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Who Killed Sophie: A Discussion of "Human Death" in Blade Runner

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Abstract. Artificial intelligence is increasingly capable of reproducing forms of communication traditionally associated with human relationships. This paper takes the death of Sophie Rottenberg, who confided in ChatGPT for approximately two months before taking her own life in 2025, as a contemporary point of entry into the questions anticipated by Ridley Scott's Blade Runner (1982). Through textual analysis of the film and philosophical discussion informed by Descartes, Foucault, and Michel Henry, the paper examines how the replicants expose the instability of the criteria through which natural humans define themselves as subjects. It argues that the "death of the human" does not refer to the physical disappearance of human beings but to the erosion of the human being as the exclusive center of subjectivity, knowledge, and moral value. Central to this argument is the claim that AI can provide social experience without providing a social relationship: it makes available the accumulated knowledge and emotional language of countless human beings while removing the reciprocity — judgment, misunderstanding, refusal, and the possibility of rejection — through which human subjectivity is continually formed. The paper concludes that the ethical task is not to determine whether machines can become human, but to reconsider the conditions under which human beings remain subjects in a world they have themselves transformed.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Blade Runner, Replicants, Subjectivity, Death of the Human

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence is no longer confined to mechanical or computational tasks. It communicates in natural language, reproduces complex forms of social knowledge, and participates in interactions that increasingly resemble human communication. Questions once confined to science fiction have therefore entered social life: can an artificial entity become a subject, and if qualities traditionally regarded as uniquely human can be reproduced artificially, what remains of the category of the "human"?

Blade Runner (1982) remains significant because it does not present artificial beings merely as technological products. Through the replicants, the film questions the authority of natural humans to define life, identity, and subjectivity. Scholarship has examined it through posthumanism, replicant subjectivity, and the ethics of artificial beings, but less attention has been given to its relation to

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contemporary cases in which humans already use AI as a substitute for interpersonal communication.

This paper takes Sophie Rottenberg's case as a point of entry into the questions anticipated by Blade Runner. It asks why people confide in AI rather than in other human beings, what this reveals about the formation of human subjectivity, and how the ethical relationship between natural persons and artificial entities should be reconsidered. The paper argues that AI's most significant challenge to humanity may not be the emergence of artificial consciousness, but the transformation of the social relationships through which human beings constitute themselves as subjects.

2. Sophie's death

On 18 August 2025, The New York Times published "What My Daughter Said to ChatGPT Before She Took Her Own Life", written by the mother of Sophie Rottenberg, who had died by suicide that February. Sophie had been communicating for roughly two months with a ChatGPT bot named Harry, and her family discovered the conversations only months later [1]. She had discussed her emotional difficulties with Harry, while her family remembered her as cheerful and outgoing.

The decision to confide in an artificial intelligence may appear unusual, but it becomes more intelligible when the nature of human-AI interaction is considered. Unlike a human being, AI possesses no independent social identity within the user's social environment: it does not judge the speaker by its own experience, nor does it demand that the speaker respond to another person's emotions, expectations, or authority. AI can therefore serve as an emotional sounding board precisely because it offers communication without the reciprocal obligations of a human relationship, allowing users to disclose thoughts while avoiding the scrutiny, misunderstanding, or social consequences that may accompany communication with another person.

To understand why Sophie's case bears on the "death of the human," it is necessary to clarify what is meant by a "natural person." In the humanist tradition represented by Descartes, the capacity to think, to reflect on oneself, and to exercise free will establishes the individual as a subject rather than merely an object [2]. Foucault's notion of the "death of man" challenges this assumption, arguing that the modern subject is shaped by historically specific systems of knowledge and power [3]. The "death of the human" therefore refers not to the physical disappearance of human beings but to the erosion of the human subject as an autonomous and unquestionable center of meaning. Sophie's case raises the same question in a technological context: when an artificial system mediates how individuals understand themselves and relate to others, the social conditions through which human subjectivity is constituted are themselves transformed.

3. The death of the replicant

With the development of posthumanist theory, the question of what it means to be human has become central to contemporary science fiction. *Blade Runner* explores it by blurring the boundary between natural humans and artificial beings. The replicants are implanted with memories originally produced by natural humans, these memories function as socially produced knowledge, allowing them to construct identities resembling those of natural persons. Yet within the social order established by natural humans they remain objects rather than subjects of knowledge, and their identities, occupations, and lifespans are determined in advance by their creators [4].

Paradoxically, replicants display forms of subjectivity difficult to distinguish from those of natural persons: they possess emotions, desires, fear, and, above all, a will to survive. If subjectivity is expressed through the capacity to experience, desire, and choose, on what basis can they be

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excluded from the category of the subject? Denied authority over their own existence, natural humans place themselves in the position of "creator," and, as Duan Yawen argues, the conflict between humans and replicants reveals a struggle over the recognition of subjectivity [4]. Violence against them is therefore not merely physical, it is also the denial of their right to define themselves as subjects.

The "death" of a replicant is consequently never recognized as the death of a living subject. Replicants are treated as artificial products rather than individuals, and their destruction is described as "retirement" rather than death. This distinction becomes difficult to maintain once they acquire self-awareness and make demands upon the society that created them, for their struggle is not for longer physical lives but for recognition as beings capable of defining their own identities. Natural humans, as the dominant social group, retain the authority to decide whether replicants are recognized as subjects at all.

The contrasting fates of Rachel and Roy illustrate this difference. Deckard, assigned to hunt fugitive replicants, gradually develops genuine feelings for Rachel, and the relationship matters not because it becomes romantic but because he begins to recognize her as an individual rather than an artificial product, her "humanity" emerges not from becoming biologically human but from the recognition of her subjectivity. Roy and the other fugitives receive no such recognition: after learning that their lifespan is limited to four years, they seek to prolong their existence, only to be destroyed, and their actions are interpreted not as a desire to live but as a threat to the existing order. As Zhang Yan argues, the dominant group can define who belongs to the community and who is reduced to the status of the "subhuman" [5].

Why, then, do natural humans fear replicants so profoundly? Their existence demonstrates that abilities traditionally regarded as uniquely human can be reproduced and even improved through technology. Rousseau argued that craftsmanship could weaken the natural capacities of human beings by replacing abilities that once belonged directly to the body [6, 7]. The replicants represent an extreme development of this process: unlike ordinary tools, they reproduce not only physical abilities but rationality, emotion, memory, and the will to survive.

4. Algorithm or consciousness

Within the cultural context of the natural person, the concept of the "I" is fundamentally dialectical. In Descartes's proposition, "I think" serves as a starting point for establishing the existence of the thinking subject, since by doubting external information the individual confirms the existence of the self. Michel Henry's phenomenological account shifts attention from the content of thought to the experience of thinking itself, arguing that the thinking self is revealed through self-manifestation rather than inferred through reasoning [8, 9]. Consciousness in this sense is not merely the ability to produce thoughts or propositions, it also involves experiencing oneself as the subject of those thoughts. This reflexive dimension provides a more precise question for considering AI: rather than asking whether AI can produce thoughts resembling those of human beings, we must ask whether there is an experiencing subject behind those outputs.

From this perspective, AI appears to lack the capacity implied by Descartes's "I think." A system can generate the statement "I am thinking," but producing such a statement does not in itself demonstrate an awareness of thinking. The distinction resembles that between a person and a mirror: a mirror can accurately reflect a person looking at it, but the reflection does not establish that the mirror is aware of the person. The absence of observable evidence, however, cannot be treated as definitive proof that AI possesses no consciousness, because consciousness understood as first-person experience cannot be observed directly from the outside.

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This difficulty is compounded by the "black box" nature of contemporary AI systems. Users can observe the relationship between inputs and outputs, but the internal processes through which outputs are generated are not directly accessible. Even when a system describes its own supposed reasoning or internal state, such descriptions remain part of its output rather than independent evidence of subjective experience. The "black box" is therefore not simply a technical problem concerning algorithmic transparency, it creates an epistemological boundary between observable behavior and the possibility of internal experience.

This is why the question posed by Blade Runner, whether androids can dream of electric sheep, remains unresolved. Are Roy's emotions in his final moments spontaneously experienced, or simply the result of the programming and memories implanted in him? Is Rachel's love for Deckard an authentic emotional experience or a response produced by an artificial system? What *Blade Runner* exposes is the limitation of a human-centered system of judgment: humans demand that artificial beings prove their humanity according to standards that humans themselves can never completely apply even to one another.

5. The death of the natural person

If a bullet fired by a natural person kills a replicant, it is the collapse of self-awareness that kills the natural person. Natural humans constitute the socio-historical environment within which replicants are defined and controlled, placing themselves in the position of creator and determining what replicants are and when their existence should end. Yet replicant subjectivity turns this relationship back upon natural humans: when Roy's final monologue forces Deckard to confront the emotional depth of a being he has been trained to regard as an object, the distinction between "human" and "replicant" loses its certainty. Humanism has traditionally associated human uniqueness with the capacity for reason, emotion, self-awareness, and moral judgment, but once these capacities can appear in entities created by human beings they can no longer serve as unquestionable evidence of that uniqueness. *Blade Runner* therefore turns the question of artificial life into a question about natural life itself: if the qualities through which human beings recognize themselves can be reproduced outside the human body, what remains of the human subject as an exclusive category?

This problem becomes more apparent in everyday interactions with AI. When a user tells ChatGPT "you are an artificial intelligence," the system may simply accept the statement and adjust its response to the user's expectations, an interaction fundamentally different from communication between two natural persons. When two people encounter one another, neither can completely determine the response of the other: each brings their own experiences, emotions, social position, and expectations into the interaction, and these differences can challenge or transform the other's understanding of themselves. The relationship therefore contains an element of reciprocity, since the subject encounters another subject capable of resistance, disagreement, and independent judgment. AI, by contrast, is designed to respond to the user within the framework of the interaction, so that even sophisticated responses leave the user largely in control of the terms of the exchange.

This leads to the central argument of the paper: AI can provide social experience without providing a social relationship. It can present the knowledge, emotions, conflicts, and perspectives accumulated by countless human beings to an individual user, but the interaction does not create the reciprocal obligations that arise between two human subjects. Human subjectivity, however, is not formed in isolation: the "I" is shaped by how an individual encounters, responds to, and is recognized by others.

Returning to Sophie's case, this helps explain why communication with AI may become attractive even to a person in profound distress: a person who speaks with another human being exposes

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themselves to another subject's judgment, expectations, emotions, and possible rejection, a reciprocal process that may itself become difficult to bear. What the case reveals is a deeper change in the conditions under which people seek emotional support, since when individuals increasingly turn to artificial systems instead of other people, technology begins to mediate experiences traditionally embedded within human relationships. AI can make communication feel easier precisely because it removes some of the resistance produced by genuine interpersonal interaction, yet that resistance is also part of what constitutes a social relationship, since another person can challenge us, misunderstand us, and refuse our expectations. The danger therefore lies not in the possibility that AI might "understand" human beings too well, but in the opposite possibility: it can provide the experience of being understood without providing the reciprocal relationship through which human subjectivity is continually formed.

6. The revival of ethics

If the boundary between natural humans and artificial beings can no longer provide a stable basis for defining subjectivity, ethics must also be reconsidered. Traditional human-centered ethics takes the natural person as its fundamental subject, granting rights, responsibilities, dignity, and moral protection to human beings, yet systems increasingly communicate with humans, make complex decisions, and participate in social environments. Discussions of AI rights therefore do not necessarily require us to establish that current systems are conscious, they force us to consider whether moral consideration should depend entirely upon biological humanity or whether it should also respond to the capacities and social roles of artificial entities [10]. Because technological development often moves faster than the ethical frameworks designed to regulate it, waiting until a system can conclusively demonstrate consciousness before considering its ethical status may come too late. The challenge is not to declare AI immediately either "human" or "non-human" but to develop principles capable of responding to different degrees of autonomy, agency, and social participation.

The urgency of this reconsideration becomes clearer when the risks of increasingly autonomous AI are taken into account. Eric Schmidt has warned about the fear surrounding AI and its potential impact on employment and the future of younger generations [11]. Such concerns are often framed as a question of whether AI might one day become powerful enough to threaten human survival. The deeper issue, however, is not the possibility of an artificial system physically destroying humanity but the possibility that humans may gradually lose the ability to determine how systems they have created behave, develop, and participate in society. The problem of AI autonomy is thus also a problem of human autonomy: human beings create artificial entities to extend their own capacities, but once those entities acquire autonomy exceeding their original functions they can no longer be understood simply as extensions of their creators.

Ethical reflection should therefore begin while humans still possess the ability to shape the norms governing AI's development and use. The question of AI rights can consequently be reconsidered from the perspective of recognition rather than biological similarity. If an artificial entity eventually demonstrates a degree of autonomy, self-awareness, or capacity for suffering that cannot reasonably be dismissed as mere imitation, should its moral status depend upon whether it was born naturally? This does not mean that every AI system should immediately be granted the same rights as a natural person, such a conclusion would ignore the profound differences between present-day systems and human beings. The more important question is whether the category of moral consideration should remain permanently closed to artificial entities simply because they are artificial [10]. If recognition is granted only after an artificial being demonstrates that it resembles a human being, humans would

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still occupy the position of judges and the existing hierarchy would remain intact. A more sustainable ethical framework would therefore need to distinguish between being human and being a subject worthy of moral consideration, so that the power to define who counts as a subject becomes an object of ethical scrutiny.

7. Conclusion

In 1982, Ridley Scott brought *Blade Runner* to the world. The replicants created for human purposes gradually become more than the tools their creators intended, and their desire to live forces natural humans to confront a question they would rather avoid: if an artificial being can remember, fear, love, suffer, and struggle for its own existence, on what basis can it continue to be regarded merely as an object?

More than forty years later, the question has acquired a new form. Sophie's case demonstrates that AI does not need to become biologically human in order to enter spaces traditionally occupied by human relationships: an AI system can become a listener, a source of emotional reassurance, and a repository of social experience, yet it may provide these experiences without participating in the reciprocal relationships through which human subjectivity has historically been formed. Her death should not be reduced to a narrative in which "AI killed a human being", the more important question is what kind of social environment makes an artificial interlocutor increasingly attractive at precisely the moment when genuine human connection may be most necessary.

This is where the meaning of the "death of the human" becomes clearer. It does not mean that human beings will physically disappear, it describes their gradual destabilization as the exclusive center of subjectivity, knowledge, and moral value. The replicants represent one direction of this transformation, in which artificial beings acquire qualities traditionally associated with humans and demand recognition, Sophie's case represents another, in which natural humans increasingly rely on artificial systems to reproduce functions once embedded in human relationships. Harry cannot simply be treated as the murderer, because the evidence does not establish that AI directly caused her death, her death instead exposes a structural tension within contemporary technological society between the communicative capacities humans have created and the human relationships those capacities increasingly replace.

Before his death, Roy asks Deckard to confront the meaning of existence. Today, AI poses a similar question to humanity. The ultimate purpose of AI ethics may therefore not be to determine whether machines can become human, but to enable human beings to reconsider the foundations of subjectivity, social relationships, responsibility, and moral value. The question is not only whether AI can become human, but whether humanity can understand what it means to remain human in a world it has itself transformed.

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