



Human Machines: A Review of the Movie A.I.

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Before we become overwhelmed by this winter's line-up of possible Oscar-winning movies, I'd like to take this opportunity to look back at one of this past summer's most anticipated films: *A.I.* (Artificial Intelligence). The movie was co-directed by Steven Spielberg and Stanley Kubrick and provoked heated controversy over whether or not Spielberg – who took over for Kubrick following his death – was faithful to the late director's vision of a robot-boy, David, who was hard-wired to love. The movie prompted me to consider questions regarding the viability of artificial intelligence and whether a machine that acts like a human and is able to love should be accorded human rights. These are very good questions, but I would rather sidestep these issues and focus instead on the movie's more surreptitious message about our society's view of humanity.

Unlike any other “mecha” (the movie's term for human-like robots), David is able to love and to receive love and looks like a normal human boy. He is the crowning achievement of the A.I. masterminds. The first proto-type model of his kind, David is given as a gift to a mother grieving over her comatose child. When the child unexpectedly recovers, the mother abandons David in the forest like an unwanted pet. So David embarks on an ultimately tragic quest to become a real boy and earn the love of his mother. In contrast to this sad but beautiful portrayal of human-like behavior, the true humans whom David encounters in the movie are manipulative, spiteful, prejudiced, and uncaring. It was obvious to me that the viewer was encouraged to empathize with David's plight and to regard with contempt the humans who surround him. Even so, I found David's “humanness” disturbing, in that it seemed hollow and fabricated. For example, when he appears to find the fulfillment he has long been searching for in a final, brief encounter with his “mother,” I was left with a sense of loss because David's interactions with his mother, though human-like, lacked in many ways the credibility of a truly human situation. It struck me as ironic that though the movie prompted viewers to sympathize with the very human-like desires of David, I was repeatedly reminded throughout that he was, in actuality, far from human. Whether or not it was the intent of the directors, the movie sends a significant message about our society's confusion over what it means to be human.

Modern science teaches that we are highly evolved animals and mere bundles of complex genetic information. Emerging biotechnologies render our future as a race uncertain, and it is perhaps not a coincidence that humans are extinct at the end of the movie. Furthermore, our society tends to base our identities as humans on the sum of our parts. This movie tempts us to believe that the part that makes David human-like is his ability to love and accept love, and we begin to identify with him and to imagine that he is not so different from us. However, are we merely the equivalent of human-like machines? Do we have value only because all of our parts work well, or are we valuable because we are made in the image of God and are inherently eternal? As these questions increasingly confront our society, Christians must recognize and act upon their responsibility to communicate what it means to be human. ■

News from the Field

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Was a Human Embryo Really Cloned?

In a surprise Thanksgiving weekend announcement, Advanced Cell Technology (ACT) announced that it had grown the first human embryo clone to the six-cell stage. The announcement was greeted with both criticism and fanfare and prompted questions from those on both sides of this issue. Many ethicists, religious leaders, environmentalists, and politicians who oppose all forms of cloning responded to the news with dismay, calling for a complete ban on cloning to be immediately passed by the Senate.

Those who support cloning research in hopes that embryonic clones may be mined for their stem cells (which, some people claim, will allow scientists to develop revolutionary medical therapies) both called for a ban on reproductive cloning and questioned whether the ACT scientists had actually cloned an embryo. They criticized ACT for making its announcement in the popular press, rather than in a peer-reviewed journal where the data would have been analyzed. Biologists pointed out that embryos can divide to the six-cell stage without the help of their DNA, underscoring the uncertainty as to whether the DNA in ACT's alleged embryo was even capable of directing the development of a human being.

The controversy surrounding the announcement demonstrates the challenges to the public in understanding complex scientific and ethical issues and developing an informed opinion about them. Education on human cloning and other biotech topics is needed now more than ever if the U.S. is to have laws that properly uphold human dignity. ■

Ashcroft Moves to Block Assisted Suicide

In early November, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft issued an administrative order stating that physicians who prescribe federally controlled drugs for assisted suicide would lose their licenses to prescribe such drugs. A federal judge temporarily blocked implementation almost immediately, pending a legal challenge. The decision, if upheld, would make assisted suicide illegal in Oregon, the only state where it is currently legal. The case is expected to be a protracted one and may end up in the Supreme Court. ■

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