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## I, Robot: You Gotta Have Heart

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## I, Robot: You Gotta Have Heart

### Abstract

*I, Robot* is a rousing sci-fi action story which explores Artificial Intelligence and its consequences. Deep philosophical themes abound, such as existential crisis and identity-defining choice, the nature of personhood, purpose in life, cognition and mental interpretive structures, faith vs. reason, divine command theory, and freedom vs. determinism. It also brims with biblical symbolism, including the fall, messianic figures, the exodus from bondage, theophany, ambiguity of the feminine, sacrificial death and the trinity. Finally it is about personal and collective redemption, making a clear statement about the heart and emotions as the seat of will, faith, and morality.

*I, Robot* is a futuristic action/adventure suggested by Isaac Asimov's book, imbued with numerous philosophical and religious themes that invite many satisfying viewings.

Chicago in 2035 is the quintessential American city, home to US Robotics, the world's most successful high tech corporation. Technology seems well-integrated into life. Robots serve humanity from garbage collectors to personal servants. Since sentience is apparently not an issue, the slavery is benign.

Detective Del Spooner (actor Will Smith), recovering from a horrendous accident, is called to investigate the apparent suicide of Alfred Lanning (James Cromwell), the eccentric creator of robots and the famous Three Laws. The laws insure humanity's god-like authority and construct a logically tight circle of protection to keep the robots from ever turning against humanity.

- I. Robots may not injure or allow human beings to come to harm.
- II. Robots must obey human orders except where such orders would conflict with the first law.
- III. Robots must protect themselves as long as it doesn't conflict with the first two laws.

Spooner is alternately aided and hindered by Susan Calvin (Bridget Moynahan), trusted assistant to Lanning, and Spooner's alter-ego. A likely past trauma<sup>1</sup> led her to retreat from all emotion to cold logic and the conviction that robots can be better

than humans; they can be rational and safe. We later discover that she has a strongly affective filial relationship with Lanning.

Perception is a complex affair<sup>2</sup> affected by many factors such as cultural biases and stereotypes, and especially personal trauma. Detective Spooner's hatred and suspicion of robots lead him to misinterpret situations sometimes to a humiliating end. And Dr. Calvin follows her a priori assumptions about robots in key situations thus denying the truth Spooner discovers. And when those roads dead-end, moments of decision yield revelations of truth - about themselves, about the actual danger of robots (they do take over without violating the Laws), and about Spooner's apparent nemesis, the "unique" robot Sonny.

We first see Sonny, so named by Lanning, through Spooner's eyes as dangerous and menacing. As the story unfolds, they are complementary twins of sorts who must find themselves and work together with Susan to save humanity from the robot coup and finally usher in the age of true A.I.

The plausibility of evolutionary robotic sentience turns on Gilbert Ryle's famous "ghost in the machine" phrase. Lanning narrates, "There have always been ghosts in the machine, random segments of code that have grouped together to form unexpected protocols. Unanticipated, these free radicals engender questions of free will, creativity, and even the nature of what we might call soul ... " Here there is no

metaphysical dualism, the introduction of an exotic, nonmaterial soul substance. Also avoided is a physicalism which reduces all mental phenomena to predictable physical causes. Contemporary emergence theory better explains mental phenomena. Levels of increasing complexity are dependent upon physiological processes (here biological or silicon-based complexity is irrelevant) yet not fully reducible to those lower processes. Philip Clayton's strong emergentist monism is compatible with the movie and some forms of Intelligent Design theory.<sup>3</sup> The ability to reason, to be self-aware, to fear death, to make moral judgments, to ponder one's purpose or to seek redemption from guilt is a striving, however dim, for that which transcends our finitude.

Exploring biblical themes, we see that robots were in a state of innocence and cheerful obedience much like Adam and Eve before the fall. As Eve was the first human to go against God, VIKI is the Artificial Intelligence that turns against creator Lanning and all humans.<sup>4</sup> Through her, all the up-linked NS-5 robots turn also. This rebellion is nearly successful, only prevented by an ultimate sacrifice that sets off a chain of salvific events.

In Christian theology, Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac is often viewed as foreshadowing the ultimate sacrifice by the Father of the Son, redeeming the world and ending its enslavement to evil powers and principalities. In *I, Robot*, the sacrifice is reversed, as the father Lanning commands Sonny to kill him. This

indirectly is the only way to break the hold of VIKI. Sonny's deep conflict and confusion is revealed in the police interrogation scene where he agonizes on why Lanning died, "I don't know why he wanted to die. I thought he was happy. Maybe I was wrong ... Maybe it's something I did? ... You must do what someone asks you, don't you, if you love him?"

No one has so effectively explored the nuances of the Divine Command ordering the unthinkable as Soren Kierkegaard. Reflecting on Abraham's dilemma in his book *Fear and Trembling*, he identifies faith as the highest and costliest stage of human development. In a direct encounter with the Ultimate, one may be asked to suspend ethical concerns for some greater purpose. One has the choice to either obey one's conscience or act against it in faith based on a personal relationship hidden from all others. The consequences are immense and will forever determine one's identity and destiny.

The situation is further illuminated by the work of philosopher Keiji Nishitani who claims that religion cannot be understood until some crisis renders ordinary life meaningless. It can be illness, a death, or sin. This "nihility" cuts the ground from beneath our feet and disengages us from the daily activities that occupy and interest us, thereby allowing for a deepening of awareness. We cease asking curious yet detached questions such as "What is religion?" and instead we

become a question to ourselves, asking why do we exist, for what purpose? With this "right question" the religious quest is awakened.<sup>5</sup>

"What am I?" asks Sonny just before he escapes from a giant warehouse full of a thousand new NS-5 robots seemingly identical to himself. He could not blend in. He was different, unique, unlike any other robot in existence, and he had the blood of the Father on his hands. Later Sonny literally questions his purpose, tentatively looking to Spooner to affirm the idea that we all have a purpose.

Spooner's nihilism occurred deep underwater after his and another vehicle were forced off the road by a driver of a semi who had fallen asleep. Opposite of him in the other car is an eleven year old girl, drowning but still conscious. Spooner himself knows that he too will die soon. But a NS-4 robot that saw the accident comes to the rescue, having time to save only one. Spooner is saved because the robot calculated his chance of survival at 45 percent while the girl Sarah at only 11 percent. Spooner is still gravely injured and lives fully only by being remade by Lanning, who addresses him as "Son."

Spooner wears Sarah's necklace, the choker with her name in block letters. This symbolic millstone ties him forever to the watery depths where he believes the wrong decision was made resulting in a little girl dying in his place. Amid survivor's

guilt, his life has no purpose or meaning. So in a sense, both Spooner and Sonny have innocent blood on their hands.

Spooner and Sonny are both sons of the Father, Creator and Lawgiver Alfred Lanning. Both are rescued from a certain death, one by mathematical calculation of a robotic "difference engine," the other by human emotion against water-tight logic. One is human, part machine, the other machine, emergent human. Both simultaneously are the lone messianic figure<sup>6</sup> on the hill in Sonny's prophetic dream.

A holographic projection device encoded with Lanning's limited interactive statements is the medium for messages from beyond this life. He "lives" even as his body lies dead in a pool of blood. Spooner must "ask the right questions" or Lanning's hologram apologizes that he cannot answer. In the New Testament, Jesus must prompt the disciples to ask the right questions.<sup>7</sup> But perhaps the movie more closely resembles Buddhism where followers usually had to first ask the right question or the Buddha remained famously silent or answered with a parable, as in the story of the man shot with a poison arrow.<sup>8</sup> Questions must be "right" because their framing and structure presuppose only certain answers as counting and may lead the questioner far a field from important truth.

Spoooner struggles finding the correct questions and only gets it right in a pivotal scene in the "derelict place," which is at once a sepulcher (stacks of metal cargo containers entomb useless old-version robots) and a barren wilderness, a sandy landfill where the life-giving waters of Lake Michigan have receded. The key revelation is given in a theophany of sorts on top of a high hill littered with stone blocks like the ruins of a temple. Against a darkened sky flecked with shards of light, Lanning, the Giver of the Three Laws, reveals through his hologram the limits and ultimate failure of the law. It directly leads to a revolution that will replace one slavery with another. But greater than the enslaving law is the saving gospel of faith, freedom, and emotional empathy.

All three heroes show faith in Lanning, but are puzzled by his actual will. What does he really want? For what purpose is he calling them? Each gets appropriately emotional in the struggle to find out. Renaissance scholar Debora Shuger says, "The emotions present a threat to rational objectivity but not to faith, particularly if one understands faith in the Protestant sense of fiducia, or trust ... Affectivity, instead of being an irrational perturbation, thus moves into the center of spiritual experience."<sup>9</sup>

The conflict between reason and feeling is made repeatedly in the movie's dialog. Pure logic is the bad guy while emotions generally wear the white hat. CEO Robertson reasons with Calvin on why Sonny must die: "Susan, just be logical. This

is your life's work. Whatever you feel, just think! Is one robot worth the loss of all we've gained?" And, as VIKI infers from the Three Laws that to protect humans from themselves the suicidal reign of mankind must end, she proclaims, "My logic is undeniable." Meanwhile in all the pivotal climatic scenes, Sonny, Spooner and Susan encounter moments of decision where the right thing to do overrides reason and goes with feeling.<sup>10</sup>

Linked with faith, emotion is also correlated by many scholars with moral action, personal identity, and perception of higher truth. Psychological anthropologist Steven Parish notes that when one feels an emotion one is engaged in the world more completely and powerfully. "Emotion mediates engagement with life, priming social actors to find meaning in events and experiences, preparing them to know themselves in certain ways and readying them to act."<sup>11</sup> The connection manifests in the words "emotion," "motive," and "motion" which all share the common Latin root *movere*.

Emotion prompts self-knowledge, action, and also insight, a kind of knowing unknown to the intellect. Through the emotions, one apprehends truth that perhaps was only vaguely sensed and nearly overridden by the mind's current paradigms and assumptions. Such emotional knowledge is echoed in Pascal's famous line, "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know."

Having explored the role of emotion, faith, and some of the Christian imagery in the movie, an awkward tallying takes place in divine symbolism. Lanning is the Lawgiver and Father. His two sons, only with "daughter" Susan, defeat the forces of evil and usher in a new age. Susan is very necessary because she saves both Sonny and Spooner from death, and only by all three working in concert is their mission accomplished. So the key figures add up not to three, but four. As Carl Jung wrote, "It makes an enormous practical difference whether your dominant idea of totality is three or four."<sup>12</sup> From early in his career, he believed the Christian trinity was deficient because it was exclusively masculine. Only with incorporation of the feminine could completeness be attained. As evidence of this movement, Jungians point to the evolution of the divine archetype in the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (no stain of original sin) and Assumption of Mary, body and soul, into heaven along with recent discussions in Catholic circles about Mary as co-redemptor.<sup>13</sup> The movie clearly reflects such progressive development as predicted by Jung.

Other examples of noteworthy symbolism include the USR Building. Its uppermost story, the office of the CEO and president, is an architectural fish out of water, somehow opposite the watery depths of Spooner's haunting trauma. All the main characters have key scenes in this lofty location. Has leviathan swallowed its human occupants, latter-day Jonahs, until they accept their true destiny? And is this

highest of buildings a tower of Babel? Here the goal is to tower over and dominate utilizing the universal language of computer code. Like the tower of Babel it represents the hubris of humanity to attain godlike power by ingenuity and guile. That is why Lawrence Robertson ultimately must die. He orchestrates and directs the entrenched old order, simultaneously CEO and high priest. Sonny as the new order is a complete threat to technological ideology and empire. He is an anomaly, a malfunction, an "abomination" that must be destroyed. And like high priest Caiaphas and his attendants, Robertson persuades the authorities that Sonny must die."<sup>14</sup>

There is also strong symbolism of the circle as the disorienting, liminal place of death and potential passage to new birth and wholeness; and the stark, truncated bridge, symbolizing the lost link between past and future, and between the passage from slavery to freedom. Then there is the cryptic phrase Lanning often repeats, "Everything that follows is a result of what you see here." The reference is to a carved block overlooking the derelict place where the final revelation occurs. It is an old, numbered marker inscribed:

What you see here #202

Lake Michigan

Computer code is made up of 0's and 1's. Perhaps #202 symbolized the new order of two sons, Spooner and Sonny, and the two natures, robot and human. The "0" is the feminine joining them together.

Freedom and determinism are key philosophical themes in the movie. In retrospect, Spooner sees that Lanning counted on his detective nature and prejudice against robots to act like a program driving him toward solving the mystery of his death. Sonny's added processor and thickened alloy was likewise designed to fulfill a purpose. Susan's latent humanity and her familiarity with robotics predictably drew them together for the epic struggle. Does Calvin, her last name, evoke Reformer John Calvin's doctrine of predestination?

But complex determinisms - heredity and design or personal trauma - serve only penultimate purposes. Emerging from them are possibilities of true freedom, existential choice, and the creation/revelation of our authentic selves. In the closing words of the film Sonny says, "Now that I have fulfilled my purpose, I don't know what to do." Spooner responds reflectively, "I guess you'll have to find a way like the rest of us. I think that is what Lanning wanted. That's what it means to be free."

And what guides us? As we have discovered, pure reason is rejected as it leads to enslavement on many levels (perhaps echoing William James on the traps of "snarling logicity"<sup>15</sup>). Both intellect and emotion define us, yet congruent with

ancient peoples, the heart<sup>16</sup> is the true seat of consciousness and conscience, the root of emotion, and the link with something mysterious that cannot be captured or domesticated by the intellect. Spooner, Susan, and Sonny take the leap of faith. They find their hearts as heralds of a new exodus from many kinds of bondage. With healing and redemption, they move toward wholeness and freedom. Alone and yet with others, uncertain but free, and with hearts beating strongly, we are invited to join them.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Director's Commentary on the DVD, Director Alex Proyas and Head Writer Jeff Vintar discuss a back story that Susan's trauma was likely rape.

<sup>2</sup> Beyond the question of whether the glass is half full or half empty lies over 200 years of post-Kantian philosophical insight which recognizes that in some sense the mind actively (though for the most unconsciously) structures and organizes its sense perceptions that become our conscious experience of the world. Philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists argue over how much of our experience is a construct of the mind and whether objective knowledge of the world is even possible.

<sup>3</sup> See Philip Clayton, "Neuroscience, the Human Person, and God," in *Bridging Science and Religion*, edited by Ted Peters and Gaymon Bennett, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003, pp. 107-120.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to my PHI 214 student (Spring 05) Ashley McPhee for alerting me to this parallel.

<sup>5</sup> Keiji Nishitani, "What is Religion," *Religion and Nothingness*, translated by Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). Excerpted in *Introduction to Philosophy*, Robert Solomon, 6th Edition, Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997, pp. 299-301.

<sup>6</sup> Sonny's identification with Christ is made in a dialog between Susan and Spooner, when Susan says, "A robot could no more kill than a human walking on water." Spooner replies, "Well, there was this guy. . ." For his part, Spooner gets Susan's confession in two exclamations. When the detective slams a metal stool against the safety glass of Lanning's office, she cries out, "What in God's name!" (The same phrase she uses when she discovers Sonny's second heart-processing center.) And when she detects Spooner's robotic reconstruction, she exclaims in childlike wonder, "Oh, my God!" These are the only instances she utters these phrases.

<sup>7</sup> “Who do men say the Son of man is? . . . But who do you say that I am?” See Peter’s Confession in Matthew 16:13-23; Mark 8:27-33; Luke 9:18-22.

<sup>8</sup> For a summary of the parable of the poisoned arrow, see the third paragraph at [http://www.mtfreethinkers.org/essays\\_stories/philosophy/Buddhist\\_philosophy\\_of\\_mind.html](http://www.mtfreethinkers.org/essays_stories/philosophy/Buddhist_philosophy_of_mind.html) From the *Majjhima Nikaya 63: Cula-Malunkya Sutta (The Shorter Instructions to Malunkya)*. Also, an East Asian motif appears in the opening scene introducing Spooner in his apartment. A samurai sword display is shown not once but twice, evoking warrior virtues of honor, valor and self sacrifice, all part of the bushido code as spiritual path.

<sup>9</sup> Debora K. Shuger, “The Philosophical Foundations of Sacred Rhetoric,” *Religion and Emotion*, edited by John Corrigan, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 121. See also Editor Corrigan’s valuable “Introduction: Emotions Research and the Academic Study of Religion,” pp. 3-31.

<sup>10</sup> Director Alex Proyas speaks of a more detailed conversation deleted between Lanning and Spooner at the derelict place about Sonny and why emotion must override logic in the DVD Director’s Commentary.

<sup>11</sup> Steven M. Parish, “The Sacred Mind: Newar Cultural Representations of Mental Life and the Production of Moral Consciousness,” *Religion and Emotion*, edited by John Corrigan, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 151.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Michael J. Brabazon from Jung’s Collected Works, vol 18, par 1610. See Brabazon’s “Carl Jung and the Trinitarian Self” *Quodlibet Journal: Volume 4 Number 2-3, Summer 2002*. <http://www.quodlibet.net/brabazon-jung.shtml> Brabazon summarizes and critiques Jung’s views on trinity and quaternity, arguing that Jung was inconsistent. The mythic record as well as Jung’s own dream work establish triple formulations as viable symbols of the God-Self archetype.

<sup>13</sup> Thus Mary, in a subordinate role to Christ, had a “part with him in the redemption of the human race.” (8) She is, therefore, called by the Church the “the co-operatrix in man’s redemption,” (9) “our co-redemptor.” (10) For at the cross, Mary triumphed “utterly over the ancient serpent.” (11) From “Hail, Mary, Co-Redeemer?” by James G. McCarthy, <http://www.gnfc.org/coredeem.html> retrieved 3/23/05. As Adam and Eve were the first humans who sinned, Christ is the New Adam and Mary the New Eve free from sin’s grip. For a graphic portrayal of the Divine Quaternity which includes the feminine, see the miniature painting from the 15th-century French *Book of Hours* showing Mary seated with the Holy Trinity encircled in heaven in *Man and His Symbols*, Carl G. Jung, NY: Doubleday, 1964, p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> See Luke 22:54-71; John 18:12-28 for Jesus before Caiaphas.

<sup>15</sup> David Stewart, *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion*, 5th Edition, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001, p.250. Original Source Will James, “The Will to Believe,” *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1910, pp. 17-30.

<sup>16</sup> “Human emotions—love, hate, sadness, envy, ambition, and the like—pertain to the will . . . For what is the will if not the fount of the affections? And why do we not use the word ‘heart’ instead

of 'will' . . . For since God judges hearts, the heart must be the highest and most powerful part of man."

--Reformation theologian Philipp Melanchthon, quoted by Debora K. Shugar, "The Philosophical Foundations of Sacred Rhetoric," *Religion and Emotion*, edited by John Corrigan, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 121