

**RUMINATIONS ON TECHNOLOGICAL SINGULARITY AND SPECIESISM IN
THE POSTHUMAN WORLD OF PHILIP K. DICK'S *DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF
ELECTRIC SHEEP?***

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Abstract

Posthumanism, a concept that is gaining popularity and is an emerging field of study in various disciplines, makes significant propositions regarding the future of humanity. It goes beyond the popular notions implying the annihilation of human community to envision an ideal framework in relation to a post-anthropocene setting. The threat of technological singularity and the bane of speciesism acquire attention in conjunction with the former and latter respectively. Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep, prima facie represents a literal "post" human world, which when scrutinized exposes the underlying philosophical assumptions inherent in an ideal inter-species interaction. The paper attempts to explore these aspects by foregrounding the concepts of singularity and speciesism that enable a close examination of the text from the purview of posthumanism.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Technological Singularity, Speciesism etc.

Introduction:

Posthumanism makes claims for an ideal living atmosphere which exhorts co-existence at an inter-species level. It envisions a scenario that brings together humans, animals, intelligent machines and ecology within a single framework. Thus, the posthumanist philosophy aims to dismantle anthropocentric worldview and substitute it with a post-anthropocene one. As *homo faber*, (Man the maker) humans have enjoyed a superior status over other beings, owing to their enhanced cognitive capacity. Having gone a long way from Stone Age, finding success after years of struggle to produce yield from harsh geographical

terrains and mastering the nuances of technology to achieve remarkable feats which include creation of artificial intelligence and interplanetary travels, human species do have many a reason to be take pride in their selves. But when this *hubris* turns unchecked it paves way for drastic repercussions. Death and subordination at the hands of an intellectually evolved community driven by artificial intelligence or the end of the world resulting from drastic climactic changes and environmental disasters are harsh realities that could prove to be nightmarish for the scientific community and layman alike in different parts of the globe. While such apprehensions regarding an apocalyptic doom looms large over the current world, a harmonious interaction cutting across the boundaries of speciesistic differences as proposed by posthumanist philosophy can have far-reaching implications.

The paper attempts to explore the implications of technological singularity, speciesism and posthumanism in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick. It attempts to show how anxiety regarding technological singularity may contribute towards both proliferating and arresting speciesistic tendencies in the posthuman world depicted. Technological singularity refers to the notion that intelligent machines may dominate the world attributing a subordinate status to the human community. Speciesism is a notion that accounts for the discrimination of non-human species. These ideas will be examined in detail. Animal compassion and true empathetic concerns help in arresting this form of singularity and in upholding the ethos of posthumanist philosophy by dismantling the speciesistic hierarchies that populate the universe of the text.

The Posthuman World of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Understanding popular and philosophical implications embedded in the term posthumanism is crucial to the study undertaken as the text depicts a world which is likely to be erased of human community, at the same time making an attempt at allowing inter-species companionship in the form of animal compassion. Popular posthumanism evokes the notion of a world devoid of humans or one where other enhanced beings, technologically or otherwise overpowers the human race. The latter possesses the implications of a technologically singular world. Technological singularity is the hypothesis that “the invention of artificial superintelligence (ASI) will abruptly trigger runaway technological growth, resulting in unfathomable changes to human civilization,” to the extent that it could surpass the human need and relevance in this world (Eden and Moor, 2012). This view proposed by Vernor Vinge (1993) much earlier in his article “The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era” was instrumental in initiating discussions on the same at a global level. In his words: “Acceleration of technological progress has been the central feature of this century... We are on the edge of change comparable to the rise of human life on Earth. The precise cause of this change is the imminent creation by technology of entities with greater than human intelligence” (p.1). Though such claims regarding intelligent machines overpowering human community have been considered practically an impossibility by a few

critics, sci-fi writers have seriously dwelled upon such themes taking into account the rapid technological advancement that the current society has been assimilating with considerable ease. Ventures undertaken around the globe to develop artificial intelligence, create humanoids, robots and androids capable of performing multifarious activities are causes of both cheer and concern for the humanity at large. A major portion of the concern arises out of the apprehensions regarding a literal post-human phase which will witness the awakening of consciousness in these insentient beings who could turn to be the *nemesis* of their creators.

However, the philosophical aspect of posthumanism draws upon the idea of an ideal world as mentioned before in the introduction of the paper. It does not deal with the fears of annihilation, replacement and disembodiment of human community but, with yet another conception of the human. According to Katherine Hayles (1999), the posthuman “does not really mean the end of humanity...It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human” where the human subject is shorn off the privileges that he has accorded for himself in an anthropocentric society (p. 286). Cary Wolfe (2010), in his seminal text *What is Posthumanism?*, shares a similar attitude when he maintains that development of posthumanism may be traced to the need for “a new theoretical model for biological, mechanical, and communicational processes that removed the human and *homo sapiens* from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information, and cognition” (p. xii). It points vividly to the destruction of speciesistic hierarchies which is to be replaced alternatively by an inclusionary framework.

Do Androids Dream depicts these strains of posthumanism, both popular and philosophical. The novel classified within the genre of science fiction (sci-fi) details the life on earth after an atomic war referred to as World War Terminus (W.W.T.). The readers are provided a glance into the predicament of the few people who inhabit the planet through the depiction of a bounty hunter, Rick Decker who works with the police department to “retire” humanoid robots or organic androids. The author also calls attention to the life of a “special” named John Isidore, to examine the effects of discrimination at an intra-species level in addition to the focus placed on inter-species interaction. Since the post-war era in the text witnesses a scarcely populated earth, it points to a literal wipe-out of the human community even though here, it is a result of mass emigration to Mars. An implication of threat posed by technological supersedence and disembodiment of human community is represented not merely by the presence of Nexus-6 organic androids referred to as “andys” and the potential development of a much more evolved type, but also by the increasing dependence of the individuals on advanced technological tools such as the mood organ and electric animals which help them to wade through the existential angst that they face on a daily basis. Even as these pointers indicate the popular notions associated with the posthuman era, the urge to possess a genuine animal, to trace a live one on any part of the globe and the empathetic concerns eventually developed by Deckard towards the andys, are indicative of the philosophical goals of posthumanism which advocate co-existence between man, machine

and organism that could possibly develop from the shedding of egological consciousness by humanity. When he is capable of doing away with such egoistic tendencies inherent within the core of speciesism, Deckard identifies with Isidore, “the special” who long before him becomes a representative of the ideal posthuman world envisioned by the philosophy. At this juncture, it is necessary to examine the determining factors that leads to this transition; the fear of a technological singular world and the overwhelming presence of speciesistic tendencies which is eradicated partly due to this fear of singularity.

Technological Singularity and Speciesism:

Do Androids Dream commences with the implication of pervasive influence of technology in the lives of the people who inhabit the scarcely populated earth. Suffering from isolation and existential anguish, Deckard and his wife Iran are found to be highly reliant on a mood organ which manages their emotions according to the setting dialed by the user. They are also dependent like other individuals on an empathy box which creates a virtually simulated environment that is intended to heighten their sense of empathy via the enduring of physical pain that is effected through stoning. Most of the people who populate the scarcely inhabited planet earth are also shown as owning electric animals as a substitute for real animals which are invariably extinct. These products of technicity whether it be the instruments that stimulate or repress sentiments or electric animals that offer them a sense of being, hence, are an indistinguishable part of human life and they are capable of controlling human behavior and actions to a great extreme. Though technological singularity largely deals with the enhancement of artificial intelligence that could wreak havoc on the future of human civilisation, it also hints at the possibility of man turning mechanical as an automaton due to his overwhelming interaction with the tools of technology such that these become indispensable to his existence. A suggestion of disembodiment and existence at the virtual level too is implicit in such assumptions. The plausibility of this kind of a scenario has been explored by Hans Moravec who proposes that it is in fact possible to make human consciousness available within a virtual level:

Moravec proposed that human identity is essentially an informational pattern rather than an embodied enaction. The proposition can be demonstrated, he suggested, by downloading human consciousness into a computer, and he imagined a scenario designed to show that this was in principle possible... Moravec test was designed to show that machines can become the repository of human consciousness—that machines can, for all practical purposes, become human beings. You are the cyborg, and the cyborg is you. (Hayles, 1999, p.xii)

Deckard’s anxiousness when he finds Irene opting for a mood of depression using the console of Penfield and his own inability to resist the use of empathy box, may be attributed to his concerns regarding disembodiment and a deep plunge into a virtual realm from where an

escape could be impossible. Especially since the reality of electric animals confronts the humanity at large, the anxiety of an unreal life envelops the whole of mankind depicted. The protagonist's attempts to possess a genuine animal, a real, live and sentient one is representative of the desire of the human community to catch hold of the last traces of the real world that is fast vanishing and to arrest the potential transition into a disembodied, virtual and technologically singular life. Coupled with this anxiety is the concern regarding enhanced human-like beings, the Nexus-6 androids who has the potential to replace the human species especially because they could easily pass over as humans if not closely examined and "delineated by standard profile tests" (Dick, 1968, p.18) such as the use of Voigt-Kampff apparatus. The instrument detects the lack of empathy in these entities, the only feature that differentiates them from humans. The fact that these intellectually developed beings with the aid of biotechnology could possibly trigger a technologically singular world is expressed by Deckard when he utters "if the androids had remained substandard, like the ancient q-40s made by Derain Associates - there would be no problem and no need of my skill" just before his task of retiring a prodigious singer, Luba Left, who is unfortunately an android (Dick, 1968, p.44). His job as a bounty hunter demands that he "retire" i.e, kill the androids who have made their way from Mars to Earth. As the text does not provide a substantial reason for this mission undertaken, it could be rightly inferred that it is the fear of a singular world dominated by the organic androids that would push the human community to a subaltern position toppling the power and supremacy which they hitherto wield, that persuades the police department to recruit bounty hunters to terminate the droids. This attitude clearly points to the efforts by the human race to maintain speciesistic hierarchies where they will continue to occupy the pinnacle of the hierarchy. Thus, the apprehensions regarding a technological singular world in *Do Androids Dream* arises from the fear of having to forego the supremacy inherent in the attitude of speciesism maintained by humans since pre-W.W.T phase.

Speciesism, a term introduced by Richard Ryder, an English philosopher and later popularised by Peter Singer (1983) refers to the "irrational prejudice" that the Utilitarian philosopher [Jeremy] Bentham identifies as the basis of our different treatment of animals and humans. Just as, say, women or Africans have been mistreated on the grounds of morally irrelevant physiological differences, so animals suffer because they fall on the wrong side of a supposedly 'insuperable line'" (p.8). The Utilitarian philosophy repudiates this prejudice and advocates an equal treatment and "equal moral consideration" for all beings "irrespective of family, race, nation or species" (Garrard, 2004, p.137). Broadly speaking, speciesism refers to the superior status upheld by certain species, namely *homo sapiens* over other beings. It could manifest in the form of the subordination of nature, animals or intelligent machines. Dick hints at the prevalence of speciesistic tendencies during the era before atomic war which inevitably led to such a mammoth disaster that rendered the surface of the earth uninhabitable and caused the extinction of a number of species. Though the reasons for the cause of W.W.T

are not sharply defined, the description of the event implies an apocalyptic phenomenon that was capable of wiping out the beings on the planet. The mention of a colonization programme that was underway, implicitly points to the hand of humans in having triggered the disaster. This is a critique of the reckless actions undertaken by many to assert power and authority over the rest of the world. In its course, ecology too bears the brunt of such actions and once it reaches the saturation point, it unleashes its fury that cannot be contained by human efforts which could be why the repercussions of the atomic war proved to be beyond repair for the human community depicted: "The dust which had contaminated most of the planet's surface had originated in no country and no one, even the wartime enemy, had planned on it...The owls had died...After the owls, of course, the other birds followed," and gradually the rest of the animal world with a scarce population of the fauna left behind (Dick, 1968, p.8). Such disastrous results follow from the ecological consciousness arising from speciesism that prevents the possibility of communication that goes beyond speciesistic hierarchies. The immediate post-war era witnessed differential treatment of yet another species, the androids: "The humanoid robot - strictly speaking, the organic android - had become the mobile donkeyengine of the colonization program" and individuals migrating to Mars were offered an android slave as an incentive (Dick, 1968, p.8). This form of domination however, did not cease to exist on earth since it ensued with the descent of Nexus-6 as discussed above. These evidences once again assert the fact that the fear of technological singularity which physically displaces the human species may be equated to the fear of being displaced in terms of human exceptionalism as well. Thus, the mission to eliminate the androids is a means of protecting and preserving an anthropocentric framework and to curtail any attempts at disrupting the central position attributed to the human within this ideology.

Discussion on speciesism also warrants the need to discuss differential treatment at the intra-species level specifically because it is considered to be "exactly analogous to racism, sexism, and other forms of irrational discrimination and prejudice" (Duignan, 2013). Though humans take pride in their lot as a species, not all of them enjoy an equal status. The question of normativity makes the situation problematic as a healthy, mentally sound, heteronormative individual would be easily accepted into the society while others marginalised on various grounds. This is keeping apart other considerations involving, race, gender, caste, class and ethnicity. Society may exclude the disabled, but the chance that they could possess special skills which are supernormal should not go unheeded. It elevates their position from that of the other to a status that ideally goes beyond that of the supposedly "normal" individuals. Taking into account the issues of agency and autonomy, two of the primary factors that work against the non-human beings in comparison to the human species, it can be deduced that these factors also cause discrimination at an intra-species level, namely in the case of the disabled individuals. However, it's indeed necessary that such aspects need to be redefined as they are essentially relative as detailed by Wolfe. He presents the case of Temple Grandin

whose special abilities helped her identify with the animal community. “In Grandin’s case... her specific condition (a form of autism known as Asperger’s syndrome) enables her to understand more deeply how nonhuman animals such as cows perceive and experience the world, and she has integrated that understanding, she claims, into her designs for animal holding facilities throughout North America” (p.xxix). In this context, Dick’s foregrounding of intellectually diminished individuals, in the persona of John Isidore becomes relevant thus, depicting the differences involved within the human community apart from the lack of a harmonious inter-species interaction.

Isidore, represents the case of the “specials” who were sidelined during the process of emigration. Their intellectual faculty had been affected by the dust which remained after W.W.T. “Once pegged as special... a citizen dropped out of history. He ceased, in effect, to be part of mankind” (Dick, 1968, 8). Isidore’s attempts to be acknowledged does not go unnoticed. Nevertheless, his efforts to accommodate the androids and save a tortured spider are not merely aimed at gaining recognition, but are evidences to a consciousness devoid of egoistic mindset and speciesistic worldview. The very fact that enhanced cognitive capacity need not warrant a superior position in the hierarchy that constitutes power may be examined through the persona of Isidore. Much before Deckard does, Isidore exhibits an inclination for being considerate towards the androids. Also, his compassion towards the spider is on an empathetic level rather than a wish for owning it. *Do Androids Dream* thus postulates the inculcation of an inclusionary perspective in lieu of an exclusionary one. This is the prime focus of posthumanist philosophy that exhorts the need for an inclusive framework that embraces every being in its fold irrespective of the binaries that have been perpetuated for long. In the context of the novel, it goes a little further to advocate the inclusion at the intra-species level as well.

Though the traces of deep hierarchical structures embedded in the notion of speciesism pervades the universe of the text, it also presents the rupture of these structures which is implicitly depicted in the animal compassion exercised by the characters. But this notion poses a series of questions. How does one account for the animal compassion exhibited by the “regular” humans? For Isidore, the “special,” it is purely on the grounds of empathy. But, what about other individuals like Deckard? Is the urge for possession yet another form of asserting superiority? Or does it truly signify the possibility of inter-species interaction? Deckard’s desire to own a real animal can be understood in terms of the latter. His excitement at discovering a toad in the “uninhabited desolation towards the north” (Dick, 1968, p.103) is genuine as it essentially gives him a reason to live. Amidst the existential crisis that he and the rest of the humanity faces, animal compassion becomes a site of refuge. This compassion arises partly from the anxiety in relation to a singular environment, one dominated by machines or virtuality. The possibility of singular world may seem to be far-fetched. But, Turing test attributed to Alan Turing in 1950 was intended to show that machines may acquire human traits such that they would become indistinguishable from the

human community. The test envisions a situation where questions are posed to machines and humans and one needs to detect their identity correctly. If one failed in the attempt, the game would prove that machines could think. Voigt-Kampff apparatus that Deckard makes use of serves a similar purpose to distinguish the human from the droids. At a point, the bounty hunter almost fails to identify the android, thus, hinting at the possibility of singularity. Since the humans in the novel are on the verge of such a predicament, singularity is a potential reality close at hand. The refuge they try to find in real, sanguine, genuine animals is hence a temporary solace ensuing from the fear of displacement. It is also bound to enable reflection on their selfish deeds and their relationship with their fellows and other beings. According to Barbara Herrnstein (2006),

the problem of our kinship to other animals mirrors that of our relation to other problematic beings: for example, the unborn, the mentally disabled, the drunk, or the terminally comatose – beings, that is, who are recognizably our own kind but not yet, not quite, not just now, or no longer what we readily think of as *what we ourselves are*. (p.153, emphasis in original)

When this problem is resolved, it could potentially give way to the recognition of the hitherto marginalised individuals and species as does the environment of *Do Androids Dream* as it nears conclusion. The author attempts to “champion the cause for a ‘trans-species empathy’ that will recognize the human as a human animal whose defining characteristics are not so much exceptional” (Chiew, 2014, p. 54) which is invariably effected through the fear of singularity. The text implies the scope of amiable interactions at inter-species and intra-species level, hinting at the possibility that “we are in a way Nayar calls *humanimals* because our environment relations are always characterised by networks of complex crossings and interchanges with other beings and material forces.” (Oppermann, 2016, p.27) It is evident in the guilt that overpowers Deckard and the empathy he eventually begins to feel for the androids though it occurs gradually and not readily like Isidore. His affection towards Rachel Rosen, an organic humanoid may be understood in this light and not solely from the perspective of the sexual innuendo implied in the text. The unfathomable pain that the people in the novel experience at the loss of their animals is yet another point asserting the inextricable bond that they share. Deckard’s empathy is also directed at Isidore by opting to help him out of the isolation he has been enduring. It opens up possibilities of harmonious interactions at the intra-species realm as well. All of these are invariably suggestive of the strands of co-existence between the triumvirate -the man, machine and other biological organisms as envisioned by Hayles, thereby paving way for an ideal posthumanist scenario.

Conclusion:

The threat of a singular environment invariably initiates the breaking of speciesistic barriers that hinder exchanges beyond the domain of the “perfect” humans. The fear of a disembodied existence and one that could be manipulated by non-human intelligent

humanoids trigger this transition from egocentrism to ecocentrism, the latter being embedded in the inclusive framework upheld by posthumanist philosophy. The transformation of Deckard from a ruthless bounty hunter to an individual with the capacity to consider human and non-human beings whether it be animal or an organic android at par with one another, is a proof of the inclination that the text possesses towards the goals of the philosophy. Eventually, literal posthumanism paves way for the philosophical dimensions attributed to the term which occurs via the decentering of the human subject or any other forms of authority. The author thus, discards the likelihood of domination of even non-human or insentient beings, to advocate the case for an ideal posthumanist scenario as envisioned by the philosophy. At the same time, the ability to empathise becomes the evidence for the elimination of hubristic and speciesistic tendencies that maintain an anthropocentric world. Removed from the vestiges of speciesism, humanity may have lots to aspire for. The posthuman world of the text thus, opens the possibilities of and hope for an ideal setting that is capable of transforming the dystopian environment into a utopian one. The transition though far-fetched, the novel however does not cease to offer optimistic prospects regarding the same.

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