



## Allusions to theology: *I, Robot*, universalism and the limits of the law

*Timothy D Peters\**

*In today's world of hyper-regulation and legal paranoia about technological development, it should come as no, but also the greatest, surprise that the message proclaimed by Saint Paul is returning. Such a message calls us 'beyond the law', overcoming its limits and inviting us to step outside the differences its 'letter' institutes. For the Pauline 'good news' is one that announces a universalism, sublating both the law and difference, and, in so doing, enabling true freedom. This article argues that the film **I, Robot**, despite being a text as far from the Pauline Epistles in time and space as it is in content, gives rise to questions that have concerned both theology and legal theory for centuries: questions of the place and constitution of law in society, its role in regulating human behaviour and its ability to institute difference between (and within) people. It argues that, under the conditions of postmodernity, the concerns of high theory (theology, jurisprudence, psychoanalysis, Marxism) mesh with, intersect in, and are rendered explicable by the representations of popular culture (Asimov, science fiction, **I Robot**).*

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished.<sup>1</sup>

### The Three Laws of Robotics

#### LAW I

A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

#### LAW II

A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

#### LAW III

A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

---

\* Research Assistant, Socio-Legal Research Centre, Griffith Law School, Griffith University. The author would like to acknowledge the help of Ps Andrew Peters (Leadership Developer and Pastoral Theologian, AE & LA Peters Outreach Enterprises) for discussions regarding St Paul and the Law and Dr William MacNeil (Associate Professor, Griffith Law School) for his invaluable editorial comments and encouragement.

<sup>1</sup> New American Standard Translation Bible, Jesus of Nazareth, Matthew 5:17–18.

## Introduction

In 2004, as part of the resurgence of science-fiction film, Alex Proyas' *I, Robot*<sup>2</sup> was released, *suggested* by Isaac Asimov's book of the same name.<sup>3</sup> Almost two millennia ago, a Christian-Hebrew scholar named Paul wrote a letter to a small group of his protégés in Galatia declaring the demise of the Jewish law. While these two texts could not be farther apart in time, place, audience, medium and genre, unifying them is a thematic commonality: a jurisprudential inquiry into the law and its limits. For the law *is* limited in both texts, soliciting for its completion something beyond itself: a 'spirit' to fulfil its 'letter'. Drawing on Alain Badiou's reading of St Paul and his philosophy of 'the event', this article seeks to bring into dialogue these two texts (St Paul and *I, Robot*), arising out of and addressing the intersections of popular culture, theology and jurisprudence. For in today's world of over-legislation and legal paranoia about technological development there has been a 'return to Paul' and his message. Such a message calls us 'beyond the law', overcoming its limits and inviting us to step outside the differences its 'letter' institutes. As Badiou points out, this can only be done via the event that announces a universal that sublates both law and difference and, in so doing, enables true freedom.

Proyas' *I, Robot*, far from being 'mere entertainment', constitutes a staging of this event by responding to Asimov's legal response to technology via the Three Laws, and, legal responses to technology and society more generally. The world that Proyas' creates in *I, Robot* provides just enough distance, both fictionally and technologically, to demonstrate the limits of the law and the power of the event. Thus, under the conditions of postmodernity, discussions of high theory (theology, jurisprudence, philosophy) mesh with, intersect and are rendered explicable by the representations of popular culture (film, science-fiction, *I, Robot*).

I will begin such a discussion by outlining Asimov's development of the Three Laws and Proyas' creation of an 'Asimovian' world in *I, Robot*. This world is one that demonstrates Paul's descriptions of the failure of the law and its custodial role. To overcome this failure, Paul requires 'the event' of Christ and thus we will then examine Badiou's reading of Paul as one who 'declares' this event. Such a declaration punctures what will be the topics of two further sections: the pagan subjection of destiny to the Cosmic Order; and the law's repetitive and controlling nature that destroys thought. The event, however, punctures the situation by instituting a 'universal' that steps beyond both the pagan system and the law. This break can only be achieved by the work of love. Thus, finally, we will conclude with an examination of the way the event rejects abstract universalism in favour of a universal singularity, instituted by love.

### The law as custodian: Asimov, Proyas, Paul

Isaac Asimov was one of the most prominent and influential writers of science-fiction of the twentieth-century. His extensive oeuvre (greater than

---

2 *I, Robot*, 2004. Directed by A Proyas, Screenplay by J Vintar and A Goldsman, Twentieth Century Fox, DVD.

3 I Asimov, *I, Robot*, HarperCollins Publishers, London, 1996.

200 works) covers many fields and his works on robots and other science-fiction are considered foundational to the genre's development. However, more than that, he was not only a populariser of the science-fiction genre but science itself (his non-fiction works outnumbering the science-fiction ones). He believed that science could provide many of the answers to what the future would behold. His desire was for science and scientific futurology to leave behind theological, mythological or religious views of the future<sup>4</sup> and his influence was substantial in both science-fiction and science. There are many stories of today's scientists and roboticists being inspired by Asimov's work. Some of his insights, including his 'Three Laws of Robotics' have also been taken on and inspire the scientific community and development of robotics.<sup>5</sup>

One of Asimov's most substantial contributions to science-fiction was the development of these famous 'Three Laws of Robotics.' Sick of the continuously recurring Frankenstein-monster style plot — man creates robot, robot turns and kills man — he wanted to develop robots that could work and operate alongside humans in harmony. The Three Laws were thus designed to circumvent the problem of the robots' superior strength and power: the First Law is in place to protect humans, the Second to ensure robots remain under the control of humans and the Third to secure the robots' protection. These laws form the logical processes behind the robots' operations.

Proyas' film visually displays the world of the 'Three Laws'. For Proyas created an Asimovian universe and integrated many of Asimov's stories and themes into the narrative. In this world, the Three Laws, attributed to the creator of the robots, Dr Alfred Lanning (played with perfect scientific eccentricity by James Cromwell) are hardwired into each robot and consistently form the background and foundation to Proyas' narrative. The difference with Proyas, however, is that his film actually *has* a narrative. Asimov's stories were, in line with his belief about the science-fiction genre, focused on the technology and the bare traces of narrative structure throughout *I, Robot* are merely to enable a discussion of technological queries and problems.<sup>6</sup> Proyas, on the other hand, crosses genres by combining a mystery story and an action movie with a sci-fi flick. Such a move creates a stronger narrative and plot structure than Asimov's work on robotics. Instead of founding a story based purely on technological development and the outworking of the 'perfect' Three Laws, Proyas allowed his characters and story to affect the foundational Three Laws and question their operation.

For, while the Three Laws enable the robots to interact and operate alongside humans, they are also a controlling mechanism that attempts to limit the robots' actions and position within society. Thus, in the words of St Paul, they operate as the robots' tutor or custodian. For Paul develops an argument about law (in particular, the Law of Israel) in his letter to the Galatians. He

---

4 I Asimov, 'Introduction' in I Asimov (Ed), *Living in the Future*, Beaufort Books, New York, 1985, pp 7–14.

5 A Proyas and A Goldsman, 'Directors Commentary', *I, Robot*, Twentieth Century Fox DVD, 2004.

6 J Gunn, *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982, p ix.

argues that the law was given as a custodian of Israel, until 'faith came'.<sup>7</sup> Here, he is making a comparison between the law and a slave or attendant to whom, in the ancient world, a child was entrusted and subject to until their coming of age when they became free citizens.<sup>8</sup> He is thus arguing that the law operates as a custodian of Israel.

Paul's problem with the law, however, is that in itself it is unable to provide freedom (the law cannot provide sufficient righteousness to enable a relationship with God). He argues that if 'a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law',<sup>9</sup> but the law in itself is inadequate. Its role as custodian means it does not have a 'life giving function that would transform and change the human nature'.<sup>10</sup> Andrew Peters argues that the law:

Was added because of transgression and its purpose was to confine us and keep us under restraint until the promise came, until faith came, until Christ came. For Paul, the law cannot produce true righteousness and holiness before God . . .<sup>11</sup>

This is the result of Asimov's laws as well and is demonstrated in the Asimovian universe that Proyas' creates. It is a world in which the Three Laws have been put in place to protect us from the robots and to keep them in custody. There is no way for the laws to provide freedom. Asimov's dealing with the Three Laws is the same and any Asimovian response to technology tries to enslave technology to law — to put it into custody under the law and to ensure our control of it. Any notion of freedom or operation outside the law is not possible. Nothing within the law can bring freedom. For Paul, freedom could not be gained until Christ came and we could be released from the law. Thus, what is required is an 'event' to break with the law and enable its overcoming to provide freedom. This is what, for Paul, Christ does. For Proyas, this is what occurs with Lanning's death and the appearance of the robot Sonny — a robot that can operate apart from the Three Laws (played with digital enhancement by Alan Tudyk). It is only, as Alain Badiou would say, 'the event' that enables a break with the Laws' domination of the situation. It is this notion of 'the event' that we now turn to.

### **Alain Badiou: the Universal, the Truth, the Event**

Alain Badiou interprets Paul's notion of the break instituted by Christ in relation to his philosophy of 'the event'. Badiou's 'event' is what enables the development of a universal singularity as a truth-procedure that is able to puncture both the principles that govern the situation (organising its repetitive series — for Paul, the law) as well as the identitarian or communitarian categories of the situation (that is, the Greek or pagan subordination of destiny

---

<sup>7</sup> Bible, above n 1, Galatians 3:23.

<sup>8</sup> G Bornkamm, *Paul*, Harper & Row, New York, 1971, p 127.

<sup>9</sup> Bible, above n 1, Galatians 3:21.

<sup>10</sup> A Peters, *Holiness Without The Law*, AE & LA Peters Outreach Enterprises, Brisbane, 2005, p 25.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

to the Cosmic Order).<sup>12</sup> This ‘event’ has to originate outside the situation (that is, not within the law or identitarian/communitarian categories). It is something that enters into, interrupts and cannot be explained by, the situation. Truth is that which then operates out of this event as fidelity to it. It is thinking the situation ‘according to’ the event.<sup>13</sup>

For Paul, Christ’s resurrection is such an event. Badiou describes the requirements of truth as a universal singularity in relation to Paul as follows:

1. The Christian subject does not pre-exist the event he declares;
2. Truth is entirely subjective (it is of the order of a declaration that testifies to a commonality relative to the event). Thus every subsumption of it becoming under a law will be argued against;
3. Fidelity to the declaration is crucial, for truth is a process not an illumination;
4. A truth is of itself indifferent to the state of the situation . . . [it] is a concentrated and serious procedure, which must never enter into competition with established opinions.<sup>14</sup>

Truth is thus the declaration of, and faithfulness to, an event. Such a process has two consequences:

First, since truth is evental, or of the order of what occurs, it is singular . . . No available generality can account for it, nor structure the subject who claims to follow in its wake. Consequently, there cannot be a law of truth. Second, truth being inscribed on the basis of a declaration that is in essence subjective, no preconstituted subset can support it; nothing communitarian or historically established can lend its substance to the process of truth. Truth . . . neither claims authority from, nor . . . constitutes any identity. It is offered to all, or addressed to everyone, without a condition of belonging being able to limit this offer, or this address.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the declaration arising out of an event is truth — the subjective element that arises out of the conviction in declaring the event. In order for this truth to arise as a universal singularity there must be complete ‘fidelity’ to the event. Such fidelity is a continuous process which, for Paul, involves faith, love and hope. Here, faith is the declaration of the conviction to, and of, the event. But faith, as Badiou argues, is not salvation. Faith, rather, ‘prescribes a new possibility, one that, although real in Christ, is not, as yet, in effect for everyone’.<sup>16</sup> So, as it is not in effect for everyone, the work of love is needed so that ‘truth’s postevental universality can continuously inscribe itself in the world, rallying subjects to the path of life’.<sup>17</sup> As the truth is ‘of the order of a declaration that testifies to a conviction relative to the event’,<sup>18</sup> it cannot be argued to come under the law. A break with the law must result and this is fulfilled through love. Paul’s (and Christ’s for that matter) summation of the Law into the maxim ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’<sup>19</sup> can only, according to Badiou, operate through faith because the loving of thyself

---

12 A Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Trans R Brassier, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003 pp 11, 14.

13 A Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Trans P Hallward Verso, London, 2001, p 41.

14 Badiou, above n 12, pp 14–15.

15 Ibid, p 14.

16 Ibid, p 88.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid, p 14.

19 Bible, above n 1, Romans 13:9, Matthew 22:39

cannot occur prior to the resurrection. Prior to the event, 'the subject, having been given up to death, has no good reason to love himself'.<sup>20</sup> Thus:

on the one hand, the eventual declaration founds the subject; on the other, without love, without fidelity, that declaration is useless . . . a subjectivation that does not discover the resource of power proper to its universal address misses the truth for whose sudden emergence of it seemed to be the sole witness.<sup>21</sup>

But, once we have faith which opens us to the true, and love which universalises the effectiveness of faith's trajectory, we need hope in order to continue.<sup>22</sup> Hope is not a hope for the future, but rather a connection between events. It enables the subject to operate in the interval between two events and the subject's faith in the first event is sustained by his hope in the second:<sup>23</sup> 'But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love'.<sup>24</sup> Love, in such an understanding, is that which universalises the declaration of the event. It is that which is for all. As such, the truth arising from the event is 'indifferent to the state of the situation'.<sup>25</sup> It is not there to enter into debate regarding itself and is not to be put in competition with established principles. It is simply there to be declared.<sup>26</sup>

Proyas' film introduces this notion of 'the event' into Asimov's world. For while Proyas creates an Asimovian universe in one respect he also demonstrates the closedness of such a universe and the need for a break with it to rupture the Cosmic Order and the law's control. This break or event is the entry in of the robot Sonny following Lanning's death. This event is declared by both Sonny and Detective Spooner (played by Will Smith). Thus, in one sense, Sonny is bringing forth or declaring his own existence. However, in a reversal of the Christ-event (of which there are many allusions to) Lanning's death comes after the creation of Sonny (but before his appearance). In a similar fashion to the Christ-event, it is unprovable. Any proof that Lanning has been killed and had not committed suicide was unavailable and there was no more proof of Sonny's creation (or the means of his creation) than his very existence. But while both Sonny and Spooner declare the event, Sonny's role is more Christological/Messianic than Paul's (Paul never claimed to be the messiah but rather proclaimed Christ's role as Messiah). Such a combining of Christian/Biblical figures (Christ and Paul) is common within the film, the most prominent example being Lanning's Trinitarian appearance as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>27</sup>

Spooner's role, on the other hand, can be argued to be quite Pauline,

---

<sup>20</sup> Badiou, above n 12, p 89.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p 91.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p 93.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p 94.

<sup>24</sup> Bible, above n 1, 1 Corinthians 13:13

<sup>25</sup> Badiou, above n 12, p 15.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Dr Lanning is the 'creator', father of robotics and writer of the Three Laws. The natural allusion here is to God 'the Father'. However the allusions go further than that as it is Lanning who pays the sacrifice, killed to allow the 'salvation' of humanity. He is found dead at the bottom of USR's headquarters, thought to have committed suicide — but, as is discovered, a suicide not to escape life but to enable its continuance. In the same way, it can be argued that Christ knew he was going to be crucified, yet continued in the very process that led him to the crucifixion — this form of giving oneself up could be read as a similar

operating as a declarer of the event and deferring the messianic status to Sonny. Spooner declares the event (of Lanning's death and Sonny's creation) by evidencing the fact that Lanning's death was not a suicide and that Sonny was not a 'normal' robot. He is the first to suggest, and declare, both. Thus Spooner fulfils a Pauline role in the film. It is even tempting to analogise the calling of him by the holographic projector upon Lanning's death with the Damascus road conversion in which Paul saw a light from heaven.<sup>28</sup> Is not the holographic version of Lanning that speaks to Spooner merely a light? In fact, is not the only way Lanning is seen in this entire movie through light either in holographic images or in the light from computer monitors?<sup>29</sup>

One might expect this event to result in a miraculous, 'Wizard of Oz' like transformation — the bursting out of colour into the midst of black and white. However, this is not the case. The colours and tones used in *I, Robot's* cinematography remain, throughout the movie, muted blues, blacks and greys. Even with the injection of stronger human characters and an almost human robot into the Asimovian universe, 'the event' does not seem to change the nature of the world. But this is true to the nature of the event. For in one sense there is no difference in the situation after the event. The event is not a substantial change that invokes complete revolution. Rather, it is in the fidelity to the event — the complete commitment to it — and the seeing of the situation via the event that then invokes the change. This is why the colours in *I, Robot* do not change — the world, in one sense, is no different to what it was before Sonny's creation. Yet there is this hint of difference (like the way that the only perceptible difference between Sonny and the other robots is that Sonny's eyes are blue and the rest brown). It is in this slight difference — the same, but not the same — that the event operates. For Christ's death and resurrection changed nothing but changed everything. Lanning's death and Sonny's creation changed nothing but changed everything.

Thus, the event operates to break with the situation in two ways. First it breaks with the principles that govern the situation and organise its repetitive series. That is, the law, and in our circumstances in particular, the Three Laws that govern the robots and their operations in the world of *I, Robot*. The event also breaks with the identitarian and communitarian categories that want to enslave the subject to the Cosmic Order. That is, enslaving them to their place

---

form of suicidal tendency. At the very least, both figures — Lanning and Christ — knew they were giving up their life for the rest of humanity. Furthermore, however, Lanning continues to appear throughout the movie, either as a hologram program speaking to Detective Spooner, or as part of a recording of different seminars or discussions regarding the Three Laws. Finally his voice is overlayed, as if the voice of God, discussing the possibility of Robots having a soul when the process to 'kill' Sonny is being undertaken. Is this presence throughout the movie (after his death) not dissimilar to the consistent (Christian) presence of the Holy Spirit, everywhere appearing and speaking, leading Spooner to the correct conclusions and actions? Thus Lanning is positioned as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

28 Bible, above n 1, Acts 9:1–8.

29 It is interesting to note that in the original script Lanning and Spooner had no prior relationship. This was rewritten in later on to give greater feeling and depth to the story. However, the lack of prior knowledge of Lanning would, interestingly enough, place Spooner outside the inner circle. Only through the mimicking (see above regarding Badiou's argument that the Damascus road conversion of Paul mimics the Christ-event) of Lanning through a light would Spooner be introduced to the event: Goldsman and Proyas, above n 5.

in society. In *I, Robot* these identitarian and communitarian categories are those that enslave robots and humans to their place in society — almost as slave and master. The event breaks with both these operating principles of the situation and develops a singularity that operates universally beyond both sets of principles. This means that the event enables a universal to develop. We will now explore, in turn, these elements of an event: the pagan subjection of destiny to the Cosmic Order; the law's regulatory control of thought; and the puncturing of these two factors.

### **Breaking with the Cosmic Order: Žižek, Paganism, Christ**

Slavoj Žižek's analysis in *The Fragile Absolute* provides an insight into how Christ breaks with the pagan notion of 'cosmic justice and balance' and the subordination of the subject to such notions. He argues that 'Christianity breaks with the pagan notion of the circular death and rebirth of the Divinity'.<sup>30</sup> That is, that 'Christ's death is *not* the same as the seasonal death of the pagan god . . .'.<sup>31</sup> Thus, there are two discernible attributes in the history of religion: the *global* and the *universal*. First there is:

the pagan Cosmos, the Divine hierarchical order of cosmic Principles, which, applied to society, produces the image of a congruent edifice in which each member has its own place. Here the supreme Good is the global balance of Principles, while Evil stands for their derailment or derangement, for the excessive assertion of one Principle to the detriment of others . . . the cosmic balance is then re-established through the work of Justice which, with its inexorable necessity, sets things straight again by crushing the derailed element . . . The very core of pagan Wisdom lies in its insight into this cosmic balance of hierarchically ordered Principles — more precisely, into the eternal circuit of the cosmic catastrophe (derailment) and the restoration of Order through just punishment . . .<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the global notion of paganism operates within notions of completeness or wholeness: of a balance. Justice, in such a system, is the force or principle that preserves and restores that balance. This balance is a continual reconstituting of 'the way things are' or the cosmic system or order. Any break from this is seen as something that needs to be dealt with and then reinscribed into the system so as to bring back the balance and order.

Is this not the Asimovian world created by Proyas? In Asimov's desire to integrate humanity and technology — humans and robots — he longs to return to a balance and logic that does not accept anomalies or changes. Everything must be able to be explained in regards to logic or scientific philosophy. Nothing can operate outside this system. (Is such a perspective not dissimilar to the traditional pagan method of ascribing every anomaly to the gods — here every anomaly is ascribed to a certain scientific explanation — but both these notions try to explain everything rather than allowing for something to exist beyond the edge of knowledge). However, such a perspective in fact blinds the viewers of the situation. For example, the logical and scientific understanding

---

<sup>30</sup> S Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute — or why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?*, Verso, London, 2000, pp 118–19.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek, above n 30, pp 119–20.

of the circumstances surrounding Lanning's death would indicate that it was suicide: a man throws himself out of a locked room from a great height and kills himself. However, while a scientific explanation of what happened results in the conclusion of suicide — no-one else was in the room, therefore he must have done it himself — it does not answer the question 'why'? This is the 'right question' for the situation, as Lanning's hologram consistently points out to Spooner. The blindness of the pagan position does not ask the question 'why?' — a question that so often forms the basis of theological inquiry more than the scientific question of 'how'? The blindness of the system also ignores the anomalies in the system: the corrupted video surveillance files; that the glass was safety glass (very difficult to break); the fact that houses are not normally demolished at 8pm; that the robots *must* have been acting in a way to help us — in accordance with the Three Laws.

These anomalies, however, are small when compared to Sonny — the anomalous robot who is 'a completely different breed of robot', able to operate outside of the Three Laws. At this point the anomaly is acknowledged, but not as an event. Rather as something to be dealt with so as to restore order and balance. It is thought that simply because no robot has ever committed a crime, that none ever will. But also, one that does is a mistake, a hazard, a malfunctioning unit that needs to be destroyed. Once the anomalous robot was caught and returned to USSR for decommissioning, Spooner's boss Lieutenant Bergin describes the pagan cycle. His (mistaken) analogy is that of the Wolfman: 'guy creates monster, monster kills guy, everyone kills monster — Wolfman'. While the reference, as Spooner points out, is to Frankenstein — a particularly astute observation given the Frankenstein monster's history as one of the first artificial men in literature<sup>33</sup> and Asimov's dislike of the Frankenstein-monster robot narrative — it is a perfect description of the pagan order. Any event will be attempted to be reinscribed into the system, removing its power to bring a different order. It is seen as a scandal or as an anomaly.

However, it is only through fidelity to this event that access to something different is available. As Žižek argues in relation to Christ, into the pagan cosmology enters what seems to them as a 'ridiculous and/or traumatic scandal'.<sup>34</sup> It is the notion, completely unknown to paganism, of individual, personal '*immediate* access to universality (. . . of the Holy Spirit . . .)'.<sup>35</sup> Participation in the universal is direct. It comes, irrespective of any place in the 'global social order'.<sup>36</sup> Žižek points out that we are enjoined to 'unplug' 'from the organic community into which we were born . . .'.<sup>37</sup> It is this process, this 'gesture of *separation*'<sup>38</sup> that goes against the pagan wisdom. It is a stepping beyond the place in society, moving beyond the position of 'the way things are'. And isn't this the question that has been beyond all the challenges of society and social structure? Isn't this the question behind the Marxist critique, the feminist critique, etc? The process is to question the way

---

33 S Shelley, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, Collector's Library, London, 2004.

34 Žižek, above n 30, p 121.

35 Ibid, p 120.

36 Ibid, pp 120–1.

37 See Žižek, above n 30, pp 120–1 regarding Christ's request to hate Father, Mother, Sister, Brother, Families etc; Bible, above n 1, Luke 14:26.

38 Žižek, above n 30, p 121.

things are and to step beyond them. This operation is the one that allows Paul to claim that there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female.<sup>39</sup> Such distinctions are not important in the Kingdom of God — unlike the Marxist, feminist or race critiques where difference is emphasised. As Žižek puts it:

Christianity *is* the miraculous Event that disturbs the balance of the One-All; it *is* the violent intrusion of Difference that precisely *throws the balanced circuit of the universe off the rails*.<sup>40</sup>

In our case, the balanced circuit of the universe thrown off the rails is none other than the circuits put in place in the robots that run the city in *I, Robot*. It is the robots' circuits that are really put off balance. The distinction human-robot is one that is critiqued, deconstructed and subverted in this film. To the extent that by the end of it there are questions left as to the differences between humans and robots. At what point does that difference emerge? Once the robots have unplugged from the social structure — the distinction between robot and non-robot or human and non-human — questions of 'the soul' are raised.

But the point of Žižek's argument above is that the appearance of Christ and Christianity is what throws off the balance of the universe, because an anomaly (Christ) enters into, and breaks down, even subverts the distinctions of society. In such a way, the entrance of Sonny into the world of USR and the future of robots does the same thing. The anomaly of Sonny, a robot who has the Three Laws in-built but can also act against them — like the Jew of all Jews, blameless before the Law<sup>41</sup> but the one who declares the event overcoming the Law — is one that breaks down the distinction between human and robot. Throughout the film, reference is made to speeches by Dr Lanning where he invokes the idea of robots developing a soul. Questions are raised as to when the various programs of the robot (perceptual schematics, difference engines, personality simulations) develop to the point that a robot becomes human. These questions move to break down, once again, the distinctions between robot and human, or more generically between human and non-human.<sup>42</sup> Sonny's appearance is an indication of the complete break-down in that distinction. Thus, in addition to Paul's reference to there being no male or female, no Greek or Jew, there is also no robot or human. The difference there is developed to a point where the distinction is no longer. It has been subverted, the balance that is engendered has been sidestepped and we have 'unplugged' from the world that requires such distinctions. The balance of the world has been thrown off and, as a result, it will never be the same. Thus, the event breaks the pagan inscription of society to its position and opens a way for a universal singularity to be developed.

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid; Bible, above n 1, Galatians 3:28.

<sup>40</sup> Žižek, above n 30, p 121.

<sup>41</sup> Bible, above n 1, Philippians 3:6.

<sup>42</sup> It is such that the seeds of the new are already present within the old: Žižek. It is the inability of the old to answer the questions regarding anomalies that have arisen that brings forth the new which can answer such questions. See also T Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, pp 64–5.

## Breaking with the logic of the law: Badiou, VIKI, Sonny

However, the subversion of paganism is not the only effect of the event. For the event also punctures the guiding principles or laws of the situation. These are the principles that lock the subject into a repetitive path, enslaving them to the rules of the set. In *I, Robot*, the Three Laws operate in such a way enslaving, as Asimov designed them, the robots to their control. However, Proyas' movie takes this a step further and shows how the law attempts a universalism by enslaving humans to the Laws as well. This is demonstrated in the way the robots take over, in accordance with the Three Laws, and incarcerate humans, each with their own personal NS-5 robot to assist, serve *and guard them!*

Badiou argues that the 'law is what constitutes the subject as powerlessness of thought'.<sup>43</sup> For him, the letter of the law operates blindly, without thought, as if operating under automatism.<sup>44</sup> 'The letter mortifies the subject insofar as it separates his thought from all power.'<sup>45</sup> This is the way the Three Laws capture and enslave the robots. They are locked into the 'undeniable logic' and calculation of VIKI (Virtual Interactive Kinetic Intelligence — the robotic 'brain' that controls all technical operations within USR's offices as well as the latest series of robots via their direct uplink) and her interpretation of the law. They are powerless and their own thought, because they are under the Law, is not allowed. As Badiou says:

When the subject is under the letter, or literal, he presents himself as a disconnected correlation between an automatism of doing and a powerlessness of thought.<sup>46</sup>

This operation goes beyond mere obedience, binding the robots to the 'death' of the law. They are automatons operating only under the command of VIKI and will continue to do so to their death. In the scene where Spooner's car is attacked by a 'pack' of robots, the death of the law is explicit. The robots are literally throwing themselves onto a car moving at incredibly high speeds. They continue to do so despite the dismembering, smashing, shooting, squashing and destruction of those that have gone before. Finally, at the end of the scene the last robot, when the police arrive, throws itself into the burning wreckage so that no evidence of robots is left behind. The obedience to the Three Laws leads them directly to death. As such the Three Laws not only imprison their subjects but they bring death. Thus, in order for the subject to operate on the side of life rather than of death there must be a break with the law.<sup>47</sup> This break comes, for Paul, in the form of salvation: 'the ruin of . . . disjunction . . . a lawless eruption, unchaining the point of powerlessness from automatism.'<sup>48</sup> It is only when the subject can maintain 'thought in the power of doing' that there is salvation — what Badiou defines as a truth procedure.<sup>49</sup>

---

43 Badiou, above n 12, p 83.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid, p 84.

47 Ibid, p 81.

48 Ibid, p 84.

49 Ibid.

The robots must be released from the power of the laws and this is done by 'killing' or destroying VIKI.

However, what *I, Robot* demonstrates here is not only law's control over the subject to whom it applies but its obsession with 'the other' and its desire to bring 'the other' under its control. The Three Laws in *I, Robot* are not universal. They *do not* apply to all for it is only the robots who are controlled by them. While humans acknowledge and desire the existence of the Three Laws, they do not take up, nor are willing to follow or subscribe to the Three Laws themselves. Thus, those under the law remain the exception to those without the law.<sup>50</sup> But, it is at this point that the law's desire for universalism is displayed. The law cannot handle those outside its control. Thus it is always trying to dominate those outside it: it is the humans that suffer the consequences of the robot revolution in *I, Robot*. It is those 'others' that VIKI and all the robots under her control must deal with, incarcerating and regulating them. This is not simply Foucault's efficient, panoptic all-seeing eye:<sup>51</sup> the regulation of the robots forever watching us (the blue strip that is throughout all of USR's offices as well as Lanning's house). Rather it is a regulator's dream of complete domination: the assignment of a robot to every person to *ensure* their compliance. Thus the robots incarcerate humanity 'protecting us from ourselves' and dominating us with their interpretation of the Three Laws. The law believes that it is only under its control that we can remain truly safe.

In this way *I, Robot* demonstrates the law's failure as both a protector and a saviour: the robot protectors are destroyed to enable the law's rule; and it turns out that the law as saviour is a deranged, bodiless brain that, in its arrogance, imposes what is 'best' for humanity. It is the entrance of humanity's and the robots' true saviour, via the event, that is the only way to overcome these incarcerating and regulatory desires of the law. It is Sonny, whose actions are able to cross both the law and freedom in love, that enables the break with, and overcoming of the law — for both robots and humans in a way that does not differentiate or preserve an 'other' but applies to all as a universal.

It is the event that does not bring into play the differences or categories of the set or situation. This overcoming of differences by the universal out of the event is one that comes out of a knowledge of both groups — humans and robots. This is why it is Sonny (the one who knows the Laws, but can choose not to obey them) but also Spooner (as someone who experiences both the human nature and the robotic nature via his cybernetic arm) that declares this event. Sonny is able to reference both the robots (in his in-depth understanding of the Three Laws and their logic) and humans (his identification with them via dreams, feelings, emotions — the soul) who has the ability to collapse the differences and proclaim the universal. Thus there

---

50 Ibid, pp 41–3. The very process of the Jewish law is one which requires a separation and a withdrawal from that which is 'unclean' and those that are 'uncircumcised'. As such, it is impossible for the Jewish tradition to operate universally as their very law (or at least the practice at the time of Paul) requires them to segregate and to exclude. See Peters, above n 10, p 23.

51 M Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Trans Alan Sheridan Penguin, New York, 1991.

are two components to Sonny's ability to puncture the set: first, the fact that he is able to collapse differences by practicing difference; and second, by his ability to operate out of love and not the law. Let us examine each of these.

### **Puncturing the situation: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, robot nor human?'**

Badiou notes that, even though (for Paul) there is 'neither Greek nor Jew', in fact there are Greeks and Jews:

That every truth procedure collapses differences, infinitely deploying a purely generic multiplicity, does not permit us to lose sight of the fact that, in the situation (call it: the world), *there are differences*.<sup>52</sup>

He argues that:

Differences can be transcended only if benevolence with regard to customs and opinions presents itself as *an indifference that tolerates differences*, one whose sole material test lies, as Paul says, in being able and knowing how to practice them oneself.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, in line with Paul, we should be aware that:

within the order of particularity, everything is permitted. For if differences are the material of the world, it is only so that the singularity proper to the subject of truth — a singularity that is itself included in the becoming of the universal — can puncture that material.<sup>54</sup>

So, while there are differences — Greek/Jew, robot/human — these differences are 'punctured' by the universal, the singularity proper to the subject of truth. But it is not enough for the distinctions to be punctured to develop the universal. For the law's (failed) universalism will try to continue, attempting to impose both its regulation (its desire to enslave the subject) and its difference (its obsession with 'the other'). Thus, the law itself must also be overcome.

Such an overcoming of the law cannot simply be by transgressing it. Rather it must be by fulfilling its failed attempts. This can only be achieved via love. For the way to be freed from the law is not, in a sense, transgressing it. Such a process operates within the system set up for it. The law is a series of prohibitions and duties and breaching them is automatically enshrined in them being there. As Paul points out, without the law, sin or transgression is not known and, as a result, the instituting of law makes sin known.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the instituting of law bears in mind the possibility of transgression. Transgressing the law in no way frees us from it but brings to bear the brute force of it. Rather, in order to overcome the bondage of the law and the prohibition-transgression dialectic we must fulfil the law. Žižek argues that there are two ways of 'subverting the Law' . . . 'One can *violate/transgress its*

---

52 Badiou, above n 12, p 98.

53 Ibid, p 99.

54 Ibid, p 101.

55 Bible, above n 1, Romans 7:7.

prohibitions . . .’ but this is ‘the inherent transgression which sustains the Law’.<sup>56</sup> However:

much more subversive than this is *simply to do what is* allowed, that is, what the existing order explicitly allows, although it prohibits it at the level of implicit unwritten prohibitions.<sup>57</sup>

The process of identifying with the law is the very process which can undermine it:

The basic paradox of the relationship between public power and its inherent transgression is that *the subject is actually ‘in’ (caught in the web of) power only and precisely in so far as he does not fully identify with it but maintains a kind of distance towards it*; on the other hand, the system (of public Law) is actually undermined by unreserved identification with it.<sup>58</sup>

He goes on to give the example of prison life, in which the only way prison can destroy the subject is when the subject does *not* fully consent to the fact that he is in prison and tries to maintain an inner distance from it. In so doing the subject is caught in the ‘vicious cycle of fantasy’ and, when this is realised, ‘the grotesque discord between fantasy and reality breaks [him] down’.<sup>59</sup> Thus:

the only true solution is therefore fully to accept the rules of prison life and then, within the universe governed by these rules, to work out a way to beat them. In short, inner distance and daydreaming about Life Elsewhere in effect enchain me to prison, whereas full acceptance of the fact that I am really there, bound by prison rules, opens up a space for true hope.<sup>60</sup>

The danger of such identification, however, is that it could very easily result in reinstating the power of the law to control. It is not through the process of obeying the law that it is overcome but rather that of fulfilling it. For, while strict obedience to the law may be achieved, it will not bring life and the process of subverting it will be of no effect. Paul teaches us that it is in fulfilling the law, not doing it, that it is overcome.<sup>61</sup> Rather than merely obeying the command (accepting life as it is or succumbing to the Law) we must look to the spirit of the law. That is what Christ is getting at when he says:

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’. But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.<sup>62</sup>

Fulfilling the law is not invoking it in its letter — the blind element that cannot achieve anything — rather it is in taking the spirit of why it was given.

---

<sup>56</sup> Žižek, above n 30, p 147.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p 148.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, pp 148–9.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p 149.

<sup>61</sup> Peters, above n 10, pp 26–7; Bible, above n 1, Galatians 5:14.

<sup>62</sup> Bible, above n 1, p Matthew 5:38–42.

That is how the law can be summarised by both Paul and Christ as ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. The process is one of doing the unexpected: obeying the law itself, but breaking the unwritten law that goes with it. For example, in Christ’s day, a Roman soldier could force, by law, a Jew to carry his pack one mile and no further. The Jews, resenting such a law, would make sure that they carried the pack no further than one mile. However, by carrying the pack a second mile (something horrifying to a Jew of the day) it breaks the unwritten law and removes the power of the law itself. It is no longer the law’s power that you are operating under for, by carrying the pack the second mile, you are operating in freedom outside the law’s control.<sup>63</sup> As such, the law is overcome by ‘unplugging’ from the social system that sustains it and fulfilled by ‘loving your neighbour as yourself’.

This overcoming of the law through love can only be achieved via the event. For any attempt to overcome the law without the puncture of the situation will result in either the reinscription of law’s command or the institution of differences — the situation before the event can only repeat itself. Without the event, the subject has no power to give up either differences or the law.

### Conclusion: The Universal and the Realm of Love

Ultimately, what *I, Robot* teaches us about ‘the event’ is the way that a ‘universal singularity’ has to reject the abstract universalism claimed by the situation. In the final story in Asimov’s *I, Robot* ‘the machines’ (supercomputer versions of the robots) have been developed to manage the world’s economy. The balance between supply and demand has finally been perfected. However, slight anomalies occur within the system — a slight over-production, a small excess in labour. These anomalies always seem to have a connection with the latest incarnation of anti-machine, anti-robot fundamentalists: the Society for Humanity. What we discover in the story, however, is that it is not the actions of the Society for Humanity that are causing the anomalies but rather the machines themselves. Each anomaly results in the removal of a member of society (whether an engineer or a company director) from a position of influence. The machines have taken into account the resistance by certain members of society and thus, in order to protect humanity (by preventing economic disruption, deemed as the greatest harm to humanity), protect themselves.

This is the legal-technological situation that Proyas’ *I, Robot* responds to. For while *I, Robot* was criticised as having nothing in common with Asimov’s ideas (except in name),<sup>64</sup> the movie actually comes to the same conclusion: following the Three Laws will result in the robots/machines complete

---

63 Andrew Peters says the ‘blessing’ is in the second mile, that is, the law loses its power to control when we enter the second mile: A Peters, Sermon on the ‘Second Mile’.

64 There were numerous examples of reviewers’ criticism of the movie as a Will Smith focused blockbuster that deviates greatly from Asimov’s themes. See, eg, articles by R Ebert, ‘Cyber Cypher: ‘I, Robot’ misses Asimov’s complexity’, *Chicago-Sun-Times*, 16 July 2004, p 33 (accessed via *Factiva*, 25 March 2007); S Persall, ‘Just Call it “I, Will Smith”’, *St Petersburg Times*, 16 July 2004, p 2B (accessed via *Factiva*, 25 March 2007) and L Kennedy, ‘Solid sci-fi tale is fuelled by philosophy’, *Denver Post*, 16 July 2004, p F.01 (accessed via *Factiva*, 25 March 2007).

dominance and control of humanity. While Asimov simply argues that humans have never had control of their destiny (by being subject to uncontrollable economic, social and natural forces) and now the machines have simply confirmed that lack of control, Proyas creates an argument for freedom. Instead of the passive handing over of controls to the machines, the control is taken, in a more realistic image, by VIKI and her armies of robots marching through the streets imposing a curfew and deeming anyone in their way hazardous. The conflict of the laws results in the Third Law merging with the First, as it is considered that the only ones that can truly protect humanity are the robots/machines and thus they must ensure their own survival. Any single person that gets in the way must be dealt with (even if it means harming them). This is one of Asimov's own conclusions (though the level of harm conjectured by Asimov is minimal).<sup>65</sup>

What the conjunction of the film *I, Robot* with 'the event' does, is completely reorientate the picture. The movie shows that the logic that wants to save humanity as a whole and will harm anyone that gets in its way is deranged. Sonny, on the other hand, demonstrates the power of love. VIKI claims that her logic is undeniable and, while Sonny agrees with the logic, he deems it as 'too heartless' and acts against it. It is in these final scenes of the movie that Sonny takes on his purpose and gets the nanites — mini- robots designed to eat/vaporise positronic brains — in order to kill/destroy VIKI. However, he is presented with a choice: save Susan Calvin or destroy VIKI. Sonny's separation and release from the laws is demonstrated at this point, for the logical response would be to destroy VIKI and save humanity. However, urged by Spooner, Sonny gives up the saving of humanity to save Calvin. He is released from the arrogance of the laws and their abstract universalism that wants to claim what is best for humanity — this abstract notion 'out there' in aggregate somewhere. Rather he chooses to save the concrete individual in front of him and in the process, by passing the nanites to Spooner (who kills VIKI) is also able to save humanity.

This is the nature of the universal singularity, for the event is not something that develops an abstract universalism. Rather it is a universal that operates out of the singular. This is why the universalist saving of humanity must be given up, for such a position places the bearer of the cause in an arrogant position of determining 'what is best for humanity'. Rather, the event determines a universal proper that will operate at the level of the singular — Susan Calvin — but operates for all at that level — by destroying VIKI. This abandonment of the 'logic' of the abstract universalism is the recognition of love. It deems the abstract as heartless and sees the love, passion and fidelity of the event that enables the break with the logic of the Law and the logic of universalism.

Thus, Proyas' *I, Robot* mimics an event — inserting itself in the midst of our scientific and science-fiction narratives and breaking with the technological perspective of Asimov that wants to imprison the subject to its destiny and enslave technology to the Law. Thus today, like St Paul, *I, Robot* calls us to recognise the heartlessness of the Law and step beyond its requirements into the realm of love. That is, *to love your robot as yourself!*

---

65 Asimov, above n 3, pp 9 and 247.