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*Gilgamesh to Blade Runner: Teaching the Catholic Intellectual Tradition in RSCC104*

Christopher J. Kelly, PhD

I joined the faculty of Sacred Heart University in the Fall of 2008.<sup>1</sup> Several months earlier I had responded to an ad placed by the Department of Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Studies seeking to fill a tenure-track position in Catholic theology. This stipulation was sufficiently general that I was not immediately eliminated from contention, so I continued reading. The more I read, the more my interest was piqued. The advertisement was worded with sufficient care to make it clear that the successful candidate would devote much of her or his time teaching a class identified as the capstone to Sacred Heart University's Common Core curriculum. The class had the rather unwieldy title of *The Human Search for Truth, Justice, and the Common Good*.

Now, I had never heard of Sacred Heart University before, but there was no question of me not sending an application after reading the brief description of the rationale for the course included in the position advertisement. This was exactly the sort of class I wanted to teach. I knew it had the potential to be something more than a factor in a student's GPA. For me, it had the potential to be meaningful, to be affective in the lives of those who had entrusted their education to SHU. Naïve of me? Perhaps. Idealistic? Sure. As of the Fall of 2014, though, I will have taught the class twenty times, and I believe in its efficacy as much now as I did then. I have put a lot of thought and effort into framing the content and method of how I teach RSCC104, and I continue to make adjustments adding, deleting, and tweaking as I deem necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> It is somehow fittingly ironic that a Catholic can be taught to explore his tradition by a rabbi. In this instance, I would be remiss if I did not recognize the contributions of Professor Jay Holstein at the University of Iowa. This essay results from his inspiration and pedagogical acuity. It is from him that I gained a sense of what a close reading of myth really means.

Founded in 1963 by Bishop Walter Curtis, Sacred Heart University is an institution born in the climate of the Second Vatican Council and takes seriously its responsibility to steward the mantle of Catholic intellectual tradition into the modern world. We strive to structure our curriculum around and offer our faculty immersion in the vast array of texts, images, sounds, ideas, and values that constitute said tradition. Our Office for Mission and Catholic Identity regularly sponsors events, forums, colloquia, etc., with open invitation to both faculty and the wider community, with the intent of engaging in conversation about issues and concerns relative to what is it we are supposed to be doing and why is it important.

The Office runs a very successful program specifically directed toward faculty members called the Presidential Seminar. In short, it is a series of presentations and conversations between team leaders and twelve faculty members who have been selected from a pool of applicants. Diversity is key here; every effort is made to ensure that each group includes faculty from the sciences, business, education, and health professions, not just the liberal arts. Outside speakers are invited in and all manner of discussion, from Aquinas to bioethics, follows. The program spans roughly six months and is guided by a specific set of readings designed to familiarize and deepen understanding and appreciation for the Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CIT) and the nature of Catholic higher education. Each participant is expected to work towards the completion of a project that in some meaningful way brings together their own specialties and the framework of the CIT. This essay is taken, in part, from my experience as a participant in the 2012 Presidential Seminar.

Sacred Heart University's Common Core stands as one of the institution's signature pieces, and those of us who teach in the program are charged with introducing both the content and the principles constituent of the CIT. No easy task, to be sure. Not only are we dealing

with an immense amount of material, but we are beleaguered by a lack of ideological coherence and a confusion regarding the specificity of terms. To foster a sense of purpose and integration, our Core requires students to take four successive courses designed around what we have identified as four fundamental questions of human experience: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to live a life of meaning and purpose? What does it mean to understand and appreciate the natural world? What does it mean to forge a more just society for the common good? Each course in the program approaches these questions from a different perspective. We begin with a historical approach, proceed to a literary one, then a number of natural and social science courses from which students may pick provide their angles, and we culminate in either a philosophy or theology course that acts as a capstone to the requirement. As one who teaches this capstone my own thinking is that we do both the tradition and the students a disservice if we conceive of the CIT in too rigid a fashion. The program should not be a series of courses on dogmatics or ecclesiology. It benefits from a more nuanced treatment of tradition. This essay came to fruition during my time in the Presidential Seminar as I recognized the need to explain (if to myself more than my classmates) what I was trying to do in my capstone to the Common Core. I offer an expanded version here to provide some articulation of how my sections of RSCC104 can be both a reflection of and contribution to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

Now, the phrase “Catholic Intellectual Tradition” is not entirely clear, nor is it obvious how it ought to be manifest in Catholic institutions of higher learning if it could be defined.<sup>2</sup>

Parsing it does little to register clarity. I would suggest “catholic” has two primary, adjectival

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<sup>2</sup> For a concise treatment of some of the questions the phrase raises see John J. O’Keefe, “Catholic Intellectual Tradition and University Mission” *Journal of Religion and Society* Supplement Series 6 (2011): 1-9 [<http://moses.creighton.edu/jrs/2011/2011-6.pdf>]. Also recommended for relevant source material is Michelle Loris, “Engaging the Catholic Intellectual Tradition – Sacred Heart University’s Common Core: The Human Journey” *Mission and Catholic Identity Publications* Paper 7 (2009): 455-64 [[http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=mission\\_pub](http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=mission_pub)].

meanings: “universal” (from its Greek root *katholikos*) and “related to particular forms of Christianity” (in most instances, Roman Catholicism). Is there some sense, though, in which Catholic isn’t catholic? Well, yes, to the extent that certain teachings and practices are particular to Catholicism as opposed to Hinduism, for instance. At the same time, however, the spirit that infuses life into those doctrines and rituals is oriented to the universal redemption of humanity, from the perspective of the faithful. “Intellectual” can mean different things to different people; its constitution varies depending upon one’s criteria. “Tradition” may be the most problematic of the three words. Catholic tradition is an expansive concept. Where do we draw the line? Is there a line to be drawn?

If we are to proceed in a productive way we need some sort of framework. One of the experts invited to speak to my cohort of the Presidential Seminar was Professor Terrence Tilley, Avery Cardinal Dulles Professor of Catholic Theology in the Department of Theology at Fordham University in New York. Tilley has written extensively on the CIT, and his distillation and synthesis of the various nuances concerning its nature and function proved to be most helpful in organizing my own thoughts. Using Tilley as I guide, I offer the following examination of my version of RSCC104 in an effort to suggest how it is an example of the CIT in action.<sup>3</sup> Because my goal here is more practical than theoretical I am going to avoid the danger of getting bogged down in too much provenancial detail and note that Tilley draws upon the thought of Yves Congar and others to argue that traditions ought not to be defined solely according to their content. They are, rather, communicative processes that provide ways of thinking and behaving. *How* we go about communicating is much more important than the content, the *what*, that is communicated.

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<sup>3</sup> The bulk of Tilley’s presentation drew on his work in Terrence Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

For Tilley, the CIT is about the means rather than the specifics of what is handed on. Religious traditions can and do change for they are not reified entities under the control of ecclesiastic authorities or the discipline of theology or the complex system of ritual. The CIT has a number of characteristics that serve to keep it adaptable, but for the purposes of this essay let me note two that directly concern what I am trying to do in RSCC104. Tilley suggests that the CIT is characterized by what he calls the “analogical” imagination, which he contrasts with a “digital” imagination.<sup>4</sup> The analogical seeks to find similarities and points of unity between apparently discordant things, be they events, peoples, stories, etc. It refuses to exclude, and opts for “both/and” when confronted with a dilemma. The digital prefers an “either/or” response. Such inclusivity automatically expands the realm of the CIT. The second characteristic Tilley calls a universal hope. The Catholic Intellectual Traditions maintains a resolute conviction that no matter the circumstances there is hope for everyone, everything, everywhere. No matter how bleak, nothing is beyond redemption. So, given these characteristics, how does the CIT find expression in my classroom?

Growing out of its Jewish cradle, Christianity is irrevocably linked to a narrative. From its earliest centuries onward it has understood itself to be part of a continuous unfolding of the divine *oikonomia*, a Greek term from which we derive the English word “economy.” The term means something like a plan of action or management strategy. For Christianity, everything that has happened since the fall of Adam and Eve has been part of a divine economy, a plan designed by God to bring humanity back into an intimate relationship with the Creator. The incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent establishment of the Church are understood as ordained developments in the sacred stratagem. History is the constant unfurling of this plan, and the sacred scriptures, including the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are its account. It

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<sup>4</sup> Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, 125-34.

is this connection to narrative that underpins my version of RSCC104. I guide my students through narratives but not for their entertainment nor as an exercise in literary analysis. I ask that they carefully read and carefully consider the texts before them as myths.

In the academic discipline of religious studies the term “myth” is a technical one used to designate a story considered sacred because it communicates something about how we understand the human condition and its relationship to ultimate reality, whatever form that may take. The myth communicates some sort of “truth” whether or not the account is historically accurate or verifiable. The particulars of the story may be objectively true, or they may be complete fabrications. The beauty of the myth, though, is that any lack of historical veracity in no way limits the power of the tale. Myths express universal questions, ideals, triumphs, and tragedies. In them the names and faces of characters blur, thus allowing anyone to assume their identities and visages. In them the hopes and fears, the dreams and failures of all human beings find expression beyond the debilitating effects of time.

We read various texts in RSCC104. Some have an obvious place in the CIT – such as Augustine’s *Confessions* and Therese de Lisieux’s *Story of a Soul* – but the inclusion of others into some sort of Catholic “canon” is less certain. How do you make a case, for instance, for the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or the film *Blade Runner*? Gilgamesh’s tale is a 3000 year old epic poem from ancient Mesopotamia. *Blade Runner* is a science fiction tour de force directed by Riddley Scott and released in 1982. Neither one appears characteristically “Catholic,” yet each can be sheltered under the CIT when read and utilized in a particular way. Herein lies the crux of the matter.

I always begin my course with a close reading of Genesis 1-4, the myth of creation, Adam and Eve in the garden, and the episode between Cain and Abel. In my experience, the

majority of my students come from Christian backgrounds, and they tend, at least, to be peripherally familiar with the basics of the account. But peripheral is not substantive, and this is a text worthy of serious engagement. Furthermore, if they do know the story, chances are they have been told that it documents the commission of original sin. What I suggest to them is that perhaps there is a lot more going on behind the plot that may not be so obvious. Drawing upon the wisdom of one of my mentors, Rabbi Jay Holstein at the University of Iowa, I maintain that the hallmark of all great literature is irony.

Without getting into technicalities, irony suggests that what the text says is not necessarily what the text means. But only those sincerely interested and dedicated to discovering the truth are careful enough to read between the lines. So that's what I try to do. We go through those four chapters of Genesis line by line, and along the way I raise questions, provide some background information, and generally try to muddy the waters. I do so, not to undermine the traditional Christian interpretation of the eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of the good and the bad as the act of primeval disobedience but to jilt students out of a set way of thinking, to begin a mindset of informed criticism. In the way we read Genesis Eve's act becomes one of supreme courage and exactly the choice the biblical God wants the pair to make. Genesis 1-4 presents the human condition in a nutshell. As Holstein asserts, it forces us to confront the three biggest challenges of human life: food, sex, and death.

It does so in the form of a narrative, a story, the very medium that provides the foundation for the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. The first Christian missionaries did not expound doctrine; they told stories. They called for others to hear the *evangelion*, the Greek term for "good news" that comes to us via the Old English "godspel"—what we call "gospel." In choosing to tell stories they were following in the tradition of their founder. Jesus favored

communicating with audiences by telling parables, short stories filled with everyday characters and situations intended to present some sort of moral teaching. Although the plot contexts and characters in his stories may seem ordinary, they tend to gravitate to the theme of making choices. Characters in Jesus' parables have to make choices; the stories themselves demand responses from attentive listeners and readers. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:29-37) is, perhaps, the best example of this dynamic, and we pay particular attention to it in my class. The Samaritan traveler chooses to stop and offer all the assistance he can, despite the risks involved. This is the genius of the tale. Jesus makes the one person least likely to be heroic, a 1<sup>st</sup> century Samaritan, the only one to do the right thing. This then forces his audience, whether they are 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews or 21<sup>st</sup> century college students, to ask "What would I have done?"

The CIT is filled with stories and people telling stories, but it has no stranglehold on the medium. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is no parable of Jesus, but it does have fundamentally Catholic concerns. Fundamentally Catholic because they are fundamentally human concerns. It challenges the reader to ask whether he or she has the courage to respond authentically to the dominance of food, sex, and death in human experience. Gilgamesh and the *adam* creature presented in Gen. 1-3 are intimately linked as "in-between" creatures. One is uniquely created in the "image and likeness" of an unseen God. The other is fashioned by the gods to be two-thirds divine and one-third human. Both have to come to terms with the frightening reality of the human condition, a condition fraught with uncertainty, unspeakable pain, and yet the possibility of profound joy.

The story of Gilgamesh is not a happy one.<sup>5</sup> It is not great because of any marvelous deeds accomplished by its warrior-king hero or answers or insights he gained. It is a tale of transformation but not resolution. For the uninitiated, Gilgamesh is the semi-divine ruler of Uruk, an independent city-state in ancient Mesopotamia (modern day southern Iraq). Uruk is

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<sup>5</sup> My course uses N.K. Sandars, trans. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972).

described in the 3,000 year old text in glowing terms, as the grandest and strongest citadel in the world. Gilgamesh, the son of a high priest and a minor goddess of wisdom, is its king. Two-thirds god and one-third human, he is described as having the perfect body and as being jaw-droppingly handsome. He is quite unlike anybody else in terms of his presence and ability. Despite (or perhaps because of) his unique genealogy, Gilgamesh is a terrible ruler. He uses and abuses the citizens of Uruk for his own personal pleasure. He beats up all the men and takes to bed all the women. When we first meet him Gilgamesh is defined by his indulgence in sex and violence. The question the text wants us to ask is “Why?”

In response to the lament of Uruk’s beleaguered people, the gods fashion a rival for Gilgamesh, another semi-divine being named Enkidu, who can match the fierce king tit for tat. In theory, a worthy opponent would keep Gilgamesh too busy to bother the city’s inhabitants anymore. As it happens, the two become fast friends, closer than brothers according to the text. They go on numerous adventures and accumulate much glory and fame. Their hubris, however, insults the gods, and at a meeting of the divine council it is determined that Enkidu must die. His death is neither swift nor heroic. The text notes that he dies in a less than courageous manner, wasting away slowly and reclining on a couch. He is denied a “man’s” death with sword in hand on the battlefield.

Enkidu’s death is a crisis moment for Gilgamesh. It precipitates an existential angst that overwhelms and debilitates him. For the first time the possibility of death enters his consciousness. His awareness of his own context is suddenly filled with ominous dread. He now has to choose how to respond. What will it be: fight or flight? Disoriented by the loss of his friend, Gilgamesh chooses to flee but only in order to procure what he needs to mount an attack. His opponent is mortality and the weapon he needs is in the possession of the only mortal man

ever granted immortality by the gods, a man by the name of Utnapishtim. But Utnapishtim lives very far away in a mysterious garden of delight frequented only by the gods. Fueled by his conviction that he is too great to suffer the fate of ordinary men, Gilgamesh undergoes an arduous and magical journey to arm himself with whatever knowledge Utnapishtim can share so that he may defeat death.

Over the course of his quest a transformation begins to occur. Gilgamesh is weakened and humiliated by the task so that he becomes a shadow of his former, formidable self. Just before he eventually finds Utnapishtim he receives some advice from Siduri, a goddess of wine. She counsels him that his quest is futile and that he should go home and care for a wife and for children. Having come this far, though, Gilgamesh is not about to give up, so he pushes on and confronts Utnapishtim. For his part, the immortal is thoroughly unimpressed with Gilgamesh's continued bravado and his now less-than-attractive physical appearance. As a result, Gilgamesh never does learn how to attain immortality, but Utnapishtim does give him something of a consolation prize. He tells him where to find a small plant that has magical restorative powers. It does not grant immortality, but whoever eats of it is made young again. Gilgamesh seems content with this. After finding the plant in question he heads back to Uruk, deciding to share it with the city elders before eating some himself. This detail is rather telling. It hints at the possibility that the tyrant king may be changing. Could it be that his concerns are beginning to expand beyond his own desires?

Not long after setting out Gilgamesh stops to refresh himself at a natural well. He lays down his prized possession to bathe in the cool water. Unseen in the depths below a serpent is roused by the scent of the magical plant. It rises up onto the bank whereupon it gobbles up the hard-won flora and is instantly transformed into a baby snake again. Gilgamesh is devastated.

He drops to his knees, tears streaming down his face. He cries out “Was it for this that I toiled with my hands, is it for this I have wrung out my heart’s blood? I have nothing.” One cannot help but feel for Gilgamesh. Heart-broken, he has lost the one glimmer of hope he had to face his greatest opponent. What happens next, though, leaves this particular reader uneasy, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. Almost nonchalantly Gilgamesh decides to go on home. There is no expression of rage against the snake or the gods. There is no “woe is me” pathos in the vein of the great Greek tragedies. There is no resolution moment in which Gilgamesh comes to realize and reconcile his mortality. It is as if he can do naught but acquiesce. I would argue that it is in this moment that he perceives the human condition at its bleakest and is dumbfounded.

But what has all this to do with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition? To begin with let us recall Tilley’s guiding criteria. The CIT has never been averse to adopting and reworking various elements from other traditions, be they practices, ideas, or stories. This ought to be especially true if such elements further enquiry into the enigma of human life. If the “both/and” emphasis within the tradition can inculturate the gospel as the mission spectrum expands, let us “baptize” the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. We do so not with a mind to improve it or to make it acceptable to read, but to make available its inherent wisdom. Additionally, it is of singular importance to Tilley that tradition is primarily a “how,” not a “what.” How we teach the *Epic* makes it possible to include it in the purview of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* communicates subtly, employing a masterful use of irony, that hallmark of all great art. Uncovering its subtleties requires a concerted effort on the part of the reader, a willingness to suspend the digital imagination and plug in the analogue. For me, the myth ranks among the greats because of the complexity of its characters and its unrelenting vision of a lack of order, sense, purpose, and justice in the cosmos. The Catholic tradition has its

fair share of complex characters, but it does not share the pessimism that drips from the pages of the *Epic*. That being said, however, we've all been there. Gilgamesh can be an "every person." His sense of frustration and confusion is ours.

The existential angst precipitated by the death of Enkidu is a sudden awareness of the immanence of the human condition. I would contend, though, that this angst had been with him from the beginning—as it is with all of us—but he sought to ignore its presence and smother its implications. Why does King Gilgamesh indulge in sex and violence? Could it be that these two physical activities raise him above his lingering one-third mortal self, albeit for just a short time. In them he loses himself and draws close to that which transcends; he approaches the divine. And for Gilgamesh, an in-between being much like the *adam* creature in Genesis, approaching the divine presents the possibility of wholeness and all that it represents. His conquests in the bedroom and on the battlefield provide some sense of validation, a momentary stay against chaos. While engaging in these activities he is free, and the latent angst is overpowered.

Enkidu was the one person close to being Gilgamesh's equal and therefore best able to silence the death knell. When he dies Gilgamesh can no longer hide from or drown out the awareness of what I call his "context." He gets an inkling of who he is in relation to the cosmic drama of life. The shadow of death finally eclipses his heart. But because of his nature and long years compensating he reacts childishly, violently taking out his frustrations on those around him and heading off to find Utnapishtim and a way out. Awareness of context demands a response. This is a key concern for me in RSCC104. How does one authentically respond to the common lot of humanity?

One can find many answers to this question in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, but, as Tilley reminds us, the CIT is not about providing answers as much as a means for asking

questions. It offers an abundance of resources for the serious-minded to begin dealing with ultimate concerns like death. But the awareness of context has to come first in order for an authentic response to follow. In every story we read in my class the main character(s) faces a crisis moment (or moments) followed by a moment of choice. The crisis moment reveals the context, which then necessitates a response. Some dreaded revelation marks a turning point. But, as Gilgamesh suggests to us, it is not necessarily a onetime experience. The *Epic* suggests a series of intrusions into its hero's consciousness that are ignored by wine, women, and song. He is aware of the lurking menace but because of his very nature he tries to compensate. Even as his quest for Utnapishtim begins a process of transformation he remains defiant. For instance, when the goddess Siduri tells him to go home and care for a wife and children in essence what she is offering is something of an antidote to the sting of death. Settling down and starting a family means growing up, it means giving up the selfish quest for eternal youth. This, the one piece of advice that offers some measure of peace with the possibility of joy and lasting accomplishment (i.e. children) he ignores.

It is not until the snake steals his prize that Gilgamesh finally gets it. His lack of defiance or determination to go back for another plant is suggestive of an awareness of the futility of his predicament. An awareness of his context prompts a response. This is one way we can understand the narrative from the point of view of the CIT. It is also a good starting point, for an awareness of the perception of futility is in the purview of the CIT, a tradition that also provides a means to begin responding authentically to such a perception.

Gilgamesh goes home a beaten man living in a gloomy and chaotic world, a sentiment that is at odds with the vision of the CIT. But there is one further subtle detail we should note. The final tablet in the Gilgamesh epic recounts the praises the citizens of Uruk heap upon their

now-deceased king. In one telling line we read “they laid out their offerings; his dear wife, his son, his concubine, his musicians, his jester, and all is household.” Could it be that there is some reason for hope in this story of a man screwed over by the universe to such an extent that he can find no strength and no words to respond? Could it be that Gilgamesh did, in the wake of his devastation, choose to take Siduri’s advice after all? In accord with the sense of universal hope constituent to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition just maybe there is a small glimmer of hope in this story. We cannot make too much of it, but the possibility exists that Gilgamesh may have found some measure of responding to the threat of mortality in the nurturing environment of family. At the very least, his story survives the death experience.

I always end the semester with a viewing and discussion of Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*.<sup>6</sup> For me it is the quintessential example of a modern day myth. The sweep and implications of the story are epic. In my experience, though, most students fail to appreciate the depth and subtlety of the drama. They see the movie as too dark, too complicated, too long. I once had a young man express to me that his impression of the movie was that it was two hours of his life he wished he could get back. A tad harsh, I felt. Granted, the film is oppressively dark, both cinematically and emotionally, but I have to admit that it is exactly these characteristics that I find almost diabolically appealing. Despite its lack of immediate appeal to my students I am not at all averse to making them watch it, sustained by the hope that its effects may linger and resurface at a time when they are more open to all that it has to offer.

As with Gilgamesh, *Blade Runner* is driven by a nascent chaos, a foreboding that despairs over an absence of justice, and the plot is filled with characters who have little control over their predicaments. The story is so rich that it can be understood in many different ways, but

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<sup>6</sup> My preferred format is the 1992 Director’s Cut rather than the original theatrical release. The later version removes the voiceover and adds, in my opinion, a more ominous atmosphere.

I assign it in my class and relate it to the CIT for three reasons: its ontological presentation of the human being, its suggestion of the inherent value of life, and its refusal to resolve the tension that constantly broils beneath the surface. As I proceed to explain what I mean I will be providing a simple synopsis for those who have not seen the film, but I would caution that spoilers abound and I encourage some quality time spent with the Director's Cut to more fully appreciate its subtleties.

The plot is quite straightforward. We are presented with a vision of the not-too-distant future in which overpopulation and environmental degradation have transformed Earth into a dark and dreary world. Those who fit the bill, i.e. are wealthy and healthy enough, can leave the planet and join what are called "Offworld" colonies, where life is, apparently, much better.

Advanced bioengineered androids developed by the Tyrell Corporation called Replicants have been employed as a kind of slave labor force in order to secure and build the infrastructures of these extraterrestrial colonies. These androids are almost indistinguishable from human beings. They look and think like everyone else, but they have the capacity to be far superior physically and, in some cases, mentally. Their weak link, that which identifies them as Replicants, is a lack of empathy and emotional immaturity. When an unspecified number of them rebel against their human masters in a bloody rebellion Replicants are banned from returning to Earth, and an elite police unit known as Blade Runners is created to hunt down and destroy any who do.

The film's protagonist is Rick Deckard, a retired Blade Runner who is called back into service to track down four Replicants (Zhora, Leon, Pris, and Roy) who are loose on the streets of Los Angeles. As a safety measure Replicants were manufactured with a shelf-life of only four years, after which their biomechanical systems shut down. Aware of their impending fate, the four Replicants return to Earth to gain access to the Tyrell Corporation and its genius founder

Eldon Tyrell, the man most responsible for their genetic design, in the hopes of increasing their lifespans. As the story unfolds the line between human and android becomes increasingly blurred. Particularly when Deckard meets Tyrell's latest and greatest creation, a Replicant named Rachael who has been implanted with the memories of Tyrell's niece. The consequence is that she has no idea that she is not really human. She believes she has a history; she remembers growing up, not being bioengineered in a laboratory. Deckard and Rachael are drawn to each other and develop something akin to "love" by the end of the film.

As the Replicants attempt to address the problem of their imminent demise by getting closer to Tyrell so Deckard is able to track them down and eliminate them. Each of their deaths is an emotional moment that draws the audience in and resonates with some chord deep within the human psyche. Deckard shoots Zhora in the back as she tries to flee from the master of her fate. It is bloody and violent, and we cannot help but sympathize as she crashes through shop windows decorated to resemble winter scenes complete with falling artificial snow. The spectacle of blood on pure white is doubly disturbing when we realize that if we listen closely we can hear her heart beat for just a few more seconds. Leon is shot from behind and through the head by Rachael just as he is about to kill Deckard, whom he has overpowered with his considerable strength. Like Leon, the audience has no idea it is coming, so this death from out of nowhere has a particularly jarring effect. The death of Pris is, perhaps, the most disturbing, though. Having cornered her in an abandoned building Deckard shoots her in the belly as she lunges for him. The wound is lethal but not immediately terminal. She collapses on her back screaming and writhing, beating her fists and feet on the floor much like a child throwing a tantrum. It is as if she rages against her fate, her failure to avoid it, and the unfairness of it all. Deckard is visibly affected by her torment and shoots her again, in part to put her out of her

misery but also, I suspect, to relieve himself from such a visceral reminder of what may lie in store for him.

The penultimate scenes of the film feature a showdown between Deckard and Roy, the leader and most dangerous of the Replicants, that forces the audience to consider what it is that defines humanity. Having returned from killing Tyrell after learning there was no possible way of reversing the genetically encoded four year death sentence, Roy finds Pris' lifeless body. In what I find to be a touching scene the emotionally stunted Replicant kisses her corpse and smears her blood on his face, as if desperately trying to keep her with him. In an ironic twist he then reverts to a primal state, a state most basic to life, and howls like a wolf as he begins to hunt her killer. Roy's monologue as he surely gains the upper hand over Deckard is also wonderfully ironic. He challenges the Blade Runner, "Aren't you the good man?" and again, "Show me what you're made of."<sup>7</sup> Not only do these jabs call into question Deckard's own ontological status, but they also resonate equally strongly with attentive audience members. Towards the end of the confrontation we learn that Roy's body is beginning to shut down. He knows his death is imminent, but it does not prevent him from overwhelming Deckard, who ends up hanging by his fingertips from the rooftop of a skyscraper apartment building. Deckard is helpless and about to fall to his death as Roy stands over him and remarks, "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave."<sup>8</sup> Here is where any pretense of distinction between android and human completely falls apart. Neither human nor Replicant is free from the specter of death.

Just as Deckard loses his grip and begins to fall Roy flashes out his hand and saves him, gently picking him up and placing him down again on the rooftop. Roy then sits down next to him and delivers what is for my money the greatest final speech a character has yet made on

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<sup>7</sup> *Blade Runner: The Director's Cut*, directed by Ridley Scott (1982; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.

<sup>8</sup> *Blade Runner: The Director's Cut*, directed by Ridley Scott.

film: “I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time like tears in rain. Time to die.”<sup>9</sup> Reproducing it here does not do the scene justice. Roy’s death is not violent; he simply closes his eyes and bows his head. But the image is so powerfully melancholic that we cannot help but feel for him. Here is an android despairing over the encroaching darkness. His words are his testament: I was alive, I was a part of connected experience. But is it any different for any of us? Roy finally admits to himself that he has always been alone and must acquiesce to an apparent meaninglessness of experience and an unavoidable death. He does not come to terms with the idea that his existence has not mattered, but he lets it go as if giving in to something beyond all control. Like Gilgamesh, at this moment he is most human.

*Blade Runner* forces the careful viewer to confront the question of what it means to be human. What is it, if anything, that defines us as something special, possessed of inherent value? Such questions, found in all great literature, feed the wellspring of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. *Blade Runner* infuses the complication of an advanced technology that is not recognized as human even though the Replicants are almost indistinguishable from them. One of the great debates concerning fans of the film is whether or not Deckard is actually human or a reprogrammed android. Considering your point of view, there does exist a substantial amount of circumstantial and implied evidence that suggests he may, in fact, be a Replicant. Although this has important implications, fixating on finding a definitive answer to this can distract from the overall point. The story cuts to the core of the CIT when it forces us to confront who we think we are, who we want to be, and how we respond to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. In

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<sup>9</sup> *Blade Runner: The Director’s Cut*, directed by Ridley Scott.

this regard, we have to consider the predicament in which the Replicants find themselves is no different from our own.

So why does Roy save Deckard's life? I think we can point to two important concerns that relate to my attempt to communicate the CIT in RSCC104. First, in some small way, all of Roy's "moments" will not be "lost in time" if his memory remains in the person of Deckard. For a short time only, perhaps, Roy will survive the death experience each time Deckard relives the unexpected turn of events. Again like Gilgamesh, Roy will leave a legacy of having confronted his own mortality. Secondly, could it be that in the face of the end of his own he begins to fully appreciate the value of life for life's sake? That it is better to have been alive than not? He can do nothing about his own death, but he can prevent death from claiming another victim in Deckard. Does the sacredness of life, all life, convince him to save Deckard at the last minute? Roy understands and teaches Deckard that none of us knows when we will draw our last breaths, but a meaningful way of dealing with that uncertainty is to value what we have while we have it and to seek to promote life in all of its forms. His act of mercy (if we can call it that) is doubly poignant if Deckard is also a Replicant. If Deckard is as manufactured as Rachael, then Roy knows that they are doomed and will have only a short time together. Yet, however much time they have left means there is the hope, the possibility, that they can achieve something like a meaningful life, or, at least, the illusion of it. They get the chance to write their own story, and perhaps they can create the kind of love that Roy was trying to grasp with Pris. In this way sparing Deckard is Roy's way of fighting back against oblivion.

At the same time, the audience does not leave the film fulfilled. Lots of things remain unresolved. We do not really know if Deckard is human or Replicant. We do not know if he and Rachael will be able to make a life for themselves. The final scene of the film has the two of

them entering an elevator, presumably now on the run from other Blade Runners since at least Rachael is a Replicant and therefore cannot be allowed to roam free. There is the suggestion that they will not be pursued, but we cannot be certain. We see the elevator doors close, and then the end credits begin. Even without this particular intrigue, though, the film does not let viewers off the hook. Where is the justice here? What is it that constitutes authentic being? Is there anything that separates human from Replicant? Such tension is the stuff of life, and the CIT operates within it. It demands we ask these questions, and it does not settle for one definitive answer but constantly reconsiders how we approach these problems. Life is complicated and uncertain, but the process that is the CIT provides something of a guide, a means of responding that is not exclusivist and always oriented toward authenticity.

This brings us back to the importance of narrative in RSCC104. We are a species that communicates through narrative. We enjoy telling and hearing stories. My students may enjoy reading some of our stories, but they all-too-frequently forget that they are part of their own narratives. It is my hope that our careful reading of Genesis, Augustine, *Blade Runner*, Gilgamesh, etc. provides them with certain tools with which they will be able to reflect upon their own “contexts.” This is exactly what I ask them to do for their capstone project in the course. It is an assignment many are loathe to do because I keep it fairly vague, which requires them to do some self-initiated thinking and work. The payoff, however, has enormous potential. If I can get them to consider who it is they are and where it is they have come from it prompts them to consider who it is they want to be and what it is for which they want to stand. This, I would argue, is a central concern of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and a vital component of the education we try to offer at Sacred Heart University. If understood as process the CIT

provides the means and the critical vantage point from which undergraduates at Catholic institutions can begin to consider the fundamental questions of human experience.