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Robot Lives Matter?

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Assignment Prompt:

In the movie Blade Runner, the Tyrell Corporation creates robot “replicants” that are almost impossible to distinguish from humans. They have superior strength and agility, and equal or greater intelligence than the genetic engineers who created them. Replicants are used for slave labor on other planets and space stations. The replicants mutinied and are not allowed to return to Earth. Special police squads-blade runners-have orders to shoot to kill any replicant found on Earth; this is not called execution; it is called “retirement”. Comment on the morality of creating and using such entities this way. Address the following questions in your paper: What is the socio-technical environment (society and technologies)? Is it an ethical place? What type of community is promoted? Make sure you use ethical theories (ethics of purpose, principle and consequence), articles and the ACM Code of Ethics to support your positions.

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Robot Lives Matter?

It’s 2016 and slavery is still a brutal reality around the world and a crime against humanity. The human race has never been shy when it comes to enslaving fellow human beings, so with progress in robotics and AI, we will soon be able to enslave robots to do our bidding. This poses a serious moral dilemma as to what rights such entities would possess and what responsibility we have, if any, on how we use them in society. Should it make any difference whether an entity is made of silicon or carbon, or whether its brain uses semi-conductors or neurotransmitters?

By examining the Tyrell Corporation in the movie Blade Runner, which manufactures genetically engineered robots or “replicants”, virtually identical to human beings, I will explore whether we have a moral imperative to treat robots in the same way we treat people. The replicants manufactured are used for slave labor on other planets and space stations. In response to this situation they mutiny against their human creators by returning to Earth for revenge, which they are banned from doing. Special police operatives called “blade runners” are tasked to kill or “retire” replicants who defy this ban. My proposal is that it is unethical for the Tyrell Corporation to use the replicants they created for slave labor. Through observations, value judgements and

assumptions backed with ethical theories of purpose, principle and consequence I will support my argument that it is was not necessarily unethical to create robot “replicants” but it was unethical to use these very human-like replicants for the purpose of slave labor.

First I would like to provide the relevant facts to support my proposal of the ethical treatment of replicants. Because these replicants had an equal or greater intelligence than the genetic engineers that created them, it is a fact that they are not merely pieces of machinery. The Tyrell Corp built these robots to have the mental capacity of humans as well as having all their physical features and movements. Although, they are indistinguishable from humans, whether they should have the same rights as humans is debatable. The criteria commonly used to determine if an entity qualifies for moral status, either separately or in combination is the capacity to feel pain or suffer, sentience, and sapience which is the capacity for higher intelligence, such as self-awareness. Because the replicants have mutinied, they obviously have a strong desire to live, which implies a moral or emotional resentment of how they are being treated. It’s hard to believe these replicants are not capable of feeling emotions like suffering and oppression. Because they have acquired the ability to learn traits that are unique to humans and exhibit a high form of intelligence which only humans have previously experienced then they qualify for moral status and thus deserve to be treated with the same dignity as humans. It seems that this would make their servitude slavery.

If an entity has the same, if not better abilities than humans, regardless of how it was created, then we have an obligation to the entity and to ourselves as a society to be held accountable on how it is treated. If we are able to develop an entity with sentient characteristics such that they would be capable of experiencing feelings, emotion or even a consciousness, then we should extend to them the same moral consideration that we do to all living creatures. According to the ethicist Robert Hughes, “the true definition of personhood should transcend the purely physical. The social personhood concept asserts that citizenship, rights, and value adhere not to our bodies, but to subjective persons”. (Benford 119) If these rational and sentient entities can exhibit human-like emotions and needs, we have an obligation to treat them with dignity and respect and grant them the moral status they deserve. According to Benford’s *A Scientist’s Notebook*, entities considered for personhood will be, “those that have a continuous sense of self-awareness, in whatever media, will be considered social persons, with attendant rights and obligations.” (Benford 119) The replicants were definitely self-aware of their enslavement and felt oppressed; otherwise, they would not have mutinied. Even if an entity did not possess a high level of intelligence, we should still grant it moral consideration since it has exhibited the ability to suffer and feel pain, just as we protect animals from being treated inhumanely. It is universally accepted belief that slavery is evil, and inherently wrong, and is never justified, no matter what the form.

I think that we can safely assume that an entity that has the ability to feel oppressed and has a strong will to survive should be treated with respect and dignity. I would also expect that we would want to care for our creations and live with them rather than control and enslave them. As decent human beings, it can be presumed that we would be protective of these entities and not risk

undermining our basic humanity by mistreating them. Based on these observations, value judgements and assumptions I will further analyze my argument that it is unethical to create and enslave robot “replicants” from three different approaches: ethics of purpose, ethics of principle and ethics of consequence.

I will begin my analysis from the approach of an ethics of purpose. When we consider the Tyrell Corps actions based on this approach we need to focus on the company’s mission in society and its vision for the future. The corporation’s ‘good’ purposes were to become a powerful company that will fulfill a much needed role in the dangerous business of working in off-world colonization. Manufacturing replicants to be used as slave labor on other planets would enable the corporation to capitalize on this ‘cheap’ labor. Replicants would be able to work more effectively and economically than humans since they were designed with superior strength, agility and intelligence. Unfortunately, by enslaving replicants, the corporation lost sight of its internal purpose since it failed to develop a work community of mutual respect. The Tyrell Corp is the epitome of an ‘evil’ corporation driven by greed, concerned only about profits with little regard to its employees. Using replicants as slaves was not the right means to achieve the end. The corporation did not consider what kind of society it would create by enslaving replicants; it created an unethical place with no concern for the evil of creating a free mind and then subjecting it to slavery. It may have been quite an accomplishment technologically to create replicants so human-like, but the company ceased to flourish when it crossed the line in using them as slaves. An ethics of purpose includes both doing something well, as well as becoming good. The company clearly did not become something good for the replicants nor did it have the type of relationship an organization should strive to develop: one with good moral character and integrity towards its employees.

Next I will evaluate my proposal based on an ethics of principle. While advancements in technology and AI can bring great advances to our society we must follow strict ethical guidelines for its use. Even though the notion of AI was something Kant probably never imagined, he recognized that humans are not the only beings that should not be used as tools. Kant says that as humans we have the ability to reason and deliberate and this rational capacity is what makes us different from other creatures and therefore we have certain duties to each other as “rational beings” in a moral community. Moor states that for good evolutionary reasons “all rational human beings put high positive value on life, happiness, and autonomy” (Moor 66) “To be ethical one must not inflict unjustified harm (death, suffering, or decreased autonomy) on others” (Moor 66) The replicants are sentient and therefore rational beings. Kant believed that all individuals should be treated as ends in themselves and never as a means to an end. If we can demonstrate that an entity has the desire to avoid pain and discomfort then we as the creators have a responsibility to treat them ethically. We have a moral imperative to treat them in the same way we treat humans. Using replicants as slaves against their will is an unethical act. Replicants that return to Earth are simply killed or what Tyrell refers to as “retired”, another indication that they do not consider them to be anything more than just machines. Since replicants are rational beings with sentience,

this is an act of murder, which is universally considered to be unethical. Tyrell used the replicants solely as a means to an end.

The creation of replicants with the capability to understand and rationalize on its own is not unethical, but the way in which they were used is. Exploiting and taking advantage of others, whether they are humans or our mechanical equivalent, dehumanizes and devalues the rights of all beings. There appears to be no concern for the evil of creating a free mind and then subjecting it to slavery. When made to look like us and act like us, replicants become extensions of who we are and they should be recognized by society as part of our culture and deserve to be treated with moral consideration. We have a duty to treat these rational beings with fairness, inclusiveness and equality as we would any other human being. It is essential that there be policies and regulations to help society use AI in the best possible way for all.

Next, I will apply the ethics of consequence to defend my argument. I would like to begin by examining the consequences of using replicants as slaves and what impact it will have on humanity. The creation and use of replicants has the potential to create an existential crisis for human beings. This crisis could affect how we treat each other and view ourselves since our relationship toward replicants is a reflection on our species. Everything we are will end up in AI as they learn what they live; if treated with disrespect and violence chances are they will react the same way just as children learn good and bad behavior from their parents.

Substantial thought must be given not only if we *can* create replicants, but rather if we *should* create replicants indistinguishable from humans. Joy warns us that, “failing to understand the consequences of our inventions while we are in the rapture of discovery and innovation seems to be a common fault of scientists and technologists; we have long been driven by the overarching desire to know that is the nature of science’s quest, not stopping to notice that the progress to newer and more powerful technologies can take on a life of its own.” (Joy 7) It was inevitable that a replicant with superior mental capabilities would eventually resist and revolt. This potential threat was likely apparent to the designer, which is why replicants were only allowed on distant planets and not allowed to live on Earth. It is not just the pain and suffering slavery caused the replicant; but what may be the more important moral implication is what it says about the creator. The replicants and how we use them are a reflection of who we are. Immoral behavior toward replicants could lead to immoral behavior towards other entities. If we create a class of workers, like these replicants, and mistreat and exploit them for our own personal gain, this immoral behavior can carry into other realms of our society and even diminish the value of ordinary human beings. We are responsible for their existence and have an obligation to society not to create the next generation slave. The concern of mistreating an entity, which is by all intentions human-like, could impact the general feeling of empathy we experience when interacting with other entities. The problem with enslaving a replicant has less to do with what the replicant is, and has everything to do with what we can become. Enslaved replicants would have the moral right to mutiny against those enslaving it and as a consequence the replicants would be morally justified in revolting against the humans who are responsible. As we can see the consequences of using replicants for

slave labor does not bring about an overall greater good for Tyrell, replicants or society. Tyrell clearly did not demonstrate a responsible use of its resource by enslaving replicants with such human capabilities.

Although I have presented my argument as to why I believe using replicants for slave labor is wrong, it is equally important to present a counterargument in order to uncover possible strengths and weaknesses in my proposal. Some may say that a robot no matter how life-like or complex is really nothing but a bunch of wires and circuit boards. There is no moral code preventing me from throwing a computer in the garbage, so why should one feel any differently about mistreating a robot? Having replicants perform dangerous and laborious jobs could provide a benefit to society and free humans to pursue other interests. By treating replicants as living beings and granting them moral status we may wind up upsetting the social order for humans in an unfair way. Tyrell purposely utilized replicants on distant planets preventing them from integrating with society and so there was no real need to recognize them as anything other than a slave to the corporation so they felt it was unnecessary to grant them any moral consideration. Regardless of Tyrell's effort to keep replicants isolated from society on Earth, I still claim that replicants, since they were created with capabilities comparable to humans in every aspect should not be used for slave labor. Replicants who are rational beings should be considered of equal value to a human, and hopefully if treated with the respect and dignity they deserve we can promote a community of inclusion rather than exclusion. Rejecting them would amount to embracing a position similar to racism. We must accept the fact that one day soon robots will inhabit every nook and cranny of our existence so there must be at least a minimum code of ethics that guide us on how to treat and interact with these entities.

Lastly, I will use the ACM code of ethics to support my position that it was immoral for Tyrell to use replicants for slave labor. According to ACM, Tyrell was in violation of some moral imperatives. ACM clearly states an obligation to protect fundamental human rights, respect diversity of all cultures and design products to be used in socially responsible ways; to 'contribute to society and human well-being'. Since I believe the replicants were designed with sufficient qualities to be deemed human, using them as slaves violated the requirement to protect and respect all cultures even if they are not made of flesh and blood. Tyrell also violated the code that requires it to 'avoid harm to others'. If Tyrell had limited the capacity of the replicants he could have avoided the harm they posed to others when they mutinied. Tyrell did not properly assess the social consequences of allowing robots with superior strength, agility and intellect to exist and what the potential impact would be to society in trying to identify and subdue rogue replicants if they returned to Earth. It was the company's responsibility to minimize the possibility of indirectly harming others and assess the social consequences of systems that can cause serious harm; which means the pain and suffering inflicted on the enslaved replicants. Above all, Tyrell violated the code to 'be fair and take action not to discriminate' by enslaving the replicants, as it misused technology by creating an inequity between humans and replicants. Tyrell also was in violation of some organizational leadership imperatives of the ACM code of

ethics which assigns responsibility to the leadership of the organizations to ensure computing resources are not used inappropriately; as in creating high functioning replicants and using them as slaves. And finally the ACM code plainly states that designing systems that deliberately demean individuals or others is ethically unacceptable. As long as we are in agreement that these replicants have moral status, ACM code requires that they be designed such that their dignity is enhanced; slavery is a far cry from being treated with dignity.

The Tyrell Corporation was morally obligated to limit the capacities of robots. Intentionally avoiding the creation of such entities would be the more ethical thing to do, especially if the task performed by the entities could be done equally effectively without these characteristics. As more and more intelligent machines are integrated into our environment, our social response and relationship with technology needs to be carefully considered. It is the technology embedded in our environment that will shape ethical issues. It is therefore important that ethical policies and regulations help society in using AI in the best possible way for all. AI systems will need to have their own set of ethics to allow for a fruitful interaction and collaboration with humans in the environment in which it is used. The book *Ethics for the New Millennium* by the Dalai Lama, may offer us some guidance for our future with AI, and states that, “the most important thing is for us is to conduct our lives with love and compassion for others, and that our societies need to develop a stronger notion of universal responsibility and of our interdependency.” (Joy 18)

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