley Scott, to the delight of bloggers everywhere, admitted that he viewed Deckard as a replicant. This seemingly answered the question that many viewers of the film had pondered since the director's cut was released in 1985. But Scott's revelation of Deckard as a replicant undercuts the complexity of what makes humans human, especially if one views the film as an interpretation of Genesis. The film's portrayals of Rachael and Roy as replicants who become human, further mitigate against taking Scott's comments too seriously. To say that Deckard is non-human just because he was built as a replicant defines humanity physiologically and thus shallowly. At issue here is an existential, not a physiological definition of humanity, and thus the question of Deckard's humanity cannot be decided on the grounds of whether he was built as a machine.⁸

So where does Deckard stand with regard to knowledge and mortality? Unlike Roy and Rachael, Deckard does not have one particular moment when he undergoes an epiphany concerning either self-knowledge or mortality. He does, I argue, gradually enhance his understanding of both, though. In each of his encounters with the replicants - Zhora, Leon, Pris, and Roy--he faces the threat of

death in varying degrees. The two fights he has with Leon and Roy, moreover, involve explicit dialogue about facing death. In almost the same language, Leon and Roy force Deckard to face the question of how it feels to live as a slave and have death lurking at any moment. The fight with Leon seemingly has no emotional effect on him. Death for Deckard simply means termination. As he makes clear to Rachael, he does not kill replicants, he terminates skin jobs. By the film's end, however, his pathway moves him much closer to Roy. The final scene does not need a voiceover to intertwine the humanity of those two characters. Scott fades from a shot of Roy's just-expired body filling the left half of the screen to Deckard's thoughtful prone body on the right side of the screen. With that fade, Scott highlights that both have moved toward humanity in that final encounter.

Conclusion

Viewing *Blade Runner* through the lens of Genesis not only highlights the film's obsession with human nature but it also gives defining characteristics to human nature. Reading Genesis with *Blade Runner* as a companion "text" allows one to read the Genesis story not so much as a "fortunate fall" but rather as a myth that provides a glimpse of both the curse and the blessing that humanity has inherited. This is not an inheritance stemming from sin but is simply the constitution of the human creature. To become fully human - and not "more human

than human” - involves embracing the results of eating from one tree but never tasting the other.

¹ After hearing the Archangel Michael’s foretelling of the coming of Christ, Adam, “replete with joy and wonder,” exclaims “Full of doubt I stand,/Whether I should repent me now of sin/By me done and occasioned, or rejoice/Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring.” (*Paradise Lost*, XII, 468, 473-76)

² David Desser, “The New Eve: The Influence of Paradise Lost and Frankenstein on Blade Runner,” in *Retrofitting Blade Runner: Issues in Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner and Philip K. Dick’s Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, ed. Judith B. Kerman (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991): 53-65. Sharon Gravett, “The Sacred and the Profane: Examining the Religious Subtext of Ridley Scott’s ‘Blade Runner.’” *Literature-Film Quarterly* 26 (Jan, 1998):38-43.

³ The woman does not receive the name Eve until 3:20. The name Adam, which means “earth creature,” does not appear as a proper name until 4:25. I use the names for convenience.

⁴ Throughout the Hebrew Bible, “to uncover nakedness” is an idiom for inappropriate sexual activity. See especially Leviticus 18:6-18.

⁵ David Gunn and Danna Fewell, *Gender Power and Promise* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989): 1-30.

⁶ Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (New York: Routledge, 2003): 55.

⁷ The voiceover in the original version is therefore counter to the film’s intention. In the voiceover Deckard says, “Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life...anybody's life...my life. ” That seems completely at odds with the significance of the scene; the issue is not loving life but rather accepting death.

⁸ Dick’s book would tend to support this line of thinking. At the beginning of the novel, Deckard and his wife Iran bicker over how they should use the Penfield mood organ to program their emotional responses. Deckard wants her to allow the organ to remove her bad mood but she refuses. Recently she realized “how unhealthy it was, sensing the absence of life, not just in this building but everywhere and not reacting.” [*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (New York: Ballantine, 1968): 5.] If Deckard chooses to dial up emotions on a machine to inure his feelings from environmental forces, that hardly seems human, even if he is flesh and blood.