

Article

Sacrificial Love (Of Cyborgs, Saviors, and Driller, a Real Robot Killer) in the Comics *Descender* and *Ascender*

Peter Admirand 

School of Theology, Philosophy, and Music, DCU All Hallows Campus, Dublin City University,
D09N920 Dromcondra, Ireland; peter.admirand@dcu.ie

Abstract: Seeking to examine cases of sacrificial love for another that is empathetic, unconditional, and morally redemptive, I focus on writer Jeff Lemire's and artist Dustin Nguyen's heralded comic series, *Descender* and *Ascender* (published by Image Comics starting in 2015 and 2018, respectively). In the first main subsection, I argue how illustrative fictional cases (some involving robots) can mirror inter-human ethical struggles in our own world and examine what I call the "The R2-D2 and Wall-E Syndrome". Next, I look at some representative theoretical, literary, and biblical examples of sacrifice, especially regarding morally problematic theories about Jesus' death on the cross, a classic Western example of sacrificial love. I then provide a brief context for why I chose *Descender* and *Ascender* and highlight some of the main themes and characters in the comics. In doing so, I draw from three main examples: the cyborg and mother Effie (Queen Between), the companion robot TIM-21, and the robot Driller ("a real killer"), where I glean key traits of sacrificial love as empathetic, unconditional, and morally redemptive. I close with how to distinguish unholy and holy forms of sacrificial love and reflect on how the examples of sacrificial love in the comics ultimately complement my reading of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross while adding some stipulations to his oft-quoted saying: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

Keywords: *Descender*; *Ascender*; Dustin Nguyen; Jeff Lemire; sacrifice; love; sacrificial love; atonement; comics studies; empathy; redemption



Received: 21 November 2024

Revised: 3 April 2025

Accepted: 7 April 2025

Published: 17 April 2025

Citation: Admirand, Peter. 2025. Sacrificial Love (Of Cyborgs, Saviors, and Driller, a Real Robot Killer) in the Comics *Descender* and *Ascender*. *Humanities* 14: 91. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h14040091>

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1. To Lay Down One's Life

In the comic *Descender* and its sequel *Ascender*, a robot-killer ("Driller, a real killer"), twisted and haunted by guilt from a murderous act, sacrifices his life to save another and thereby helps restore the galaxy. Indeed, Driller's fictional story will be a keystone of this article's examination of such sacrificial love, in which I employ examples from the comics to highlight a sacrificial love of one's life for another that is empathetic, unconditional, and morally redemptive. While I take it for granted that comics provide a rich medium for literary, philosophical, and theological analysis,¹ a few words further below will be needed regarding language about a robot's moral fall and catharsis. Can robots even have a consciousness and free will that entail corresponding legal and moral rights? While the philosophical and technical expertise to answer such a question are compelling, I take it for granted here that robots could become beings with rights and deserving or capable of such sacrificial love, in what I call the "R2-D2 and Wall-E Syndrome".² In the first main subsection, I highlight my rationale for this and argue how illustrative fictional cases can mirror inter-human ethical struggles in our own world. Next, I look at some representative theoretical, literary, and biblical examples of sacrifice, especially regarding

morally problematic theories about Jesus' death on the cross, a classic Western example of sacrificial love.

Because I primarily analyze authentic acts of sacrificial love from story arcs in the comics *Ascender* and *Descender*, I then provide a brief context for why I made this choice and highlight some of the main themes and characters in the comics (see Figure 1; and for a timeline of key events in the comics, see Appendix A, Figure A1).



Figure 1. Covers of the author's copies of *Descender* 1 and *Ascender* 1, drawn by Justin Nguyen and written by Jeff Lemire.

In doing so, I draw from three main examples: the cyborg and mother Effie (Queen Between), the companion robot TIM-21, and an extended focus on the robot, Driller ("a real killer"), where I gleam key traits of sacrificial love as empathetic, unconditional, and morally redemptive.

I close with some final thoughts on sacrificial love, on how to distinguish unholy and holy forms of it, and reflect on how the examples of sacrificial love in the comics ultimately complement my reading of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross while adding some stipulations to his oft-quoted saying: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).³

2. Robots, Electric Sheep, and Dignity: The R2-D2 and Wall-E Syndrome

There are no shortages of novels, movies, video games, tv shows, and other media that include robots and some grappling or subplot involving robot rights, consciousness, free will, responsibility, and the ethics of creating non-human, sentient life. A list would move us beyond a comfortable wordcount, but confer these three representative examples. In Mary

Shelly's *Frankenstein*, human scientist Victor Frankenstein fashions a living being without any thoughts to the created being's own needs, desires, or rights. While Victor succeeds in the act of creation, he is engulfed with disgust for what came to be called the Creature or "the Monster".⁴ Following a series of traumatic events,⁵ the Creature invites Frankenstein to sit by a fire in a mountain hut so he can listen to the Creature's woeful tale, steeped in regret and isolation: "but am I not alone, miserably alone?", he asks Frankenstein.⁶ Further into his monologue, he utters: "Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?"⁷ From its literary inception, the novel is a warning to hubristic humanity thinking they can play God without consequences.⁸

In *Frankenstein*, moreover, a lack of empathy with the Creature is a deep sign of moral failure.⁹ Like Shakespeare's Richard III, who claims dogs bark at him and children mock his deformity, the Creature can cite a mix of both societal blame and individual choice and responsibility for what he became, even if he originally hoped to be good.¹⁰ But while Richard III could wield his power, rhetorical skill, and ample freedom to bend others to his will,¹¹ the Creature seems to have less recourse outside brute force. We see this same struggle for freedom and moral choice by some Replicants in the *Blade Runner* movies, comics, and video games (based on Philip K. Dick's novella, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*).¹² Replicants were beings created and engineered through human genetics by Eldon Tyrell, who says in the 1982 film that replicants are "more human than human".¹³

But for many human beings, these replicants are another word for slaves. Again, we are presented with created beings abused or misused by the creators who care little about their desires or dreams to become free and recognized individuals, but will punish them severely if they succumb to any of humanity's base urges like violence and lying.¹⁴ Thus, in the 1982 *Blade Runner* movie, we have the famous "like tears in the rain" monologue from the replicant rebel leader Roy Batty (see Figure 2). While Batty is fighting Blade Runner Rick Deckard (whose job is to "retire" (kill) replicants), Deckard mistimes a jump from a roof and soon dangles precipitously from a steel beam. Roy effortlessly leaps over and looks down at Deckard, saying: "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave".¹⁵ Throughout the film (especially the Director's Cut), Deckard has his own existence and identity questioned, as distinguishing human from replicant relies upon the (fictional) "Voight-Kampff Empathy Test" which examines pupil dilation and responses based on a series of emotional comments and questions.¹⁶ In the movie, Deckard not only forsakes his Blade Runner role but illegally falls in love with a Replicant named Rachael. They escape and fly off together in a Spinner.¹⁷

The near indistinguishability of human creators and their artificially created beings is a repeated trope in the genre, usually to justify humanity's horrible treatment of the robots (and acting as a metaphor for the racism, abuse and maltreatment of some humans by others).¹⁸ In the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* television series (airing from 2003 to 2009), humans believed that they were the creators of robots called the Cylons only to discover that the Cylons had evolved and now had models that looked and acted human or did not even know they were Cylons.¹⁹ These differences led to both a Cylon Civil War and Cylons still choosing to side with humanity after discovering they were really Cylons. As with Replicants and Blade Runners, Cylon-human love blossoms. In sci-fi, such interspecies love, especially at times where interracial love was frowned upon or forbidden in actual society, were meant to challenge contemporary times.²⁰

In *Battlestar Galactica*, though, such inter-species love only followed after a long and painful struggle, especially in the aftermath of the Cylon genocidal attack against humanity where torture and murder of Cylons were justified by alleging they were not human and felt no pain. In "Flesh and Bone" (S01E08), the viper pilot Kara Thrace (callsign "Starbuck"), on account of a missing nuke in the Battlestar Galactica fleet, tortures and waterboards

Cylon model Leoben (see Figure 3). These televised scenes were particularly charged when the episodes aired in light of the US War on Terror and allegations and proof of the torture of Muslim prisoners by US soldiers in Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and other black op sites.²¹ Also disturbing is how Starbuck takes pleasure in Leoben's torture, justifying it by memories of human deaths and convincing herself that the Cylon Leoben is just "a bunch of circuits with a bad haircut", that he has "no soul" but is "just software".²²



Figure 2. The Replicant, Roy Batty (portrayed by Rutger Hauer) from *Blade Runner*, 1982.

While I morally oppose Starbuck's rationalizations and actions above, again, I am not concerned here with scientific, philosophical, and theological questions regarding whether consciousness, freedom, and responsibility within beings, whether human, robot, or non-human animals, are authentic and real. As noted, this article focuses on some key instances of sacrificial love in the sci-fi and magical worlds of the comics *Descender* and *Ascender*. I am not examining whether a robot or a cyborg has (morally and legally) legitimate feelings, consciousness, or dignity and whether they should be deemed unique beings with rights and therefore treated with respect. I take it for granted, like the cyborg character Effie does in the comics (more details below), that these robots and cyborgs are beings who cannot be harmed and injured without legal and moral repercussions.

Consequently, as with human beings, I would argue that in cases of sufficient evidence of rational choice, free will, and intentions, such beings can be praised, blamed, or punished based on their actions.²³ In other words, for the sake of this article, I am not distinguishing between some hierarchal value of a robot, human, or cyborg so that if, hypothetically, each fell into a river and I could only save one, I clearly must save the human. As we see below, this position will be challenged in the comics from all sides with acts of genocide and robotocide.

Theologically, my position is rooted in the sacredness of all creation, or in the context of Buddhist interbeing,²⁴ the notion that all of creation is interdependent and linked (which need not require the Buddhist notion of cyclical rebirth and death). In practice, though, my views above are murky. First, we, as a species, continue to treat some human beings as if they have less value than others (whether in modern day slavery, general indifference to the poor and unhoused, or chosen ignorance in the suffering of some people in seemingly insignificant geopolitical places). Secondly, regarding treatment of non-human animals,

our record historically (at least outside most non-Indigenous cultures) is abysmal, if not genocidal (confer wolves, bears, etc.).²⁵ From our thinking that dogs did not feel pain so could be tortured in scientific experiments to how we currently treat (torture) chickens or cows in slaughterhouses, many of us continue to wreak havoc and gratuitous bloodshed across farms, fields, and seas, or more accurately, blissfully allow others to do so, often the poorly paid who do our dirty work.²⁶ (Note: I am neither vegan nor vegetarian so profess no innocence here).



Figure 3. Starbuck interrogating the Cylon Leoben in the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* television series.

Third, I am clearly biased (or brainwashed) by what I will call the “R2-D2 and Wall-E Syndrome”, founded upon the ubiquitous movies, tv shows, video games, and novels where robots’ quirky personalities and uniqueness are taken for granted, and any abuse or mistreatment of them is condemned (If one of my children or R2-D2 fell into a river, I imagine my moral conundrum could be diverted as R2-D2 survived his splash in the swamps of Dagobah). Trolley car joke aside,²⁷ the point is that as a child, I never questioned the value, dignity, and personhood (if that is the right word!) of C3P0 or R2-D2. And Wall-E only cemented that belief. My reasoning might boil down to the following I would save

my child over R2-D2 but not because R2-D2 was not a real being deserving to be saved but difficult choices under constraint must be made.²⁸

More importantly, I link this openness for respect toward all beings as a counter to our historic tendency as a species to withhold respect and dignity. Too often, we are miserly and thrifty with the dignity-concept at the expense of our own spiritual and moral integrity and the flourishing of others—whether of humans with different cultures, faiths, genders, or abilities or of non-human, but highly intelligent beings. I am also reminded by a conversation with a Muslim friend of mine when I asked him whether it was ok to yell or curse at the AIs Siri or Alexa: “No, because all of creation deserves respect and it also harms you when you say and treat anything in a harmful or dismissive way”.

This does not mean claims of sentient life and dignity become common and cheap or that science is not needed to test and probe such claims. Nor does it decree that indifferently crushing a rock (even if a diamond!) and crushing a living being are not vastly different kinds of moral actions, especially in non-extreme contexts (i.e., self-defense in the latter case).

3. Sacrifice and Its Discontents

To prepare for my discussion about ethical sacrifice by robots and other beings in *Descender* and *Ascender*, I first touched upon questions of harm, responsibility, and the moral freedom of human and non-human beings. I now examine religious, literary, and philosophical interpretations of sacrifice to help me identify qualities of a sacrifice that are redemptive. Notably, across cultural, religious, historical, and literary terrain, examples of unhealthy, if not immoral sacrifice are abundant. Like the virtue of humility, deeply needed, but too often misused,²⁹ sacrifice has mixed notions, evident in these representative examples. For René Girard, historical, cultural, literary, and religious traditions and stories posit worldviews of us and them, often sustained by scapegoating, usually of a marginalized member or group, or if not marginalized, then especially innocent so that the sins of the people can be placed upon them as expiation. In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon, is sacrificed at the start of the Trojan War so the gods may bless the Greeks’ journey with wind. This was no easy task: the Greek leader initially resisted; indeed, his daughter was “the beauty of my house”.³⁰ But “because of necessity’s yoke”, he yields.³¹ She did not go willingly: “Her supplications and her cries of father/were nothing”.³²

Think also of Antigone (see Figure 4), sentenced to death by her uncle Kreon because Kreon did not bury her rebellious brother Polyneices (unlike Eteocles). “The god of death demands these rites for both” she argues.³³ In rebellion, she breaks Kreon’s law and buries Polyneices, lamenting: “I know that I will die—of course I do—even if you had not doomed me by proclamation”.³⁴ Ultimately, she hangs herself, which also results in Kreon’s son Haemon stabbing himself in grief and then his mother/Kreon’s wife, Queen Eurydice, killing herself. While Antigone proclaims that “My nature is to join in love, not hate”,³⁵ her act produces more death.

In these tales, child sacrifice is a common trope: as the child is a symbol of innocence, their deaths are dreadful and potent. In the Tanach, Isaac (for Christians) is the greatest example of a sacrificial offering (even if frozen in time like Keat’s young lovers bending closer to kiss in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn”).³⁶ For unlike Jephthah’s unnamed daughter in Judges 11, who is ridiculously sacrificed because of his foolish oath,³⁷ the main points of the Akedah are, positively, that God does not require human sacrifice (indeed, the arm and blade of Abraham the father is stayed by the angel; see Figure 5) and, more dubiously from a moral standpoint, Abraham’s obedience to God.³⁸ Being willing to sacrifice your innocent son because of a God’s voice is, of course, less heralded today and most of us understand

why Abraham's wife, Sarah, died immediately after the events described (Genesis 23:1). Regardless, Isaac becomes a Christian type for Jesus sacrificed on the cross, even though the parallels are flimsy and morally unappealing. Note also that while the Qur'an removes some of this moral ambiguity because Abraham's son (usually identified as Ishmael) is older and is a willing participant (Q. 37:97–111), the sacrifice also never happens.



Figure 4. Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Antigone au chevet de Polynice*, 1868.

And what of Christ's death on the cross: should it be deemed a senseless state-inflicted murder, a sacrifice for the expiation of sins, or a sign and testament of both God's love and a common ending for those who speak truth to power? From the Ransom Theory to the Christus Victor theory of Atonement, the former that Jesus was ransomed to free sinful humanity, the latter that Christ's death and resurrection defeat evil and sin, many competing interpretations abound. For Anselm's Satisfaction theory, God's justice demands blood and sacrifice, and Jesus' willingness to do so, as both fully God and fully human (but without original sin), satisfy these demands and criteria.

Unfortunately, some of these well-meaning interpretations have betrayed a non-violent Christ and justified a feudal, blood-thirsty, and vengeful God. They also co-opted and institutionalized a long-lasting and brutal anti-Judaism that falsely blames Jews as god-killers. This deicide charge was a key factor in what Jules Isaac called the teaching of contempt which fueled expulsions, ghettoization, and pogroms against Jews. To what extent such moral indifference and denigration of Jews, in addition to economic and nationalist agendas, fanned the flames of the Shoah, cannot be argued here.³⁹ Regardless, as a post-Auschwitz Catholic theologian, attune to the moral failures wrought from Christological triumphalism,⁴⁰ I reject any interpretations of Christ's death linked to any contention

that Christ had to die because of any original sin transgression, the need to please God (or trick the devil or pay a ransom to the devil) by atoning for sins through a sacrificial offering (Girard again, too). I also discount any cosmological claim that creation was irredeemably damned because of original sin but that Jesus' death and resurrection satisfy God and restores the salvation of humanity. This means that I find many passages in the Gospels, Pauline epistles, Patristic sources, or Vatican statements problematic if taken at face value. Instead, I laud the Franciscans who claimed that God sent Jesus purely as an act of unconditional love and grace,⁴¹ or of liberation theologians, like Jon Sobrino, who see Christ's state-backed murder as a common but tragic consequence of a life endowed to be a voice for the voiceless.⁴² Such figures challenge injustice within political, military, and institutional religious systems, seeking, instead, social and systemic change through non-violence, social justice, acts of mercy, and table fellowship with sinners, tax collectors, lepers, and anyone else open to inaugurating the reign of God among us. I will revisit these ideas in the conclusion, but for now, I turn to sacrificial love in the comics *Descender* and *Ascender*.



Figure 5. *The Sacrifice of Isaac* by Rembrandt (1635).

4. *Descender* and *Ascender*

Writer Jeff Lemire's and artist Dustin Nguyen's heralded comic series, *Descender* and *Ascender*, were published by Image Comics starting in 2015 and 2018, respectively.⁴³ The sweep of both comics is vast and incorporates many themes linked to classic sci-fi and fantasy. While *Descender* ran for 32 issues and is in the sci-fi soap opera genre, its sequel, *Ascender*, includes 18 issues with fantasy elements as well. Taken together, a key theme in the fifty individual issues is finding harmony and balance, especially in power relations involving the robotic and the magical and how to distribute and use that power justly.

As a medium, comics provide a visual and verbal platform that demands a different kind of attention than reading a short story or novel, for example. In comics, how the artistic style, color, layout, gutters, word balloons, character depictions, and fonts are juxtaposed, blended, or differentiated between and among panels and pages encourage further analytical perspectives and avenues for interpretation and meaning-making. For example, analyzing the word balloons, thought balloons, and captions on a page can be augmented by highlighting how the scene's stylistic and color depiction heightens the mood or how a character's facial or bodily portrayal showcases internal and outward emotions or how a recurrent symbol in the background or foreground accentuates an issue's theme or a character's current state. Noting font sizes, color, placement, and style are also important but often overlooked features. In short, as comics are a multimodal medium,⁴⁴ especially in the mixture of art and text, its unique features sharpen analytical and thematic reading and interpretation.⁴⁵

Descender and *Ascender* are particularly resonant in these regards with a versatile artist (and sometimes writer) like Nguyen, who excels in visual storytelling, paired with writer/artist Jeff Lemire, who scripted the work but also drew some of its variant covers. Nguyen comments that "For the entire run of both our series (*Descender* and *Ascender*) I painted using traditional watercolors—the only difference being for *Descender* I used a 300 lb softpress watercolor paper stock, and for *Ascender* I used a 300 lb hotpress version of the same".⁴⁶ In one blog post describing how he envisioned and painted the cover of *Descender* 30, he wrote that "Growing up, my favorite comic covers were the ones featuring characters conveying strong emotion in tense situations. I was also fascinated with watercolor techniques. The way the paint bled off the page, the visceral nuances that the brush left, the splatter, the texture, the imperfections. Now that I am creating covers myself, the attraction for this traditional medium is even stronger".⁴⁷

In terms of plot, the narrative arcs of *Descender* and *Ascender* are suffused with the hope and promise of organic and inorganic synthesis and robotic, AI, human, and non-human species partnership, collaboration, and love—but always under threat by war, societal conflict, and a failure of embracing cultural, religious, political, and species pluralism. In this imagined sci-fi and fantasy world, science enables the exploration and colonization of foreign planets, space travel, and AI super-intelligence, but the corresponding need for a moral, spiritual, and pluralist vocabulary still seems undermined or always under threat. This threat has also been acted upon by a "robot genocide" (D1)⁴⁸ and later by a revenge genocide enacted by the Descenders, a supreme AI and robot civilization that believes it can decide whether a galaxy's life forms deserve to live or die based on their own binary ethics. When these genocidal robots temporarily withdraw from the galaxy, the power vacuum is filled by a group of tyrannical witches called the Coven, ruled by Mother. Deeming herself a savior, Mother makes her cronies constantly spew that "Mother loves you, Mother save us". She rules the universe with her frigid, self-centered, despotic hatred (though deemed as love), supported by vampires and ghouls who imprison survivors in blood camps. Like Orwell's Big Brother (See Figure 6), Mother is everywhere and always watching.⁴⁹



Figure 6. The cover of *Ascender 2* (drawn by Dustin Nguyen), showing Mila (holding Bandit) surrounded by the eyes and vampire supporters of Mother. “Mother loves you!” as they repeat.

Nevertheless, despite bounty hunters and the elite and corrupt seeking their own agendas and propping up their own kind, signs point to greater unity. This union is initially forged in the human child, Andy Travers, and his caregiver bot, TIM-21. It is later embodied in Mila, the child of an adult Andy and his childhood love Effie, and a cast of bedraggled, flawed, but mostly likeable souls (see Figure 7).

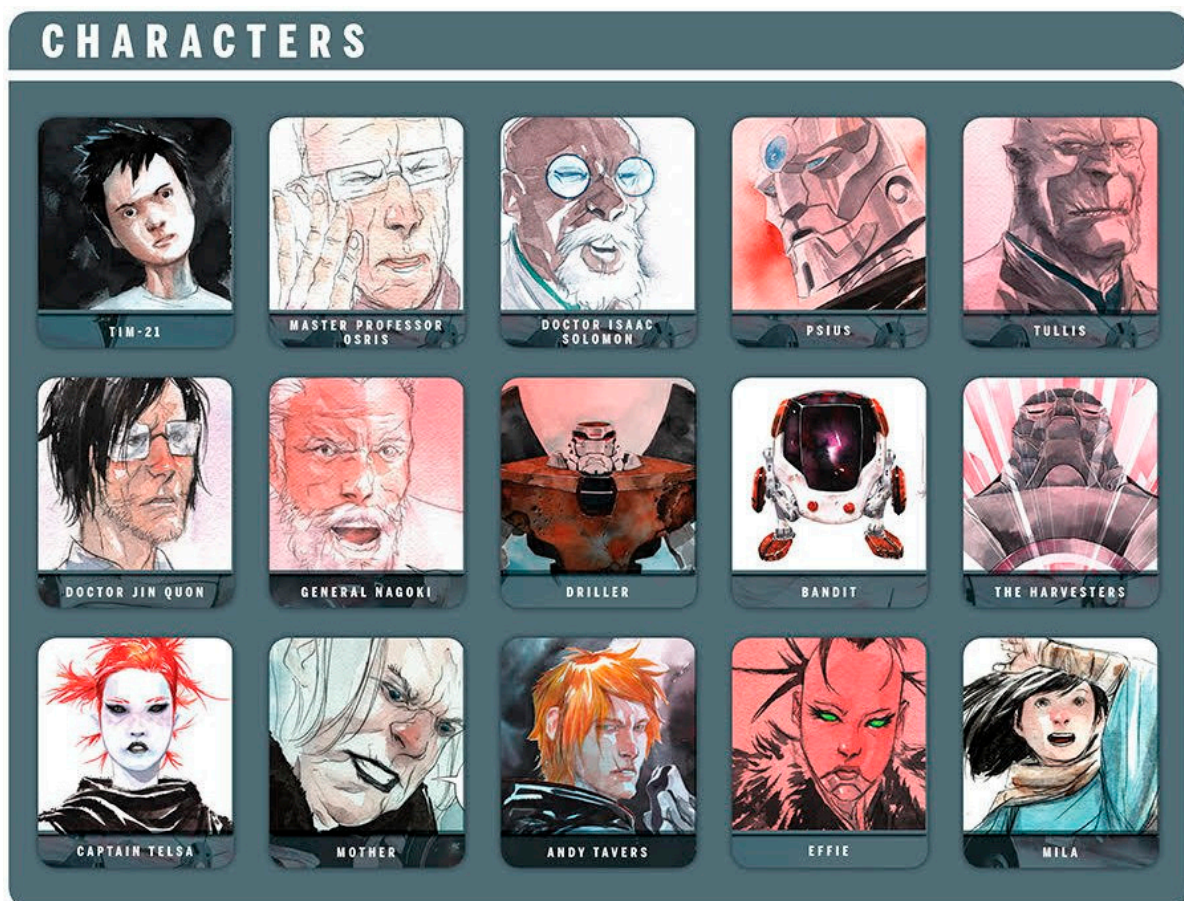


Figure 7. Character List of some key characters in *Descender* and *Ascender* by artist Dustin Nguyen.

5. Sacrifice in *Descender* and *Ascender*

Freely chosen, altruistic, moral-based, inspiring, and social-justice based sacrifice is a common thread throughout *Descender* and *Ascender* and is the counter to the very real acts of evil, genocide, and selfishness that also dominate. It is these acts of sacrifice, even if not immediately successful in overturning or defeating various tyrannical powers, that best represent the holiness and goodness in such worlds. While, further below, I will only focus on three examples from the comics, there are numerous examples, including the following.

1. Amaya Travers, Andy's mother, sacrifices herself so her son escapes after the mining incident in Dirushu. She then chooses to go back into the mine to try to save the colony, too, but ultimately perishes along with everyone who remained.⁵⁰
2. United Galactic Council (UGC) officer Tullis sacrifices himself⁵¹ on the planet Sampsun (D18) when an enormous WORM creature attacks him along with Effie, Andy, Bandit, and Driller. He fights the WORM so the others can retreat to a ship and escape. Before doing so, he tells Andy that "Promise me you'll get Telsa⁵² out of trouble. No matter what else you do, promise me that" (D18). A startled Andy stammers: "I-I promise", and in a side profile in the next panel, Tullis says: "And tell her—tell her I always loved her. . . just like she was my own daughter" (D18).
3. Helda Donnis, Private Second Class, UGC is the devoted companion to Telsa in *Ascender* who will go wherever she goes: "Once my Captain always my Captain", as he often tells her. When Telsa agrees to risk her life and bring Andy and Effie's daughter Mila to a safe haven in space (when ships had become forbidden by death per Mother's orders), they venture to some island to reach Telsa's hidden ship only to see it had become occupied by a spirit/magical demon.⁵³ Helda lures the spirit

out of the ship, willing to sacrifice himself so Telsa can get Mila away and fly the ship. Fortunately, Helda is saved by the wizard, Pelliot P. Mizerd (see the next example below).

4. Pelliot P. Mizerd, like Obi Wan Kenobi on Tatooine in *Star Wars*, was an elderly wizard who chose the life of a loner, in his case on the planet Woch, where there was much magic (D20). Despite his struggles, he not only helps a depressed, almost suicidal Driller but teaches and hones Mila's magical powers (A15) and later sacrifices himself when trying to protect Mila, Bandit, Telsa, and Helda from the Gnishians.
5. Kanto the Blood Scrapper did not know that he was a robot grafted with false memories, making him think he had been a husband and father whose wife and kids were killed by vampires. He had believed he was "a servant of the only true God" (A8) and for whom "Vengeance is my holy mission" (A13). When he discovers his past was a lie (A16), he wants his engineer-creator to euthanize him (A17), but later chooses to save the robot TIM-21's life by allowing TIM's memories and identity to override his own false memories and inhabit his exterior body.⁵⁴

Almost every character fighting against the magical tyranny of Mother and her Coven, the genocidal aims of the Hardwire robots, or mass destruction of the Descenders show signs, moments, and tendencies for sacrificial love. However, the three examples below encapsulate a sacrificial love characterized here as empathetic, unconditional, and morally redemptive.

5.1. TIM-21's Empathic, Sacrificial Love

TIM-21 was designed as a model carebot with a high level of empathy by his creator, the brilliant, but troubled scientist (and later full cyborg (!), Dr Quon).⁵⁵ TIM-21 was initially the bot companion⁵⁶ of a young Andy Travers until they were tragically separated after Andy has to evacuate the mining colony of Dirushu where his mother and everyone else dies. Fortunately for TIM-21, Andy's mother had deactivated him, sparing him from the height of a robot cull. Once reactivated a decade later, though, TIM-21 is immediately snared within the violence between robots and non-robots. Despite learning of these tragic events, TIM-21 simply wants to reunite with Andy, the boy, now a young man, who was his brother and best friend.

In one early narrative arc, TIM-21 is rescued from the melting pits by a group of rebellious robots who want him to lead a revolution against non-robots. He soon meets another TIM-series robot, but unlike TIM-21, TIM-22 has rebelled against any compassionate programming. TIM-21 soon realizes he, too, has a choice. And so, even as TIM-21 feels called to join other robots in a world protected against humans and other creatures, his bond with Andy remains a guiding light. TIM-21 seeks communion between robots and non-robots not the destruction of one or the other.⁵⁷

TIM-21's story is steeped in the power of compassion for others as well as bravery and purity that become richer and deeper even after learning about betrayals and frailty. While his empathy is deemed as weakness by the robots who seek to destroy humanity, it is his empathy that enables him to see goodness within people and believe in their redemption. There are multiple plot points of his choice to put others before him—to lay down his life—most evidently in the final battle against both the rebellious robots, the Hardwire (among others!), and then with Mother and her Coven. His entire existence, like Effie and the repentant Driller, seems devoted to sacrificial love.

The example I highlight here is at the end of *Descender* (issue 32), when the Descenders have decreed the galaxy that Andy and the others live in should be destroyed because of the way its inhabitants failed to learn from previous mistakes. Like Abraham arguing with God before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, "Will you indeed sweep away the

righteous with the wicked?” (Genesis 18:23, NRSV updated), Tim pleads the case against the Descenders’ all-or-nothing ethics. They are not swayed but ultimately agree that if TIM-21 goes with them and leaves this world, then his friends and many others will not be destroyed. TIM-21 agrees, even if this means isolation and banishment from those he loves (D32; see Figure 8).⁵⁸



Figure 8. From *Descender* 32; art by Dustin Nguyen and words by Jeff Lemire.

In the end, TIM-21 would have died if not for the many sacrifices of others (especially Driller’s) or of those willing to sacrifice their lives in defending his in the final cataclysmic battle, notably Effie, Tesla, and Mila (A18).

5.2. Effie’s Unconditional, Sacrificial Love

Orphaned in the first Harvester Attack (by the Descenders; see Figure 9), young Effie meets fellow orphan Andy Travers just at the point both have lost everything. Andy had

arrived from Dirushu, still hoping that his mother is alive. Together, the children face the truth. All they now have is each other. For over six years, Andy and Effie remain in the orphanage and their friendship blossoms. But one morning, Andy wakes her up in the girls' tent to say that he cannot remain in the orphanage any longer. He needs to become a Scrapper "now. My mom. Your parents. The robbers have to pay for what they did" (D15). Effie wants no part of killing, but she loves him. "I want to be **more** than your best friend", Effie tells Andy, "I go where you go, Andy. Always". A splash page shows the young teenagers in their first kiss (D15).



Figure 9. Images by Dustin Nguyen showing a teenage Effie on the left (from the cover of *Descender* 15) and then Effie as a cyborg, Queen Between, on the cover of *Descender* 10.

The scene then jumps to four years later. They are now married but struggling as scrappers who do not own their own ship. And Effie, who never wanted to be part of such a life, is sick of all the "ugliness". She wants to make the world better. Andy, though, is consumed by his role as a scrapper and remains bitter and vengeful. When he insists on killing robots who are not "war bots", Effie rebukes and leaves him (D15). It only gets worse. While later protesting a robot killing and trying to save a robot's life, Effie is attacked by a Gnishian and falls into a melting pit, severely burned over much of her body. She only survives with robotic replacements, noticeably at first, her right arm. Andy is notified of her condition and flies out to help her, but she wants nothing to do with him, convinced he is a murderer (D15). She next joins a group called "The Between" (D10), and embraces an even more extreme cyborg life, calling herself Queen Between. When Andy again tracks her down in need of help, she coldly reminds him: "I told you. . . I will not respond to my **flesh name** anymore. If you want to talk to me, you will call me by my artificial name" (D10). And she still believes Andy is a murderer. "Machine life is still life, Andy" (D10).

Ironically, her use of “between” in this stage of her life does not include both the human and robotic but seems to become anti-flesh, a type of cyborg gnosticism. As Andy fell into a hatred of the robotic, she seems to hate what is not robotic; both are extremes. Much of their story will be finding a way back to each other as a middle ground, as a healthy state of in-between. The story to get there is winding. Eventually, Andy begins to face his trauma and bitterness from his mother’s death and to show regret towards his own moral failures. Andy and Effie reunite. After the Descenders have attacked the second time, removed all the robots from the galaxy (A3), and killed billions of lives, Effie and Andy escape to Dirushu. For three years, they share a secluded life and soon have a child, Mila.

Meanwhile, this mass death spurs another anti-technology backlash, but more importantly, it enables the restoration of magic that had been curtailed in previous decades. While this magic (also reminiscent of a religious faith) can be used for good or evil, it is soon controlled and hoarded by the despot Mother. Nowhere is safe from her despoliation. Soon her vampires and other ghouls attack Andy, Effie and Mila on Dirushu. Scurrying to reach a ship, Effie is bitten while trying to shield Mila. She pleads with Andy to escape with their child.

He reluctantly does so as Effie becomes a blood-thirsty vampire controlled by Mother’s forces. Meanwhile, Andy and Mila, find shelter in an isolated cabin on the planet Sampsun. They presume Effie is dead and so Andy just tries to keep Mila safe and alive. Years go by only to have Andy imprisoned by Mother’s forces but finding himself in Effie’s vampiric presence. He tries to break whatever spell she is under, but only after she is sated with another’s flesh is she momentarily restored to her own thoughts. Despising what she has become, Effie begs Andy to terminate the life she had been forced to endure. She places a dagger in Andy’s hands and pleads: “I want it to end like this. While I still remember you” (A10). He still resists, but she insists it is the only way to fix her and expunge her vampiric existence. “Do you love me? Do you still love me?”

She guides his hand as the blade pierces her chest. She dies in his arms. Andy escapes with Ellie’s body and finds a quiet place to bury her. Meanwhile, Effie’s cyborg part resuscitates her heart and cleanses her body of the vampire blood. She resurrects from the grave.⁵⁹

Thinking only of her daughter Mila who she has not seen in years and who thought her dead, Effie frantically tries to find and reach her. Meanwhile, Mila, who has since learned she has magical powers, sees TIM-21 defeated by Mother and her Coven. Unbowed, the young girl battles Mother on her own. Seeing this, Effie is an embodiment of fury, especially as Andy (uncharacteristically) tries to hold her back, perhaps fearing more for Effie’s life.⁶⁰ “Let go of me! That’s my baby!” she yells at him (A18). Effie, though with no magical power of her own, jumps in to defend her daughter and shield her from any harm. Heroically, Effie is not only able to defeat Mother, but she also becomes a synthesis of both the magical and the machine world. Unlike Mother, though, she has no intention of hoarding this power. “It’s too much—I don’t—I don’t want it”, Effie exclaims, as the power sources of magic and machine course through her. With a smile, the inert TIM-21 replies: “Then, give it back, Queen Between. Give it to all of them. . . Give it to the galaxy” (A18). Effie/Queen Between, rejecting power only for herself, returns it to the entire universe in a beautiful act of kenosis. She did not want power or revenge. She wants to return to her daughter and their life with Andy and others.

5.3. Driller’s Redemptive Sacrifice of Love

Driller is an old “drop and deploy” driller robot (A4) sent to mines and other dark places to drill. In order to understand the heights of Driller’s redemptive sacrificial acts, we need to gain a deeper picture of his moral descents.

When we first meet Driller in the comic, he seems threatening with his massive metal bulk and height and his drills that can spin and cut through rock, let alone porous flesh. Yet, while he immediately becomes the protector both of a tiny droid dog-bot, Bandit and TIM-21, Driller's first spoken words in the comic swivel and spin spite: "Driller hate hrrrmans!!"⁶¹ After viciously pulverizing scrappers (who kill robots), he looks tenderly at Bandit: "Little bot broken?" he asks (D2). Indeed, *Descender's* second issue ends with a splash of a pieta image with Driller (as if the Blessed Mother) cradling a limp TIM-21 (as if Christ). Around them are warnings and beeping: "TIM-21 total system failure", while Little Bandit arfs in concern (D2; see Figure 10). So begins the reader's complex and deeply moving journey with this guilt-ridden, but also amazingly brave and kind robot. "Whatever happens—Stay behind me!" Driller tells Bandit when they are surrounded by hostile enemies (D5). Moreover, while Driller feels he is stupid and berates himself for being unable to fix a broken TIM-21 (D3 and D4), it is his proficiency in killing that seems to be his focus, as he repeatedly shouts like a mantra, "Driller is a killer, a real killer". Initially it seems mostly like a boast, especially in the heat of some battle when Gnishian scrappers, vampires, or genocidal robots are trying to maim him or those he is trying to protect. In *Descender* 16, we learn Driller's origin story and what that mantra really means. Driller is not just a killer, but much worse.

Driller's origin story is encapsulated around a complicated series of events that led Driller to Andy, Effie, Tullis, and others. Tullis, who had survived the melting pits with Driller, mentions that Driller has been moaning all night in his sleep and has been quiet since "the blond one showed up" (D11), meaning Andy. As mentioned above, a young Andy had to flee Dirushu because of a poisonous leak that ended up killing everyone else including his mother. Andy was also separated from his best friend companion TIM-21, and in the ensuing years became a scrapper—a robot killer—though part of him also dreamed of one day locating TIM-21. Now, years later, Driller finds himself in a group with an older Andy who has no idea what Driller had done to him. The present scene then flashes back into Driller's past as we learn more about both Driller's history and his tragic connections with Andy and TIM-21.

Driller was first sent as an anonymous, unnamed robot to Dirushu just after the original core colony was starting. He was said then to be part of what the company called "Quontech's newest personality upgrades" (D16) but was soon deemed obsolete. In the mines, he labored day and night with one other robot companion, both harassed by taskmaster boss, Henry Trask, who only cares for his wife and six children back on the planet Niyrata. Whatever love Trask has for them is not extended to robots. Finding their long, numerical names inconvenient, he christens "Driller" and the other robot "Scoops", intended to represent both their purpose and whatever essence they have. Mostly, Trask mocks them as "hunks of scrap" (D16) who are "pretty much obsolete" and "junk".

One night, when the robots are supposed to be charging, Scoops wants to talk and asks Driller where he had worked previously. Driller says he was drilling for two years out at mine six "but then they got big, fancy new drills" (D16). He is constantly replaced and told by humans that he is outdated junk. While Scoops says he was at mine 4 and had a nicer human than Trask, Driller says: "Ain't no nicer hrrrmans to Driller. Just make me drill. Never ask me nothing. Never talk to me. Driller just a driller to hrrrmans" (D16).

Scoops thinks humans are just ignorant—they just think "we're hunks of junk". Driller replies: "hrrrmans are hunks of junk" (D16), and Scoops thinks this is funny. They become friends. For years, they toil and endure Trask's neglect and abuse. He never repairs or maintains them. One day, Scoops accidentally fails to detect a gas leak. He apologizes to Trask saying he is broken. The night before Scoops had been even too weak to talk to Driller, Irate at Scoops and worried about his precarious livelihood, Trask attacks Scoops

and destroys him (see Figure 11). Meanwhile, Driller tries to intervene and stop Trask (A16). But then, a group of other humans enter the mine and say they need to evacuate. Trask thinks it is because of the leak. He insists they will seal it, only to hear the other men say it was some kind of attack on Niyrata (where his kids are).



Figure 10. Scene from *Descender 2*, with text by Jeff Lemire and art by Dustin Nguyen showing Driller carrying a near-dead TIM-21 as Bandit concerningly looks on.



Figure 11. A scene from Driller's origin issue (*Descender* 16), words by Jeff Lemire and art by Dustin Nguyen.

Driller, grieving over the destruction of Scoops, burdened by all the drudgery and insults, and hating all humans, bores a new hole, unleashing the poisonous gas. Trask calls him an idiot, but Driller only rages as the poison seeps everywhere: "No more hrrrmans!" (A16) he shouts. Then, turning to Scoops, who remains motionless, he says: "Driller did something, Scoops. . ." And, in another panel, a pan-out shows Driller kneeling by Scoops as two green swirls glow as the poisonous gas spreads from the tunnels. Driller, again, says that "Driller did something bad" (D16). The next page shows all the dead bodies, including Andy's mother. Words from Driller in a dialogue bubble close the flashback: "Something real *real* bad" (D16).

The scene cuts back into the present where we first see an adult Andy. In the next panel, Tullis says Driller has been moaning all night. Readers now know Driller has been reliving his past and what he had done—even more aware of the consequences and the hurt he inflicted through his action. Tullis asks Driller the following question multiple times: "Driller? What's wrong?" Recall how Driller said humans never talked to him or asked about him. He has since learned there are beings who are good, a realization that compounds the guilt and shame from his action long ago.

As Driller walks away, he says: "Driller a killer". The closing panel of the issue again shows Andy sitting down while Driller's next words are placed above him in a dialogue bubble: "Driller a real killer" (D15). Readers now know Driller's mantra all along has not been a boast, but a guilty confession. I am a murderer, he has been really saying, a real murderer.⁶²

A few issues later (D19), the guilt has fully consumed Driller. On a ship with Andy and the others (having escaped because of the sacrifice of Tullis noted further above), Driller apologizes to Effie and "yappy-bot", as he calls Bandit, "but Driller done a real bad thing. Now Driller gotta go" (D19). He confines himself in the airlock. As the others crowd around outside, Driller repeats his usual language about being a killer. Andy dismisses it as braggadocio, but this time Driller confesses everything, wanting Andy to send him out of the airlock. "Driller was in the mines. . .the mines on Dirushu when you were just a little Hrrrman". Andy still does not see why this matters. Driller says that he wanted to "make them pay. Driller made them all pay", and in a panel showing Andy in shock, Driller continues: "Driller drilled the gas pocket. Driller killed them all. Driller a killer, see? Driller a *real* killer" (D19).

The next panel shows Andy with Effie and another scrapper, Vance, with only dialogue bubbles continuing from Driller: “I’m sorry, Hrrrman. I didn’t know your mama. I’m sure she was a good hrrrman”. Effie is actually between where the two dialogue bubbles are situated—which is interesting because it creates a pause in reading the page—and a smart reader knows Andy’s mother was a good human overall.⁶³ While Driller’s crime also created the context for Andy to meet Effie—leading to the birth of Mila who becomes a synthesis, a means of salvation (D19)—these are unintended good consequences. He says: “Now Driller’s the one that gotta pay”.

Amidst Effie’s protests and after more urging from Driller, Andy ejects Driller into the deep recesses of space, presumably scrapping him (D19). Miraculously, though, he lands on Woch—a small planetoid on the fringes of Sampsonite space. When Driller emerges from his fall and sees another living being (Mizerd), he is doubly disappointed—not another “hrrrman” (D20). As noted above, Mizerd was an old wizard and now hermit who will later be instrumental in teaching Mila about her potent magical powers, but first, Mizerd regains a purpose, which is to walk Driller back from the edge, because Driller expected death and wants to die.

They sit near each other, and Driller tells Mizerd his story. He does not want to talk about why he fell from the sky though. When Mizerd notices Driller’s arm is seizing up and needs oil, Driller hints that he is about to self-scrap: “Hrrrn. . . Driller don’t want repairs. Driller just wants to seize up. No reason for Driller to keep going no more” (D20). Mizerd provides the tough love Driller needs, though, saying that all robots, since the “Quon personality upgrades”, have become “a bunch of drama bots” (D20). When Driller threatens him, Mizerd does not flinch, and Driller backs down. Mizerd says that is what he figured: “Now if you’re done feeling sorry for yourself. . .”.

He tells Driller about a camp nearby where Driller can obtain oil, which happens to be where Mizerd claims he was heading. Mizerd says the least Driller can do is help him carry stuff while heading there (D20). Driller then wants to know if Mizerd’s scared being seen with a bot. “Don’t you hate us like everyone else?” (D20).

Mizerd’s reply is perfect in the context: “Makes no difference to me. I don’t like anyone, bot or not” (D20). He tells Driller, though, he has a choice: he can either stay and seize up or go with Mizerd to receive the help he needs (D20). This could be the first time Driller is given a real choice. As with Scoops, a friendship begins. When they are attacked by Goblins with ghost bombs that Mizerd says makes your “soul turn into a ghost! You become one of their unliving bombs!” (D24), Driller says: “Soul?” And then he turns to the goblins, their bombs splattering on him and shouts: “Driller ain’t got no soul! Driller a killer” (D24). He enjoys shredding a bunch of goblins, making Mizerd fear that he is now with a “**guilty, murderous**, crazy robot” (D24), although Mizerd has no problems eating the dead goblins (D24).

But the question of the soul is apt, especially in this context of sacrificial love. Just as Deckard and others asked above: do robots have souls? Do humans? What is a soul? Does Driller no longer have a soul because he was/is a killer? Did he lose his soul? Or does Driller still have a soul because he loves and repents and grieves for what he did? Are not the soulless—if there are any—those who choose hate unrepentantly? But again, who does that, unless, like TIM-22, they were abused, etc.? Like Driller’s body count, the questions pile up.

Later when both Driller and Mizerd are captured by the sadistic Gnishian King S’nok, the king tells Driller that his technicians downloaded all his memories, so he learns everything Driller did. “I know that you truly are a ‘real killer’. Tsk. What a bad robot you are. All those poor people on the mining colony. All those human deaths on your shoulder” (A30). S’nok is an avid murderer who has no guilt so can mock the one who does. He

says he wants to scrap Driller in front of the “boy-bot” (TIM-21) to see if robots really feel anything. At the close of the *Descender* comic, it is Driller who saves both Andy and Effie and so becomes even with Andy (D32).

Then, at the final, cataclysmic battle (A16—18), TIM-21 is ready for a last stand against Mother. Meanwhile, Driller is told to seek safety, but he tells TIM-21: “Driller’s done enough running. Driller’s not leaving you again, Little Bot” (A16). When they charge at Sister/Mother (Weak thing),⁶⁴ Driller is immediately repelled and dismantled (A17). But in *Ascender* 18, the last issue of the series, Driller performs one final sacrificial act. TIM-21, battered and near-death from Mother’s onslaught, calls upon a Harvester to annihilate her, even if it also means being destroyed himself in the process. Drawn over three panels on a single page, Nguyen captures the struggling and plodding movement of Driller. In the first panel, he paints Driller, lifeless and filling the foreground while Mother/Sister endure the Harvester’s Beam and TIM-21 lies helplessly on the ground. In the middle panel, as bits of rocks and dirt splatter about, Driller struggles to rise and inch closer to TIM-21 with Driller’s left arm reaching for Tim and his right arm (with the drill part pointing to the sky), using the ground as leverage. “Little Bot, Driller’s Coming!” he mutters.

In the third and final panel, we have a close-up of Driller burrowing into the ground, with the top gutter cutting off his body and face, as if he is all drill. Meanwhile, TIM-21, with his face pock-marked and his body riven with holes, struggles to speak: “Driller?! Kzzt--are you doing--zzt?!”. Driller claws over to TIM-21 and drags him closer: “Driller doing what he does, Little Bot. Driller drilling” (A18). The framed gutter of the three panels (all the gutters are painted by Nguyen) are thick, unlike the thin gutters separating the panels on the page. The thicker gutter at the bottom of the lowest panel also accentuates the ground and space that Driller needs to penetrate if TIM-21 is to have a chance at survival. And so, Driller drills deep into the ground to move far away from the incoming Harvester beam. As we learn later, he cocoons TIM-21 and absorbs the full impact himself. He saves, not kills; sacrifices (himself), not murders; loves and does not seek vengeance; drilling to sustain and protect life (see Figure 12).

In the aftermath, a moving panel then shows young Mila, who had liked Driller immediately and bonded with him,⁶⁵ clasping her little arms around his wide, metallic, broken body (A18). He sacrificed himself so his friends could live.

5.4. Seeking Meaning in Robotic and Cyborgian Sacrifice

TIM-21 and Driller are robots. Effie is a cyborg, but in the comics, they have what philosophers call full personhood.⁶⁶ They have agency, capabilities, emotional needs, individuality, cognizance of time and their finitude, awareness of their responsibility and intentions, as well as the consequences of their actions (or inactions) upon themselves and others. They yearn, hope, dream, rage, despair, strive, grieve, prevaricate, love, harm, feel shame and guilt, seek companionship and love, aim to better themselves, heal, and secure redemption. As noted in earlier sections, this article is not seeking to examine whether such states, actions, and rights are possible for robotic beings or to define what it means to be a cyborg. R2-D2 and Wall-E have already biased me, so I was more interested in examining these character arcs to probe and form what I mean by a sacrificial love for the other that is rooted in virtues like TIM-21’s empathy, the unconditional and kenotic humility of Effie, and Driller’s swirling, sometimes lumbering morally redemptive turn. Their robotic or cyborgian identities are factors in their distinctiveness but do not inhibit examining their stories to flesh-out the meaning of sacrificial love.

Note also how their moral failings and fragility are not hidden here. Their final actions can border the saintly but their overall life, like ours, was still morally pockmarked. But

these blemishes only beautify their sacrifice; comeliness amidst scars, old wounds, wrinkles, signs of struggle, growth, age, and, in their case, missing bolts or frayed wires.

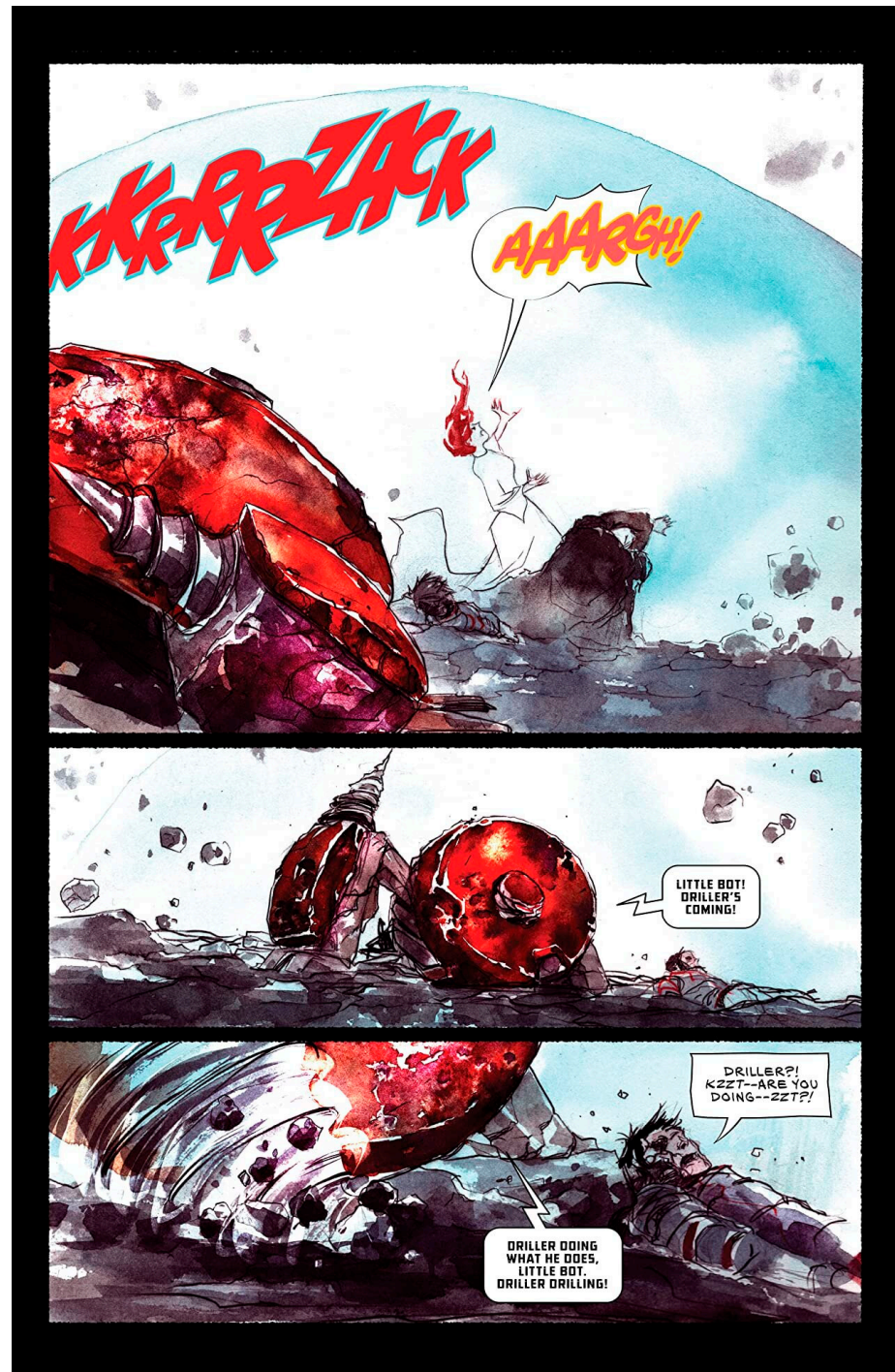


Figure 12. From *Ascender* 18. Words by Jeff Lemire and art by Dustin Nguyen.

While TIM-21, created with the purpose of loving and caring for others, is a type of ideal childlike trajectory for us all to maintain despite the ravages of life, his ‘perfection’ also renders him more unrelatable, unlike Effie and, especially, Driller. That old “drop and deploy” robot, with all his insecurities, anger, grief, shame, gruffness, and “hrrms”, showcases a way of redemption for even the most broken and disfigured. He also embodies how past failures can be sloughed through a sacrifice for love and the greater good of all.

While the final section will apply some of these ideas further to the interpretation of Jesus' sacrifice—and there are some similarities in the narrative experiences of Jesus and a Driller or Effie—the comparisons are only surface-level, like most Christ figures. Christians believe that Jesus was sinless, while Driller committed an unjustifiable atrocity in Dirushu. He also enjoyed killing a bit too much at times. While the cyborg, as both machine and human, can be somewhat paralleled with Jesus' full human and divine nature, we know of no state or period where Jesus despised one of those natures the way Effie initially sought to forsake her fleshy humanity and believed the robotic was superior. In Christianity, Jesus as God made human, did not privilege His divinity but embraced it, even allowing his humanity to suffer and die.

6. Conclusions: TIM-21, Effie, Driller, and Jesus: Sacrificial Love as Empathetic, Unconditional, and Redemptive

In Moshe Halbertal's *On Sacrifice*, he writes that *korban*, the Hebrew term for sacrifice, has developed into three linked but differing meanings, first as a human offering or gift to God, then later describing what is given up or renounced for a greater good, and, finally (in Modern Hebrew), referring to a victim of a crime.⁶⁷ This article's focus is best represented in Halbertal's second example, in which I have sought to frame the highest form of love as a holy or mature sacrificial act in which someone is willing to die to save another life. After touching on a range of literary and biblical examples (along with some theories about sacrifice), I focused on the comics *Descender* and *Ascender* and outlined three key aspects for sacrificial love to be both the highest form of love, namely showing empathetic love, as in the story of TIM-21, unconditional love in the case of Effie, and morally redemptive love in my keystone focus on Driller.

1. In reflecting upon the highest ideals of love and what a love of lasting and integral value mean, sacrifice is posited as a key, if not the key, element. Here, we even encroach upon what is holy, for what can be a greater sign of love, as Jesus remarks, then to lay down one's life for a friend? (John 15:13). But while all self-sacrifices for another are tragic, not all are types of sacrificial love because the act can be tainted by several factors, from coercion and immaturity, including an inordinate desire for martyrdom, to a willingness to die for an ignoble or destructive cause or intention. Such are not true acts of love, which should be free, expansive, and noble. A holy, sacrificial love, is thus always free from compulsion but still an aberration because all life is sacred;
2. Deemed to be the only, best, or last-resort way to save the life of another, who is suffused and ingrained within the love of oneself;
3. Ultimately entwined within both self-love and love of the other. This is because the other is also an extension and distinction of oneself. Thus, the person laying down their life chooses, in love, to sacrifice what is best in them for another because the world we live in, with its many injustices and failures, presents such a choiceless choice.

In the decision and act to sacrifice one's life for the sake of another, be it a person or cause (which is ultimately intended for the good of other people), what must never be minimized is that everyone is priceless and beloved, overflowing with dignity and love. That is precisely what makes this sign of sacrificial love of one's self for another both holy and tragic and how language of the holy and unholy can be invoked. Further above, I discussed the death of Jesus and the various justifying arguments and theories, and why some of these theories raised theological and moral problems. If applying the examples I highlighted from *Ascender* and *Descender* to the story and example of Jesus' life and crucifixion, I would summarize as follows.

Jesus did not die because God so decreed as a need or requirement to counter some hypothetical fall in a garden but because a life devoted to the love of God, friend, and (so-called) enemy often results in the cross—in shame, isolation, suffering, and martyrdom. Such horrors, though, do not have the final word: somehow, in some way, inexplicable to us, despite the level, extent, and profundity of abominations and evils, God can heal, God can save, God can fashion light where once there had only been darkness and gloom. Therefore, as Jesus (again for Christians, fully God and fully human) knew and lived exile (Matt 2:13–15), torture, abandonment, and death (Mark 15:34), he gifts to the many broken and tortured in our world a rich potential solidarity and hope. Despite death, Jesus rose again on the third day (John 20).⁶⁸

Moreover, similar to TIM-21, Jesus' life was devoted and sustained by compassion for others and a love that instilled a willingness to suffer and die for the good of those others. In the gospels, Jesus' life of compassion for the poor and oppressed (Luke 6:20) testifies to such empathy. And like Effie's maternal, unconditional, and kenotic love, Jesus embodied the love of everyone, even one's enemy, a love that came to serve others and not be served (Mark 10:45).⁶⁹ Finally, there is Driller's act of redemptive, sacrificial love, protecting TIM-21, who was (at that point) the fulcrum for defending the universe from the destructive powers of the Coven and the Descenders. In my interpretation, Jesus' death on the cross not only serves as a sign and symbol of a life of truth and social justice but is a splash page of redemptive love that signals for believers a God who created us out of love and is willing to die as a testament to that love. Jesus' resurrection illustrates a life beyond death and bleeds meaning and hope, even after the maws of death and despair. While none of us can reach the heights of Jesus, perhaps we can imitate the empathic love of the companion robot TIM-21, the unconditional love of cyborg Effie, and the redemptive love of Driller, once a real robot killer.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

The following is a visual timeline of events in *Descender* and *Ascender* published by Image Comics in their promotional materials that were released before *Ascender* 1 went on sale on 24 April 2019.⁷⁰

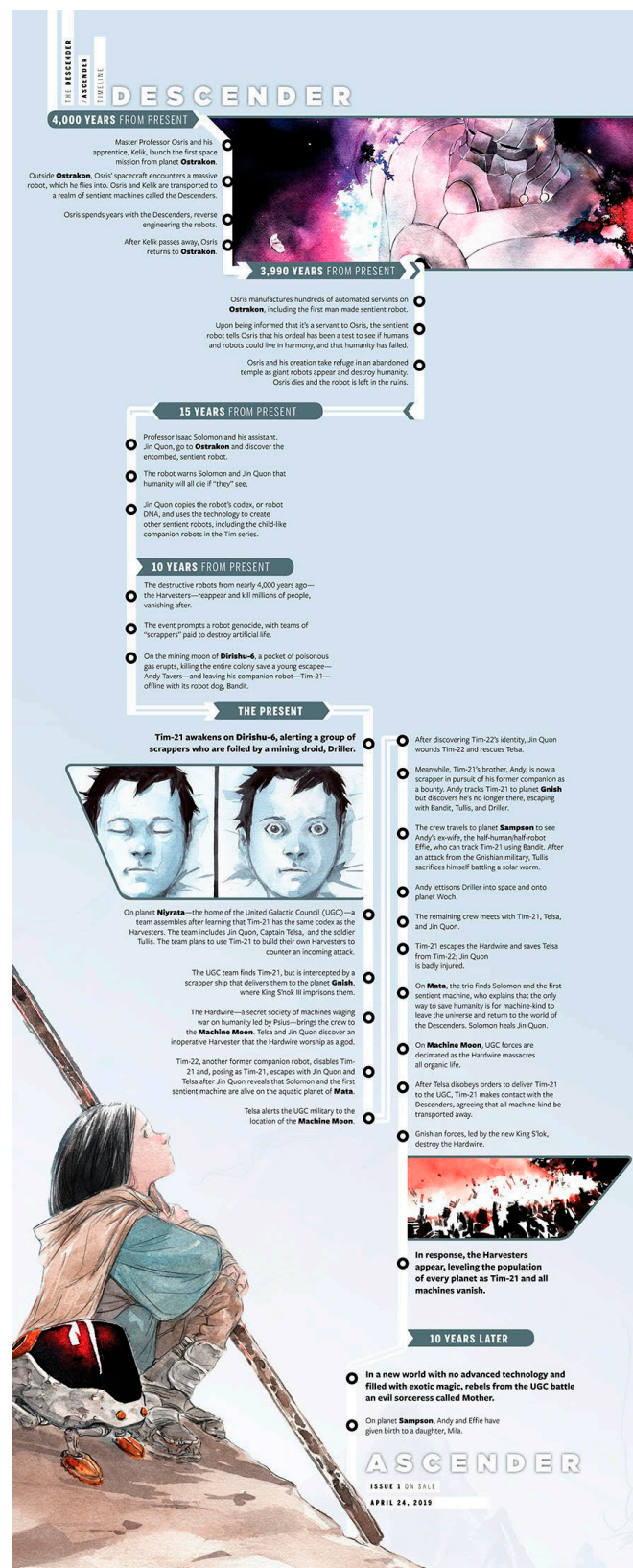


Figure A1. Timeline of *Descender* / *Ascender* by Image Comics with art by Dustin Nguyen.

Notes

- The robust academic field of comics studies needs little justification today, but for some recent comics studies examining religious, theological, or ethical themes, see, for example, (Davis 2024; Reingold and Bujeiro 2022; Lewis and Lund 2017) and the books in the Series "Theology, Religion, and Pop Culture" from Lexington Books/Bloomsbury. See also (Admirand 2023).

- 2 For a Buddhist examination of ethical issues around robots and AI, see (Hongladarom 2021); for a philosophical exploration of questions like “Does a robot have moral agency?”, see (Coeckelbergh 2022); and for a scientific and ethical examination of machine ethics, see (Raper 2024).
- 3 As pointed out in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, this phrase (John 15:13) echoes (along with much of the passage on love and friendship), Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* 9.1169a. The former is a foundational source for my reflections here, but any systematic evaluation of the context and history of the biblical passage is beyond the scope of this work, especially as ultimately, and as I have argued elsewhere, I prefer the Jesus of Mark’s gospel who is more unsure and struggling with what his calling and purpose mean than the confident Jesus in John’s Gospel who knows his purpose and seems to have everything foretold and planned. Especially for the many who have suffered traumatic and horrible suffering, a Christ as a fellow sufferer of anxiety, despair, and suffering can resonate more, especially if that same Jesus believes in, and is the source according to Christians, for redemption and healing. See (Admirand 2012, chap. 2). Note also that in John’s gospel, Jesus says these words about dying for a friend during his extended farewell discourse on Passover, what Christians have since called the Last Supper, a section in John’s Gospel replete with a series of wide-ranging metaphors and theological themes, from images of the vine and the branches to foretelling of the Holy Spirit. On love in John’s Gospel, see (Maloney 2021; Segovia 1982). See also: (van der Watt 2014; Levine and Brettler 2011, p. 187).
- 4 For an interesting feminist and comics studies analysis of God’s creation in Genesis, see (Finck 2022).
- 5 Such traumatic events include the murder of Victor’s brother William and the trial and execution of Justine Moritz (mistakenly blamed for William’s murder (committed by the Creature).
- 6 Shelly (1993, p. 102). The Creature’s main request will be a companion like him which Victor will not bring to fruition.
- 7 Shelly (1993, p. 125).
- 8 For commentary, see (Shelley 2022).
- 9 This is also a claim in traditional anti-theodicies that allege God’s moral failings in light of the problem of evil. See, for example, (Admirand 2012, chs. 1 and 3).
- 10 Confer the following quote: “I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend” (Shelly 1993, p. 101).
- 11 Confer especially Richard’s wooing and bedding of Queene Anne after she scolds and imprecates him for murdering her husband (and others). Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Act 1, scene 2.
- 12 In the novella, Replicants were originally called “Androids” and Blade Runners were “bounty hunters”. These later terms were adopted for the 1982 movie.
- 13 In the novella, androids with a “Nexus-Six brain unit” are the most advanced (Dick 1996, p. 54).
- 14 While I rebuked Frankenstein for a lack of empathy above, note that in Dick’s novella, the android/replicant Rachael is created with excessive empathy to use that against her would-be killers, the bounty-hunters/blade runners. Empathy is also a key characteristic of TIM-21 in *Descender/Ascender*, as noted below. While compassion is the virtue par excellence for the Dalai Lama, empathy has come under some attack, most notably by (Bloom 2017).
- 15 Roy then proceeds to reflect on the unique and potent memories which soon “will be lost like tears in rain”. He then saves Deckard and soon dies. For an article that employs religious and spiritual terms to analyze the film, see (Macarthur 2017).
- 16 Dick (1996, p. 30).
- 17 In *Blade Runner 2049*, we learn that Rachael and Deckard were able to have a daughter, but Rachael died in childbirth. In the novella, Deckard is married but is seduced by Rachael who tells Deckard: “Androids can’t bear children”, and refers to herself as “Chitinous reflex-machines who aren’t alive” (Dick 1996, p. 194), though her reflecting on the implications hint at something greater to her identity. Such is never resolved as the question remains of how and whether she shows humanity, whether through empathy, in her role seducing bounty hunters like Deckard, or in her cynicism and cruelty, especially in killing Deckard’s goat (226–227). Deckard admits to falling for Rachael and even sleeps with her, but the novella’s ending is very different than the film’s.
- 18 See, for example, (Darowski 2014).
- 19 The history is more complicated, especially as teased in the series’ final episodes and notion of its cyclical history. On its links to American culture and the war on terrorism, see (Potter and Marshall 2008).
- 20 This is most evident in the relationship of Cylon Sharon Valeri and BSG Viper Pilot Karl C. Agathon (callsign “Helo”) and a bit more complicated with Caprica 6 and Gaius Baltar. For a series of essays examining the various meanings of interspecies sexual relationships in sci-fi, see (Ginn and Cornelius 2012).
- 21 See, for example, (Hafetz 2016; Slahi 2015; Coll 2019).
- 22 For theological and ethical analysis of *Battlestar Galactica*, see (Mongé-Greer 2022). Other powerful examples (not discussed above) of robots seeking rights or legal recognition include the video game *Detroit: Become Human*, where you play as androids who make moral decisions and who seek true freedom, and the *Mass Effect* games, especially the story arc of EDI in the third game. See, also, many of the Becky Chambers novels, including her *A Monk and Robot* series. For commentary on her Wayfarers series, see (Admirand 2021a). A modern classic on stories of robots seeking redemption and meaning in life is (Cargill 2017).

Questions of robots and souls are frequent ones. As Deckard asks fellow bounty hunter Phil Resch in the novella: “Do you think androids have souls?” (Dick 1996, p. 135).

Proponents of universal salvation, for example, would contend that none of us would rationally choose acts that might condemn us to eternal damnation and so cannot be deemed free and responsible for such choices. For my analysis in the context of theodicy, see (Admirand 2012, chap. 11). Determinists like neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky contend we have no free will because of various factors like the environment, hormones, and genes, and so are not responsible for what we do. We are the ones who are robots. See (Sapolsky 2023). I would contend that we are all constrained to various degrees in terms of how fully free we are and how rationally clear we are in terms of intentions, justifications, and the intended and likely consequences of our actions. Nevertheless, most of us are responsible for the actions (and inactions) we do.

Hanh (1987). From a Christian perspective on interbeing in dialogue with Buddhism, see (Jersak 2024; Knitter 2013, pp. 18–20).

See for example, our bloodlust to wipe out wolves but recent efforts to protect them in (Blakeslee 2018). In Rockstar Game’s *Red Dead Redemption*, occurring in the declining Wild West of America circa 1911, you can see NPCs callously killing buffalo for sport and can even choose to take part in such culling, even to kill the last buffalo and receive a virtual trophy called “Manifest Destiny”. Note, however, that the game’s creators provide moral condemnation of such acts through various indigenous voices, including the Native American Nastas who tells the lead character John Marston (when they both are out riding and white men callously shoot buffalo for sport: “We hunt to eat, not for sport. Soon there will be no buffalo left”).

See (Press 2021).

For a recent take on the trolley dilemma (though not involving *Star Wars*), see (Edmonds 2015).

Wall-E could presumably fly out of the water!

See (Admirand 2019).

See (Aeschylus 1960, line 208, p. 11).

Ibid., line 218, p. 11.

Ibid., line 228, p. 11. On scapegoating, see (Girard 2008). “The defense of victims is both a moral imperative and the source of our increasing power to demystify scapegoating” (3).

See (Sophocles 1991, line 570, p. 181).

Ibid., line 504 (p. 178).

Ibid., line 576 (p. 181).

Keats’ 1819 ode has the line “Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss”; it refers to beauty that is seemingly more potent than in real life because it can never fade and she will always be true, similar as well to the twisted logic of the unreliable narrator in Robert Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover”, composed 1836.

Jephthah’s unnamed daughter was later referred to as Seila or Iphis from medieval sources. Note also that some scholars have argued that she was not killed but was offered to the Lord in a way that had to preserve her virginity. See (Adelman 2022, pp. 1–26). For a famous example critiquing Jephthah, see Peter Abelard’s second letter to Heloise, in which he writes: “Such men (the lords of the earth) could properly be compared with Jephthah, who made a foolish vow and in carrying it out even more foolishly, killed his only daughter” (“Letter 2, Abelard to Heloise”, in Abelard 1974, p. 121).

In *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard examines the Akedah narrative from different angles and perspectives, but still sees Abraham’s blind obedience and faith as ultimately praiseworthy (especially as he never had to go through the killing of his son), but I maintain any teleological suspension of the ethical is theologically self-destructive and opens the door to deicide if not a Deism that leads to God’s meaninglessness in this world.

See (Hayes and Roth 2012; Stone 2024).

See (Pollefeyt 2001, pp. 229–48); and (Admirand 2021b).

See, for example, (Rohr 2007, pp. 206–12).

See, for example, (Sobrinho 2008).

Optioned for television in 2020, *Descender* and *Ascender* have also been reissued in various prestigious hardbacks and compendiums, and most recently saw the successful crowdfunded *The Art of Descender* book in 2024.

See (Gangnes et al. 2024).

For a short but clever comics-style interpretation of comics studies, see (Giddens 2020, pp. 4–12).

This interview of Nguyen by Diego Higuera, also discusses the artistic and visual collaboration with Lemire on character and world developing in the comic and the forthcoming *The Art of Descender* book. See (Higuera 2024).

(Nguyen 2018). See also (Harper 2015).

The comics will be cited in the text by issue as they are non-paginated and with the “D” for *Descender* and “A” for *Ascender*.

A name like “Mother” and Mother’s use of “love” are ironic and totalitarian throughout the series, in contrast to selfless, heroic motherhood represented by Effie (who also happens to become a cyborg!) or Andy’s mother.

See the sections on Driller further below.

- 51 In comics (like the movies), if you do not see a dead body confirmed, possibilities of life remain. And while some comics, like *Saga*, *Y: The Last Man*, and *Monstress* have permanent deaths, others veer around a character's death by a reboot of the series—a retcon—or some alternative universe plot. In *Descender/Ascender*, if a character dies, they are dead unless, like Effie they are a Cyborg (A12, but see her story further below).
- 52 Telsa is another main character in the book who is the daughter of the General of the UGC and always feels she must live up to his cold and stern love. She was also traumatized and embittered by the murder of her mother by the Harvesters (sent by the Descenders) as Telsa and her mother tried to flee. Her survivor guilt manifests itself in a gruffness and fear of becoming close to anyone, though TIM-21's trust of her and the allegiance of her loyal soldiers challenge her desire to close people off. Telsa is a symbol of the soldier always willing to sacrifice herself for a cause but her intentions, because of her scarred past, would need deeper analysis than is possible here. She would also not seem best to embody the kind of sacrificial love I am advocating. Is hers a reluctant sacrificial love, not a full-bodied choice but one that only emerges after a lot of inner-refusal and rebellion? Does that make it less noble? I am reminded here of Jesus' parable about the son who is asked by his father to work in the vineyard and says he will not do it but then does as opposed to the one who says he will and does not (Matt 21:28–32). In the end, the first son is obviously better but perhaps the ideal would be the one who says and does the good. Jesus was making a point about sinners who repent and ultimately do what is good.
- 53 It is later called a “hungry ghost” by Mizerd (A10).
- 54 This is another problematic example of sacrifice as Kanto still had value in what he became and chose to do even if the initial memories and backstory were fabricated. Plotwise, it is a clever way to allow TIM-21 to then inhabit an adult human body that (for a time) matches Andy's so they can appear closer on the outside just as they had when Andy was little in the mines of Dirushu. Of course, Andy will continue to age visibly while TIM will not in the same way.
- 55 Dr Jin Quon's character story is very complex involving a lot of betrayal and self-centredness (much like Gaius Baltar in *Battlestar Galactica*) with a deep intelligence and canniness and moments of heroism, but space does not permit his story here.
- 56 While TIM-21 becomes special and unique, initially he was just one in a series of these model robots like the Replicants or Cylons who had various identical models. TIM-22 looks just like TIM-21 but becomes a bitter, vengeful robot (partly because he was abused and hunted by humans).
- 57 For the story of a robotic tiger toy who decides to continue to protect the little child who loves him during an apocalyptic battle between humans and their robots, see (Cargill 2021).
- 58 Note that it is not clear how the Descenders keep their promise because Effie and Andy would have died if Effie hadn't had some “personal force field” (convenient) as they were left floating in space when the Descenders disappeared. They were then saved by Driller when her “personal force field” had no more power to sustain them.
- 59 Effie is a Christ-figure in many ways with her unconditional, sacrificial, kenotic, motherly love, her death and resurrection, two natures, etc., though, as noted below, like most Christ-figures, the match is never a perfect fit.
- 60 This is a very flawed moment, especially as Andy has been a devoted father to Mila and would also sacrifice his life for her (but obviously fails in this crucial moment!).
- 61 This is how Driller calls humans which sounds like harmans—those who harm.
- 62 It is also fitting that the phrase (in a dialogue bubble) hovers over Andy as Effie left him precisely because she felt he was a murderer in killing robots. Thus, at this point in the comic, both Andy and Driller are in need of repentance and change.
- 63 Note that Andy's mother also let anger at Driller's boss (Trask) blind her to the care needed of the robots who she deemed disposable (D16).
- 64 The Coven is led by one demonic/witch-like figure deemed Mother, even if the one in power might be a daughter or sister to others in the group and through which they perpetually fight and backstab one another in their quest for controlling all the magical power in the galaxy. While TIM-21 and Driller are fighting Mother, the readers of the comic would know that two sisters had fought one another for power and to take on that title of Mother. Initially the one called “weak thing” was able to overcome her tyrannical sister, and becomes the the Mother who is responsible for the vampiric horde and other monstrosities that were unleashed on the world after the Descenders removed all robots from the galaxy (and culled billions of lives). But Mother (weak thing) unexpectedly loses her power to her sister, and TIM-21 is fighting that incantation while hoping the Harvester Robot will destroy them all. Instead, “weak thing” regains her power and kills her sister as the Harvester attacks. She survives the beam, only to finally be defeated by Effie, a true mother. Driller is at least able to protect TIM-21 from the Harvester's beam and give him a chance to live, though sacrificing himself in the process.
- 65 When Driller first meets young Mila, as they are attacked by vampire birds, he says that he is not scared and that “Driller's a real vamp killer”. There is a delightful wide-eyed and smiling image of Mila, admiring him: “I like you”, she says, touching his robot's ‘clamped hand’. While his reply is “hmmm”, which is what he always says, how can even he not fall for Mila with that look of wonder and perhaps the sweetest words said to him: “I like you, Driller” (A11). Soon Driller is playing hide and seek in a ship with Mila and Bandit (A13), although he does not like the game because he is too easily found by being so big.
- 66 On the question of AI and personhood, see (Boyle 2024).

- ⁶⁷ See (Halbertal 2012, pp. 1–2).
- ⁶⁸ See (Madigan 2021, pp. 27–28).
- ⁶⁹ This passage also is used to support the Ransom Theory of Atonement.
- ⁷⁰ Available at <https://imagecomics.com/features/the-descender-ascender-timeline> (accessed on 4 April 2025).

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