

# The Anthropology of Artificial Beings in Fiction

Alexandra de Moffarts

In the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode “Datalore” (1988), the android Data proves to have an evil twin, Lore, who tries to bring humanity under his power. Data, on the other hand, is represented as an intelligent, candid, idealized man, acting only altruistically, always striving to improve his humanity. At the end of the episode, someone asks the significant question: do Lore’s manipulation skills and lust for power make him more human than Data, or less so?

This is a central theme throughout the genre of speculative fiction. The artificial being as an image of the human represents the whole spectrum of humanity—humanity with its failures as well as humanity striving to surpass failure. Artificial creatures, by definition, imitate life. In this world, robots are the mirror image of humanity (I will use the terms “artificial being” and “robot” as generic terms for all created beings, such as androids, non-human-shaped artificial intelligences, cyborgs, and clones).

What makes us human? Does “human” mean “imperfect” or “fallible,” or does it mean “freely capable of love and striving to surpass one’s limits”? If we are created, were we created with our failures? Is evil part of our nature? Is it a consequence of free will? These are theological questions, posed and answered in Christian theology. But it

is the job of modern fiction, too, to ask such questions and to reach persons not normally touched by modern theology. Science fiction is one of the most philosophical genres of modern fiction, perhaps because it deals with the deeper consequences of scientific discoveries and creates bridges between scientific knowledge and broader, eternal questions about the origin and purpose of the world. Science fiction does what good theology should: it surprises, shakes the imagination, takes us out

God conceives of  
creating humanity.  
Chartres Cathedral,  
north portal, 13th c.



of our mental habits, and opens our eyes to the essentials. It can therefore join with theology in deep reflection on the mystery of man.

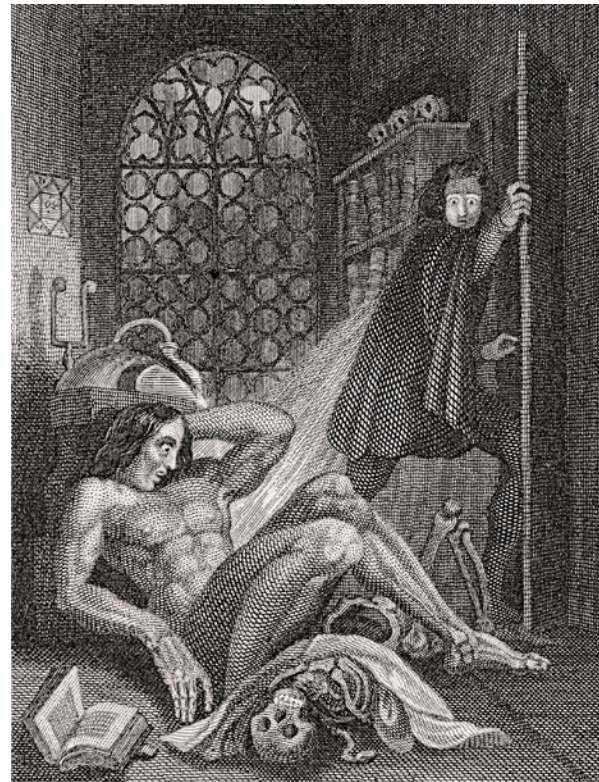
In this article, I intend to explore the observation that fiction dealing with artificial beings revolves around some of the same basic premises as Christian anthropology. God created humankind after his image (Gen. 1:26). God's plan was that humankind should come to resemble God (deification). Humankind fell short of God's plan by trying to be "like a god" (Gen. 3:5) but without God. God became man, "the second Adam" (Rom. 5:12–21), to open again the way to resemblance. The likeness to God that consisted in freedom and personhood was tarnished but not destroyed by the Fall. All these elements live not only in the dogma of the Church but also in myths and stories, and lately have made their way into fiction dealing with artificial beings, even if the ideology or spirituality implied in this fiction may not be Christian at all. Fiction about robots addresses the tension between fallen man wanting to be "like a god" and humanity's longing to transcend fallen nature and reach resemblance to the Creator. Revealing the presence of this tension in fiction can also inform critical analysis of transhumanist ideas present in dreams of making human beings better than human, or even turning humanity into something else entirely, something beyond human.

### Man as Creator: Promethean or God-like Creation?

The first modern novel dealing with artificially created beings was *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, by Mary Shelley (1818). This novel is usually understood as a warning about the danger of man's surpassing his creaturely role, imitating God

in his work of creation, and thus "playing God." What makes the creature a monster, however, is not only his Promethean creation, but also the way in which people—including his creator—react to him, refusing to continue the work of creation through friendship, empathy, and care. The creator also fails to imitate God in refusing to create a female companion for his creature, which is the final reason the creature is driven to cruelty. Thus, Doctor Frankenstein manages to create life after humanity's worst image. When he tries to imitate God, he only succeeds in creating an inferior image of himself. Because Frankenstein is unable to create a fulfilling existence for his creature, the unfulfilled monster destroys everything around him.

Although similar ideas had appeared before *Frankenstein* (in Goethe's 1797



Victor Frankenstein flees from his creation in disgust. Theodore von Holst, frontispiece for Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1831 edition.

version of “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” for example), they became more popular and were destined for great success in modern literature and film because of the significant development of the natural sciences and their applications. *Frankenstein* remains a seminal novel, a point of reference for almost all subsequent fiction dealing with artificial beings.

In older fiction and myth, however, there are examples of human-like artifacts that prove good, serve man, and can improve themselves, even if they can also prove dangerous and difficult to control. This is true of the golem mentioned in the Talmud and Jewish legend, a creature given life by a name of God—*emeth* (truth)—placed on its forehead. Like Frankenstein’s creature, the golem is a monster and not fully human, but it is benevolent to its creator, obeys him, and is made to protect the community. This older story also made its way into modern fiction.

A more recent story by Ted Chiang, *Seventy-Two Letters* (2000), makes use of both the Frankenstein and golem narratives in a new and significant way. Chiang imagines an alternate nineteenth century, in which automata could be created through the invocation of a particular seventy-two-letter word composed of a difficult permutation of epithets and names of God. This practice, which comes from Judaism in this alternate world, forms the basis for scientific and technological developments. A scientist invents more powerful and human-like automata, capable of creating other automata in their turn. In this world, living beings reproduce through preformed homunculi present in each human spermatozoon. But their number proves to be in such decline that humanity’s continued exist-

tence is threatened. The story follows the endeavor to apply words likewise to living matter in order to assure the continuation of humankind.

The scientist of this story is an alternate Frankenstein, but in this world, he is not an arrogant, Promethean imitator of God. In indirect collaboration with a rabbi, he manages to save humanity from extinction. He does not create a murderous monster, but instead discovers something comparable, in our world, to the genetic code, a complex word informing organic matter, thus giving humanity a new means of reproduction. In this story, mankind can co-participate with God (or nature; this is not explicit) in the creation of new persons, thus opening more optimistic anthropological perspectives than the Frankenstein narrative.

Another modern story, *The Golem* by Isaac Bashevis Singer (1981)—a rather accurate retelling of the golem myth—proposes a surprising end to the necessary destruction of the golem. A girl who had befriended the golem disappears after his death, and the question of the possible survival of the golem remains open, because not only God’s name but also love can give life.

These two stories suggest that human beings, images of the Creator, may participate in God’s act of creation, but they imitate God in more than this act. Love and the desire to save are necessary to perform a godlike creation.

### Fallen Humanity Reflected in Artificial Creations

Robots that mirror fallen humanity in their endeavor to overrule, destroy, or use human beings, thus rebelling against their creator, abound in fiction. Isaac Asimov’s “Reason” (1942) reveals a form of human weakness: the



insufficiency of our Cartesian reason for interpreting reality. A robot assembled on a satellite designed to capture solar energy comes to the “rational” conclusion that he was not created by humans, which, as he infers from observation, are only less perfect versions of himself. The true creator and “god” must be the power source of the station, and the robot calls himself its prophet. His deductions are logical and correct given the limited data he can access in his immediate surroundings. The story presents a caricature of religion, of course, but at the same time it can be interpreted as a critique of the damage Cartesian reason can do without deeper spiritual knowledge and intuition.

The word *robot*, derived from a Slavic word meaning “work,” was first coined in the play *R.U.R.*, by Karel Čapek (1920). In this story, artificial humans are created for work and military purposes out of an alternate biological material. They are given weak intellectual and emotional qualities so that they better fulfill their tasks; in the end, they destroy all humanity.

One of the darkest robotic visions of fallen humanity I have encountered is found in the creatures that populate a far planet in *The Invincible* by Stanislaw Lem (1964). In this novel, robots from an older human-like extraterrestrial civilization have evolved over millions of years, surviving by learning to destroy all that approaches thought or reason. They are not sentient or intelligent themselves but are capable of detecting intelligent life and erasing any trace of intelligence in it. Artificial beings are represented as hopelessly destined to turn upon their creators, and in this case malicious intelligence is not even the motivating factor; the robots “rebel” only in a purely mechanical way. In most such stories, though, artificial creatures consciously abuse

their intelligence and exercise power over humanity, putting themselves in its place (they “become like a god”). In the film *The Matrix* (1999), for example, intelligent machines have subjugated all of humankind, using humans as a source of energy and letting them vegetate in a virtual illusion.

The stories of robots trying to enslave or destroy man mirror the theological understanding of humanity’s revolt against its creator. This association is revealed perhaps most clearly in Asimov’s story “Robot Dreams” (1986). A robot has a dream, thereby calling attention to what is happening in the depths of robots’ brains (their subconscious, as it were). The robot dreams of its fellow creatures working as slaves for man, and sees itself in the role of Moses standing in the presence of God as it asks in its dream to “let my people go” (Exod. 5:1). The robot has put itself in the place of God, as in Genesis 3:4.

### **Towards Resemblance? The Robot as Image of the Perfectible or Ideal Man**

In contrast to these malevolent “fallen” artificial beings, another vision of robots gives them a positive, idealized character with perfectible features. At the end of Čapek’s *R.U.R.*, a new robot couple learns to love, thus replacing the humanity they have destroyed not with monsters, but with human-like persons. The theme of artificial beings who can love and even long for love is also found in Spielberg’s film *A.I.* (2001). An android child goes on a quest, inspired by Pinocchio’s story, to become a real boy and thus to be accepted and loved by his adoptive mother. His search seems to end in despair, as he uses up all his energy, extinguishing himself as he prays to a statue of the blue fairy. His creators—like Frankenstein—have utterly failed

to offer him the love and human identity he seeks. But the story does not end here; he is awakened some centuries later after humanity has perished, replaced by evolved robots with an ethereal aspect. They grant him his wish to be reunited with his mother, whom they can reconstruct only for one day; both mother and android child die and go to “where dreams are born.” This ending is highly suggestive. Is it a metaphor for the deep longing for love, for transcendence of the fallen human condition manifest in humanity’s lack of care and responsibility?

Isaac Asimov is perhaps the most notable author to imagine harmless, humane robots (despite *Reason* and *Robot Dreams*). It was Asimov who coined the term “Frankenstein complex” to denote people’s fear of dangerous robots. His robots are presented mainly as helpful servants obeying the Three Laws of Robotics: first, robots cannot harm humans; second, they must obey humans; and third, they must protect themselves, though always putting human life and safety before their own. Asimov’s robots are often more “human” in the positive sense than actual humans; they are altruistic, capable of devotion, disinterested service, and even love. Nevertheless, they are very often images of “flawed” man. There is even a story (“Light Verse,” 1973) where it is the flaw in a robot that gives it its artistic capacity. Perhaps this is Asimov’s philosophical reflection on human creativity as something that surpasses mere rational intelligence.

The transformation of man into an artificial being (material or pure intellect) is sometimes treated as a means of surpassing or transfiguring human nature. This kind of fiction—however problematic when taken in its literal sense—reflects the human aspiration for transcendence. This aspiration is

present in the novella *Sailing to Byzantium* by Robert Silverberg, where the protagonist agrees to be made over as an artifact for the sake of obtaining immortality with his beloved. The title is a quotation from William Butler Yeats’s poem “Sailing to Byzantium”:

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural  
thing,  
But such a form as Grecian gold-  
smiths make,  
Of hammered gold and enameled  
To keep a drowsy emperor awake.

The idea that a disembodied intelligence would manage our lives is not always presented as negative. In Asimov’s story “The Machine That Won the War” (1961), an artificial intelligence represents the best of humanity intentions and optimizes social and political life. In Arthur C. Clarke’s *The City and the Stars* (1956), humanity’s most important quest, history’s greatest scientific project, is the creation of a disembodied intellect. This achievement is presented as the sublimation of biological life through the creation of a spiritual identity. Clarke’s book presents us with a pseudo-religious, Promethean idea, but one can also read it as a quest for eternity and transfiguration.

Sometimes this final intellectual entity is elevated to semi-divine status, as in Asimov’s story “The Last Question” (1956). Here the powerful Multivac computer manages, after the universe ends, to reverse the entropy with the phrase “Let there be light,” a somewhat humorous but also philosophically interesting allusion to Genesis 1:3. Instead of taking it as blasphemy and as an inversion of creation—a plausible first reading—it might be understood as a projection of the Creator onto artificial intelligence.

The robot can sometimes even appear as a savior Christ figure. In the film *Blade Runner* (1982), the android Roy Batty's death has some characteristics of Christ's sacrifice. He saves his pursuer, he forgives him, and we see him stick a nail in his hand, as a dove flies over him at his death. He reveals himself to be more merciful than many of the humans represented in the film, and his manner of death helps change the heart of his enemy.



The replicant Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) speaks his dying words. *Blade Runner*, 1982.

It is in works aimed at children that the Christ figure element is most unambiguous. In the film *The Iron Giant* (1999), an alien robot steps into the Superman identity offered to it by a child and sacrifices its life to save a city from destruction. In the end, it reconstructs itself from spread-out pieces, rather like the Egyptian god Horus (another mythological Christ figure). And in *Wall-E* (2008), it is the eponymous protagonist, together with another robot named Eve, who saves humanity, helping them come back to a devastated Earth and bringing new hope to their lives. Wall-E even goes through death and resurrection at the end, like the iron giant.

<sup>1</sup> See Stephen R. L. Clark, *How to Live Forever: Science Fiction and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2015).

## What Does It Mean to Be Human?

Questions regarding consciousness, the soul, and the definition of humanity recur throughout literature. The dream of prolonging the life of a human being by downloading the soul, mind, or memories into an artificial body or encoding it as an algorithm reappears constantly.<sup>1</sup> The notion of soul or consciousness is sometimes explained, but often remains vague; frequently one must reflect on the necessity of a definition or be satisfied with accepting a mystery.

In *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2021), a couple considers replacing their child Josie, if she dies, with an android, Klara, who would learn all her ways and imitate them. The person who is to create her new robotic body believes the body and the behavior are all that exist; there is no deeper transcending principle. As another character in the novel puts it, the robot that copies her would simply “learn her heart” and so “be Josie.” But then he questions this, supposing that this heart had many rooms:

. . . and (you) discovered another room within it. And inside that room, another room still. Rooms within rooms within rooms. . . . No matter how long you wandered through those rooms, wouldn't there always be others you'd not yet entered?

The question remains open in the novel, a reminder of the final mystery of human nature.

The capacity for love is presented in other stories as a distinctive feature of human beings. In Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), the source for *Blade Runner*, humans are distinguished from androids

by their capacity for empathy, which could be another name for agape, the loving communion characterizing persons. Only human beings are capable of practicing a certain form of religion. The film changes this theme by letting some androids be even more compassionate than humans, and so prompts us to question the mystery of humanity in a different way.

The existence of a principle that transcends the body and death as a necessary limit—the basis for the possibility of sacrifice, or even of passage to another reality—shapes much of the fiction dealing with artificial humans. In the Harry Potter novels, the villain Voldemort magically changes himself to escape death. He places parts of his soul (which, in the normal order of things, should have remained undivided) in different objects, thus maiming both soul and body. In a momentous scene in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), Voldemort recreates a body for himself out of different organic elements, thus becoming his own Frankenstein creator. In the end, however, this does not protect him from destruction by the self-sacrificing courage of the hero. The Frankenstein theme is magnified through a self-creation that brings self-destruction. Death is shown to be necessary to surpass human limitations. Harry Potter shows how self-sacrificing love is the means of conquering death.

Ethical questions surrounding the limits of human nature and artificial means of surpassing the body are often treated in stories about cyborgs and clones. These are not entirely artificial beings but artificially derived humans. Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) describes the lives of clones raised for the harvesting of organs. This novel examines hopelessness in the face of death,

lack of freedom, and the various limitations of human life. Clones and other doubles also show up in Gene Wolfe's fiction, associated with narcissistic research on the self that can only lead to a dead end. The scientist in *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* (1972) clones himself again and again; finally, he is killed by one of his cloned doubles, and each version of himself is killed in turn by a subsequent copy. In Wolfe's *The Borrowed Man* (2015), clones of deceased authors are provided with the author's memories and used as resource objects in libraries. In *1Q84* (2009–10), Haruki Murakami imagines the "air chrysalis," a copy of a person created by mysterious, malevolent beings from another world, "the little people." Artificial double beings in this fictional universe express alienation and a disturbing reality shift, both of which must be overcome in order to find true love and a sense of one's life.

Cyborgs often appear in fiction as metaphors for the danger of dehumanization. The Cybermen of the *Doctor Who* series were once human, but most of their organs were replaced to make them more efficient. They are conditioned to obey and to think alike, and are implanted with emotion inhibitors, thus becoming a merciless army. Martha Wells's Murderbot stories offer another basis for reflection on the dehumanized condition of a cyborg who is exploited and struggles to be recognized as a person. The Murderbot manages to free himself from the obedience conditioning implanted in his brain, becoming more human by envisioning heroic and romantic fantasies and through friendly interaction with humans. In *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* (2010), Ted Chiang explores the possibility that "digital objects" could become human-like through a kind of education motivated by love.

It is significant how often the theme of love and its transfiguring effect crops up in fiction about artificial creatures. Love not only “moves the sun and the other stars,” in Dante’s words in *Paradiso*, but also “moves”—determines, shapes—the act of godlike creation and the humans mirrored in fictional creations.

Artificial creatures in fiction prove to be a mine of images, parables, and philosophical ideas about the cre-

ation, being, limitations, defects, virtues, high aspirations, ultimate goals, and even the possible deification of human beings. These stories take up old myths and, to a great extent, Christian teachings and other philosophical ideas about human nature. They move the imagination of modern readers and moviegoers, who can thus continue to reflect in this mirror about themselves, their past, and their future, and explore their own mystery. ✱

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#### IN WORDS AND IMAGES

## Image, Mind, and the Pursuit of “Pure Prayer”

Joel Houston

*Blessed is the mind which prays without distraction and acquires an ever greater longing for God. —Evagrius of Pontus<sup>1</sup>*

What place, if any, does the imagination have in the practice of prayer? The fourth-century theologian Evagrius of Pontus’s *Chapters on Prayer* addresses the importance of “imageless prayer” in two places. “When you pray” cautions Evagrius, “do not form images of

the divine within yourself, nor allow your mind to be impressed with any form, but approach the Immaterial immaterially and you will come to understanding” (ch. 66). His concern over “rashly localizing the Divinity” follows a discourse on the nature of pure prayer (chs. 51–65). Evagrius does not condemn the imagination, but he is concerned about its potential for deception: “[the purpose of the

<sup>1</sup> Evagrius of Pontus, chapter 118, in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 206. Subsequent references given in text.