

Science and Faith at the Movies: “A.I.”

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A.I. Artificial Intelligence (2001)

Written and directed by Steven Spielberg, based on the short story "Supertoys Last All Summer Long" by Brian Aldiss.

A.I.: Artificial Intelligence, was an idea that the late great director Stanley Kubrick had been collaborating on with Steven Spielberg before Kubrick died. After his death, Spielberg was inspired to try to bring this original vision to the screen in honor of Kubrick. The result is a sci-fi fairy tale journey, a visually stunning, philosophically thoughtful examination of what it means to be human. But it is also a story that becomes an analogy for mankind’s quest for meaning and significance in transcendent notions like religion that demythologizes that quest into a materialistic enterprise of symbol creation rather than true spiritual reality.

The story begins with the not too distant future as a world that has flooded many coastal cities because of the polar ice caps melting due to greenhouse gases. Thus mankind has fewer resources which leads to population control. Robots are created to take the place of many more “mouths to feed” because somehow they’ve discovered a way to energize these robots with less resources than humans consume. Laws regulate the amount of humans that are allowed to be birthed, making us all a little bit more lonely.

We are then treated to a literal academic exposition of scientist, professor Hobby (William Hurt) for the Cybertronics corporation which spells out clearly for us just what the ethical issues are that the movie is going to attempt to solve. Professor Hobby explains that the pursuit of creating artificial beings has been a perpetual hunger for mankind. They may have achieved artificial intelligence, but he concludes that it all amounts to “toys” of mere physical stimulus response. What they need to do is to create a robot that can love, with genuine emotional reaction to other human beings. It is through this accomplishment of creating a “mecha” (robot) that loves “orgas” (humans) that they might transcend mere physical existence. He suggests that “love will be the key by which they acquire a kind of subconscious, never before achieved -- An inner world of metaphor, of intuition, of self-motivated reasoning, of dreams.” The corporation’s goal is to create a child robot that could fulfill the parents’ needs to be loved. But then the question is put to the professor, “If a robot could genuinely love a person, what responsibility does that person hold toward that mecha in return? It’s a moral question.” “The oldest one of all,” says the Professor. “But in the beginning, didn’t God create Adam to love him?”

And so the questions are set that the film will explore: What makes a “real” person? Is our consciousness transcendent of our brains and neuron impulses? Can a complex machine whose identity is reducible to physical and chemical properties transcend that identity by achieving metaphor, intuition and love? By referencing the Bible the storytellers also reveal that these are questions that reach into the very heart of our most cherished religious beliefs, questions of the value and dignity of human persons.

Twenty-two months later, the company has created their first child robot, and they have chosen one of the company’s employees to test it on, the perfect guinea pigs. Henry and Monica Swinton (Francis O’Connor) are a couple who have suffered the loss of their little boy to a permanent vegetative state in a comatose chamber where Monica reads to him daily and never is able to grieve her loss as science can keep him alive, but cannot bring him back. So the company offers a robot child, David (Haley Joel Osment), as a substitute for Monica’s child Martin. At first, Monica has a hard time accepting the offer, but he is so

lifelike and “present” that she chooses to initiate the imprinting sequence that will bind the robot to her forever in “love.” She suddenly becomes “mommy” to David, and they enter into a simulacrum of a real mother and child union.

When a miracle occurs and their son Martin comes out of his coma and back into their lives, a new rivalry is born between brothers (well, sort of brothers). Martin gives his mother a children’s book to read to them: *Pinocchio*, the story of a puppet who wanted to be a real boy. This becomes the obvious central metaphor throughout the film in David’s own quest to become a human being. The original *Pinocchio* was a morality tale about ethically good behavior and choices being the defining characteristics of a child worthy of love to their parents. In this reimagining, the Pinocchio quest is no longer merely an ethical question but an ontological one: Can a complex machine transcend its materiality to become a person of equal worth to a human? What makes human beings any different from highly complex mechanical devices? If we can create artificial intelligence, is our human intelligence any less “artificial”?

The human Martin and his friends, devious and mischievous as most young human boys are, play tricks on David that put them in trouble and even danger, causing Monica to bring back David to the manufacturer. The only problem is, she can’t do it because she has grown fond of David, and she knows they will destroy him as defective product. So she leaves him in the woods and tells him to never come back but to run away. So David concludes from his *Pinocchio* story that he too wants to become a “real live boy” so that Monica will love him. He reasons that if he can just find the Blue Fairy like the wooden puppet did in the story, she will make him into a real boy. Because he is a robot incapable of understanding the metaphor, he seeks it as literally true, which sets him on his quest.

Soon David meets Gigolo Joe (Jude Law), a “lover mecha” on the run after being falsely set up for the murder of one of his clients. David and Joe are caught by scrap dealers and brought to a “Flesh Fair: A Celebration of Life,” a sort of monster truck rally organized solely to destroy robots. One of the captive robots tells David, “History repeats itself. It’s the rite of blood and electricity.” These are the people who consider David and his like to be the denigration of human dignity. Their destruction is only “the demolition of artificiality.” They believe humans are more than machines and are therefore prejudiced against robots, in a manner made to look not unlike racism.

They find a ride to “Rouge City,” with a group of young lads in another Pinocchio analogy to “Pleasure Island,” the place of temptation. At “Our Lady of the Immaculate Heart,” a church in the center of this Sin City, Gigolo Joe tells David, “The ones who made us are always looking for the ones who made them. They go in, fold their hands, look around their feet, sing songs, and when they come out, it’s usually me they find. I picked up a lot of business on this spot.” Spiritual desire is a cover for physical pleasure. At the vendor Dr. Know’s knowledge emporium David pays money and receives answers from a carnival version of the Wizard of Oz. David asks questions to find the Blue Fairy and discovers that Professor Hobby is the one who knows how to make a robot into a real live boy. But the answer is a poem that concludes, “At the end of the world where the lions weep. There is the place where dreams are born.”

Now Joe’s materialist skepticism kicks in and he questions David, “What if the Blue Fairy isn’t real? They hate us you know. The humans, they’ll stop at nothing.” When David says that his mommy will love him, Joe retorts, “She loves you for what you do for her. As my customers love what it is I do for them. She does not love you, David. She cannot love you. You are neither flesh nor blood. You are alone now only because they are tired of you or want a younger model.” In this confession of mecha psychotherapy, Joe explains that humans hate robots, “because when the end comes, all that will be left is us.” In an ironic twist of the greener grass syndrome, humans want eternal life so badly they wished they could be like

robots and thus resent them for having that capacity. But David's faith is deep and wide, and he will not stop his search for the Blue Fairy. He commandeers a helicopter and finds his way to Manhattan, now mostly underwater, in search of "Mr. Hobby."

Following in the footsteps of the lead characters in *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner*, the robot boy David is not merely searching for the Blue Fairy to become human; he is also searching for his creator. But his creator tells him that his whole journey was the test to get robots to do more than programmed directions. "You found a fairy tale, and inspired by love, fueled by desire, you set out on a journey to make her real, and most remarkable of all, no one taught you how. Our test was a simple one: where would your self-motivated reasoning take you? To the logical conclusion: The Blue Fairy is part of the great human flaw to wish for things that don't exist, or to the greatest single human gift, the ability to chase down our dreams. And that is something no machine has ever done until you."

By finding and deciphering the abstract literary clue left at Professor Know's vendor machine, David was able to find his maker at "the end of the world, where the lions weep," which is the mythopoetic way of describing the scientific creator's lair in the flooded remains of Manhattan city. So David's ability to find meaning in myth, to symbolize what he does not understand into mythological constructs, to seek after that which cannot be seen, is what makes David a human person to the scientist. Humanity's spiritual quest is unveiled as an imminent symbol-creating enterprise rather than a transcendent symbol-discovering enterprise. We create myths or fairy tales in order to give meaning to our lives. Mythology here is the symbolizing of what we do not understand into larger-than-life, transcendent images. Thus David remembers that the first thing he saw upon his "birth" was an angelic bird figure with wings. We discover later that this apparent religious image was in fact the logo of the corporation that created him.

David is not satisfied with this notion of following a useful fiction of a "dream." He wants reality, and has an existential crisis of despair. He thought he was one of a kind, but now sees he is just one of many, the first of a kind, and that his creator was creating out of his own loss, after his own dead son. David casts himself into the sea in angst-ridden resignation. At the bottom of the ocean, he stumbles upon Coney Island, now underwater from the risen oceans, and prays to the Blue Fairy statue he finds in Pleasure Island Park to make him a real boy.

The statue, an analogous icon of the Virgin Mary, does not "answer" his prayers, and he remains in unbroken devout gaze and unsatisfied longing "trapped in a cage" until his batteries run out. This is a visual reference to the filmmaker's perception of humanity's tenacious, yet ultimately vain, religious quest. And that vanity of religion is further emphasized when David finally touches the Blue Fairy, that symbol of divinity, at the end of the movie, and it crumbles into dust. This is symbolic of what David's robotic partner Gigolo Joe had explained in the front of a church that sooner or later the women who go there become dissatisfied with their spiritual quest and end up in his physical arms for "real" affection and love.

In this movie religion and myth are reduced to natural explanations. There is no spiritual or transcendent aspect to our existence. Even the terms for the robots ("mechas") and humans ("orgas") reflect this reduction of life forms to mechanical or organic complexity. David seeks after the Blue Fairy to make him a real boy, which we all know is not going to happen because the Blue Fairy is a Disney construct. But this abstract belief compels him onward, with religious fervor, to find the myth as truth.

Two thousand years later, when all of humankind has died out and only machines remain, some highly advanced robots, looking very much like the popular conception of alien beings, are able to "resurrect" David (recharge his batteries) and even give him his dream of "resurrecting" his original organic "mother" from her DNA for one day in order to experience her love (more religious concepts naturalized).

As the alien telling the story explains, “I often felt a sort of envy of human beings, of that thing they call spirit. Human beings had created a million explanations of the meaning of life in art, in poetry, in mathematical formulas. Certainly human beings must be the key to the meaning of existence. But human beings no longer existed.” These advanced robots’ experiment to resurrect the human bodies long dead ultimately failed because once their individual space-time pathway had been used, it could not be re-used. But David hopes that the moment of time with his mother will last forever.

At the end of the day, when his mother is about to go to sleep and awaken nevermore, she tells David that she loves him and has always loved him. This finally satisfies David, and he is able to lie down and die with her in happiness, knowing that he is now human because he has loved and been loved. This final shot of him closing his eyes and being able to die is important because early in the movie it was established that David did not close his eyes to sleep because he didn’t have to sleep. The fact that he now closes his eyes is the evidence that he has become human and can die in peace as a human, having found his meaning. As the narrator explains, “For the first time in his life he went to that place where dreams are born.”

Some may find in *A.I.* an analogy to the religious notion of God creating human beings as creatures whose humanity is defined in being loved by their Creator as well as others. In the first scene of *A.I.* the scientist speaking to his class of students makes this very comparison of God creating Adam to love and be loved. But with all its religious imagery and references, *A.I.* is more fittingly a humanistic interpretation of our personal quest for meaning being found in loving and being loved by other people (because *there is no transcendent reality*), as well as our manufacturing of myth (including God) as useful fictions to construct “meaning” out of material. *A.I.* is a deconstruction of religious belief into mythical construct. Even in the final scene, in which David does meet the Blue Fairy, she is merely an illusion constructed by the advanced robots (with Meryl Streep’s voice) to meet David’s desire in his own terms rather than in terms of “reality.”

Symbols, Metaphors, and the Construction of Meaning

One of the issues that *A.I.* the movie raises is the idea that we live in a materialistic universe and therefore “meaning” is not objectively discovered in reality, but is subjectively constructed by highly complex machines as useful fiction to satisfy an eternally unmet longing. The notion of spirituality and personhood are also ways of signifying this human pursuit of the transcendent.

In one sense, I would affirm that we humans do create symbols and metaphors in our art and in our science. But this is because we are created in the image of God and therefore reflect his creativity, even as the movie suggests in the beginning. But where I think the movie veers away from the Biblical notion is in its materialism. Materialism by definition believes that all reality is reducible to material processes. In this view, all claims of transcendent reality such as the spiritual world or immaterial meaning must, by the faith of the materialist, be psychologized into *construction* of subjective meaning rather than *discovery* of objective meaning.

I would argue that reality is much more complex than this simplistic reduction of materialism. The Christian faith affirms both a material and an immaterial aspect to our being. True, we do not see the immaterial world, but our finite and fallible empirical senses are certainly not the ultimate authority for discerning all of reality. This would be the mistake of the thoroughly discredited logical positivists. Their own proposition of meaningful knowledge being empirically verified observations was not itself an empirically verified observation. Like Elisha’s servant, we all need to get a glimpse of the spiritual heavenlies that are all around us and full of life and reality (2 Kings 6:17).

Is our ability to create metaphor and dream a transcendent or imminent enterprise? Is it what makes us human? Metaphor or mythopoetic language can be a “meaning revelation” rather than a “meaning creation.” Meaning revelation includes the notion that there is an objective reality that is revealed to us through the deeper connections that metaphor makes in our being. These are not merely useful fictions or arbitrary constructs, but rather an actual form of truth discovery. This is not to say that all truth claims or metaphors are therefore true, because there can be mistakes, falsehoods and lies here just as there can be in empirical or philosophical claims. But it is to say that imagination is a means of discovering truth in a different way from empirical observation or philosophical reasoning. We seek to discover meaning, truth and reality through our senses, our minds, *and* our imagination. And sometimes the transcendent nature of truth or reality can be so beyond our sense faculties and rational limitations that only imagination can connect with it.

The inadequate nature of our material senses and fallible mental capacity to understand transcendence was illustrated in Jesus’ use of parables to describe the kingdom of God. Notice, he did not speak “directly” of what the immaterial kingdom was like; he used metaphor and analogy through parables. As I explain in my book, *Word Pictures: Knowing God Through Story and Imagination*:

Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God mostly through parables. And those parables communicated invisible reality in terms of visible, sensate and dramatic images and metaphors. To him, the Kingdom was far too deep and rich a truth to entrust to rational abstract propositions. He chose pearls, dragnets, leaven, mustard seeds, virgins, children, slaves, hired workers, vineyards, and buried treasure over syllogisms, abstraction, systematics or dissertations. And his usage of such metaphors and images was not a “primitive” form of discourse, as if ancient Jews were not sophisticated enough to understand abstraction. In fact, at the time of the writing of the New Testament, Israel was competently immersed in the Hellenistic culture that dominated the Middle East with its heavily abstracted thinking. Jesus could do abstraction. He chose not to.

It would be more accurate to suggest the other way around, that indeed, stories and parables may be superior means of conveying theological truth than propositional logic or theological abstraction. As scholar N.T. Wright suggests in *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 1992), “it would be clearly quite wrong to see these stories as mere illustrations of truths that could in principle have been articulated in a purer, more abstract form.” (p. 77) He reminds us that theological terms like “monotheism” “are late constructs, convenient shorthands for sentences with verbs in them [narrative], and that sentences with verbs in them are the real stuff of theology, not mere childish expressions of a ‘purer’ abstract truth.” (p. 78) Wright concludes that storytelling is in fact the way theology was done in both Testaments: “If Jesus or the evangelists tell stories, this does not mean that they are leaving history or theology out of the equation and doing something else, instead... [T]his is how Israel’s theology...found characteristic expression, we should not be surprised if Christian theology, at least in its early forms, turns out to be similar.” (p. 78)

So according to the Bible, our imagination is indeed a part of our identity as humans and a means of connecting with objective truth. But the question becomes, what is it that is doing the imagining or dreaming? Is it an immaterial entity or the mere state of brain function or is it both? That leads us to consciousness, which we will discuss in the conclusion of this paper.

Transcendent or Imminent Consciousness?

Another important issue raised by *A.I.* is the issue of consciousness and human identity. The movie seems to suggest that consciousness is a part of the inherent properties of matter, and that humanity can actually be achieved by a highly complex machine – a robot can become a human person in its pursuit of dreams. I certainly do not have the expertise or breadth of understanding to deal with the issue of consciousness and identity in its proper depth, so I will simply raise some issues. The mind-body debate has a long erudite history and the field of neurobiology has recently provided some game changing observations, but there is little to no consensus on this brain-bending issue. (I found this chart online that is a good expression of at least twelve different views addressing the question [What is consciousness?](#)).

One of the dominant views popular with Christians and other religious believers is “substance dualism” that believes spirit (or mind) and body are separate yet integrated entities that exist simultaneously yet within two different realms of reality, the immaterial realm of the spirit or mind and the material realm of the body. This view has strong Greek influences on it with its notion of a “ghost in the machine,” it has a tendency to the theological devaluation of the body, and I question its biblical support¹, but it is certainly a respectable view that provides a philosophical basis for human dignity and worth beyond mere molecules in motion.

Reductionist views more in line with the materialism of the movie, such as property dualism, functionalism or behaviorism, all tend to reduce consciousness/mind/spirit to brain function or physical properties. We’ve already discussed this philosophical interpretation above.

Some of the views that attempt to prioritize materiality without negating transcendence are emergent dualism and epiphenomenalism or non-reductive physicalism. In her book, *Bodies and Souls or Spirited Bodies*, Nancey Murphy, a Christian advocate of non-reductive physicalism rightly critiques the classical origin and nature of substance dualism and proposes what I consider to be a more biblical anthropology of human nature as being one entity with both immaterial and material dimensions to it. She quotes James Dunn, “in simplified terms, while Greek thought tended to regard the human being as made up of distinct parts, Hebraic thought saw the human being more as a whole person existing on different dimensions.”²

She affirms a physicalist view that material is the substrate of our existence, but then suggests that human beings achieve transcendence by having higher human capacities that emerge out of material complexity to such a degree that they become non-reductive to the physical matter from which they emerged. True, there is bottom-up causation of the brain, but there is also top-down causation from the whole that is greater than its parts. In this way, she seeks to avoid the determinism of a strictly materialist or physicalist reductionism. In some ways this view may comport with the view in *A.I.* but is not without its problems, one of which is pointed out by substance dualists J.P. Moreland and Scott Rae, namely, that if the self is not an immaterial unchanging entity, then it is has no unity of personal identity through time and change, the very thing little robot David was seeking for.³ He would never be the same “real live boy” to be loved.

Modern advances in neurobiology are opening new vistas of conversation, but it is always important to remember that all empirical observations, including those of brain processes, will always be guided by philosophical pre-commitments that determine interpretation of the evidence. No matter what a materialist measures he will never acknowledge immaterial reality because his faith commitment to the pre-observational philosophy of materialism will not allow him to consider the possibility of an immaterial world with immaterial entities. I point this out because it is always the “religious believer” that is accused

of circular reasoning or “arbitrary faith” in the face of evidence. The point is that we all look at the world through a worldview that not only determines what we do see and do not see, but what we *can* see and *cannot* see. The robot David was a material entity in search of a soul or human personhood, the very thing that he could not possibly find because it cannot be reduced to his mechanical parts or human construction.

What this is all about is the issue of what makes us human and what gives us dignity or value. The notion that our “soul” is what makes us human or special is part of the problem. For as other articles on the BioLogos website indicate, the Bible says that humankind is valuable because it is created in the image of God. But the ancient Near Eastern concept of “image of God” in the Bible is not about having a spirit “soul” or a “ghost in a machine.” It is about being given the rule of dominion and stewardship as God’s representatives on the earth. ([“What Does the Image of God Mean?”](#) by Peter Enns) So the desire to maintain an immaterial entity or “soul” may not be as necessary to the defense of human value and dignity as some religious folk suspect. The Hebrew definition of worth seemed to lie in role rather than substance. Man in “God’s image” is not as material or immaterial entity but as authority or representative agency. So while I affirm immaterial reality, I am not so sure that it is the foundation of our personhood in God’s image. Having a soul is not what makes us unique or valuable, for in the Bible animals have souls too, but having a relationship with our creator is.

Koheleth, the Preacher had a dilemma like this himself. For in his moments of doubt he too struggled with whether or not man is anything more than a mere beast without transcendence.

I said to myself concerning the sons of men, “God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts.” For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth? (Ecc. 3:18-21)

Yet at the end of his existential search for meaning, Koheleth concluded that man’s quest for eternity could only be satisfied in a relationship with the living God, not in having a soul or in dreaming or creating metaphors.

He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end. The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil. (Eccl. 3:11; 12:13-14)

NOTE: Recommended book that addresses the mind-body problem from different Christian viewpoints that interact with one another in debate: [In Search Of The Soul: Four Views Of The Mind-body Problem](#), edited by Joel B. Green and Stuart L. Palmer, Intervarsity Press, 2005.

Notes

1. “The Greek versus the Hebrew View of Man.”
2. Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, Cambridge University, 2007, p 21.
3. J.P. Moreland & Scott B. Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature & The Crisis in Ethics*, Intervarsity Press, 2000, p 114-115.