

AN EXPLORATION OF POSTHUMAN REALITY IN PHILIP K DICK'S *DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?*

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Abstract

*The increasing dependence on technology has given rise to a new kind of ontological reality called the posthuman. In this kind of reality, man finds himself inextricably intertwined with machines, ones that seem more human than machine. Such a scenario calls for a change in man's outlook, in which the presence and the involvement of the machines need to be acknowledged. Having evolved to an entity of their own in man's own likeness, the machines serve to interrogate the ontological status of man in a technological world. Originally created and manufactured to serve man's own needs exclusively, these machines have a unique place of their own in the order of things and cannot be simply cast aside on failure of the realisation of the ends to which they were created in the first place. The infusion of sentience into a mechanized form calls into question the arbitrary termination of such a life form, to a possible negation of innate humanity in the process. Such a scenario has been brilliantly portrayed by Philip K Dick in his *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. How this has come about and to what end it informs life in the twenty-first century will be the focus of this paper.*

Keywords: Philip K Dick, androids, empathy

The posthuman world is a world where man's inescapable fusion with artificial intelligence defines his ontology. The daily use of such machines has led to a blurring of distinction of the difference between the human and the machine (or the non-human). Dick addresses this in "*The Android and the Human*," a speech delivered four years after the publication of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

“[O]ur environment, and I mean our man-made world of machines, artificial constructs, computers, electronic systems, interlinking homeostatic components—all of this is in fact beginning more and more to possess what the earnest psychologists fear the primitive sees in his environment: animation. In a very real sense our environment is

becoming alive, or at least quasi-alive, and in ways specifically and fundamentally analogous to ourselves.” (Dick, Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings)

In such a scenario the subject ‘s cogito often confuses between what is real and what is not . It gets caught up in the increasingly undefined distinction between simulation and factual reality, and herein lies the test of its character . Philip K Dick explores this theme of finding one’s consciousness through an investigation into the feeling of empathy shown by fictive subjects in his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. He mentions empathy as the sole criterion for determining one’s humanity and in the process also explores the ontological state of the posthuman subject .

Set in the era after the World War Terminus, the atmosphere of post-apocalyptic San Francisco is full of radioactive waste and indistinguishable detritus called “kipple”. In order to protect its citizens from this waste the government has set up colonies in Mars or one of the other unnamed colony planets .The choice available to human beings is

“Emigrate or degenerate! The choice is yours!” (Dick 5)

In such a scenario the citizens have been provided with androids as companions :

“Under U.N. Law each emigrant automatically received possession of an android subtype of his choice, and, by 2019, the variety of subtypes passed all understanding, in the manner of American automobiles of the 1960s.” (Dick 12)

The androids are manufactured by the Rosen Organisation (renamed Tyrell Corporation in the 1999 screen adaptation *Blade Runner*) having “More human than human” as its motto. They are extremely sophisticated , to the point that they are indistinguishable from their human masters . They have been programmed to act as companions in the voyage to Mars as well as to serve their masters in these colonies . This technological arrangement by the government to assuage the loneliness of its citizens (Simms) shows an excess of individualism , to the point of exclusion of any other subjectivities beyond the self . In this way does Dick present the raging lack of empathy within the human race right at the outset . By the end of the novel , Dick will have interrogated this through the confusions faced by his bounty hunter protagonist in his attempts to carry out the task of “retiring” six androids , during the process of which he is compelled to question his own humanity .

At the beginning of the novel , Rick takes for granted the assumption that an android is a mere machine : he fails to realise that his “habitual , innate approach” (Dick,4) to bounty hunting might fall short of the complexity that he would soon encounter in the Nexus-6 replicants . He believes that an android is devoid of empathy or fellow-feeling, and that humans are the only life – forms capable of this emotion . The androids have been so programmed that they provide the servitude of companionship only to humans : there is no display of fellow-feeling amongst themselves . This is what makes them non-human in Deckard’s eyes and eligible for

extermination (or “retirement”, as Dick puts it). What Deckard experiences in his skirmishes with these rogue androids is a change in his own perception of lived reality.

The absence of empathy in the androids is determined through the Voight-Kampff Test, in which the examinee is exposed to random questions regarding mistreatment of animals and their response is recorded through the dilation of the pupil. Animals being nearly extinct in the post-apocalyptic radioactive haze of America, kindness towards animals is regarded as the primary signifier of empathy in the subject. According to Jill Galvan, the animals have been “fetishized as repositories of human empathy” (Galvan). The androids, on the other hand, have been portrayed as schizophrenic life-forms, lacking in any feeling whatsoever. They are characterised by a “flattening of affect”:

...‘The consensus of police opinion is known to you in Lurie Kampff’s article, written eight years ago. *Role taking Blockage in the Undeteriorated Schizophrenic*. Kampff compared the diminished empathic faculty found in human mental patients and a superficially similar but basically-’[...]‘The Leningrad psychiatrists,’ Bryant broke in brusquely, ‘think that a small class of human beings could not pass the Voight-Kampff scale. If you tested them in line with police work you’d assess them as humanoid robots. You’d be wrong, but by then they’d be dead.’ He was silent, now, waiting for Rick’s answer. ‘But these individuals,’ Rick said, ‘would all be-’[...]‘They’d be in institutions,’ Bryant agreed. ‘They couldn’t conceivably function in the outside world; they certainly couldn’t go undetected as advanced psychotics – unless of course their breakdown had come recently and suddenly and no one had gotten around to noticing. But this could happen.’ (Dick 30)

Dick shows there is no difference between the androids and the mentally-ill, institutionalised citizens of San Francisco. Thus he inscribes them as human and by equating them with disabled citizens, gives them a marginalised position in the posthuman collective. (Galvan) As schizophrenics, the androids foreclose the symbolic order and therefore do not have an Other against whom/which they are able to define themselves. Unlike a human being, an android is not born: it is manufactured and brought into consciousness as a fully developed sentient being in the likeness of man. It comes to identify itself as an independent subject in the mirror stage where

‘the image appears to him as the contour of his stature that freezes it and in symmetry that reverses it, in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it.’ (Lacan)

Since it has no parents there is no oedipal relationship with the mother and therefore no father to break this relationship. Further, due to the absence of the father neither the idea of the Other nor the Symbolic Order is reinforced through language into the android's consciousness. In the cinematic version of the novel, Rutger Hauer's Roy Batty calls Eldon Tyrell "Father" only in the sense of creator and not as its parental form. In this manner the android's Symbolic order is foreclosed and this results in the absence of the death drive. The android perpetually oscillates between identification of its own self in the mirror stage and an idealistic conception of itself in the Imaginary Order. Therefore the androids are diagnosed with a narcissistic illness – schizophrenia and are lacking in empathy or fellow-feeling with anyone exterior to themselves. Since they carry the semblance of institutionalised humans, the bone marrow test is also redundant as it would amount to self-incrimination. So Deckard has to fall back upon the Voight-Kampff Test to determine whether it is an android or not.

Since the androids are primarily programmed to be companions and obey humans in the Martian colonies, they can only simulate empathy even while actually lacking in it. The simulation of empathy is nowhere so clear in the novel as in the Penfield Artificial Brain Stimulation (PABS.) The PABS is mood organ that enables humans to fuse their minds with Wilbur Mercer. The main function of this machine is to make one experience certain emotions – hence it is a "mood organ" (Dick 5). The empathy box with two handles provides an outlet for regular fusion of the user's mind with other human beings who are using it in the privacy of their living rooms. One 'gives' her emotions to the stimulator, which shares it with the collective. At the setting C

"it overcomes the threshold barring consciousness" (Dick 1)

Seen from a Lacanian perspective, the human subject is dependent on the device that supplies her with the moods she wants to be in, and as long as the collective is in control, the human subject is allowed to momentarily enjoy the mood in which she is no longer bothered by the barrier resisting her unconscious. One can dial a particular number and experience a particular emotion, from "a businesslike professional attitude" and "self-accusatory depression" to "ecstatic sexual bliss". These terms however, would be nothing but meaningless, hollow terms if it were not for the meaning that is ascribed to them: the meaning the humans in the novel have been taught to ascribe to them. This religious collective of Mercer's is Dick's equivalent of the social network (Galvan 418) of our time. By simulating empathic feelings of oneness with the last remnants of humanity in the privacy of their living rooms, the technological interference of the government causes alienation within inter-personal relationships, such as that of Rick Deckard and his wife Iran. Instead of having a one-on-one conversation with her husband, Iran

prefers to clutch the handles of the empathy box and merge her feelings in the virtual reality of Wilbur Mercer. As debunked by Buster Friendly (who is himself an android) Wilbur Mercer is actually a failed B-movie Hollywood actor named Al Jarry and the arid landscape is actually a manmade studio set. Government interference is also seen in the broadcasting of the only government – approved channel on television that keeps on replaying its advertisements of Mars colonization programme. John Isidore, a “special”, who was deemed ineligible for habitation in the colonies owing to his reduced IQ (brought about as an after-effect of the radioactive waste) tries to compensate for the lack of human companionship by watching TV all the time. Without the benefit of the semantic noise generated by the TV, Isidore feels a silence

“not only his ears but his eyes; as he stood by the inert TV set he experienced the silence as visible and, in its own way, alive” (Dick 15)

Thus, there is an utter breakdown of meaningful social intercourse in Dick’s nuclear haze- ridden dystopian world, leading to a total non-existence of empathy in the posthuman condition.

Solitary consumption of empathy through Mercerism therefore renders human communication and socialising unnecessary. Dick thus shows the posthuman collective (Galvan) as already fragmented and a further fragmentation is ensured by Rick Deckard’s discharge of duties as bounty hunter. Iran Deckard is practically addicted to Mercerism: she thrives on the high it provides, thereby allowing the government to infiltrate inter-personal relationships. Hence it is in the best interests of the government to ostracise the android, since as an intelligent being it can challenge the individual’s assumed biological mastery over the order of things. The android, therefore, driven by sheer narcissism attempts to subvert the state’s attempts at incapacitation. This is most clearly seen in the case of Luba Luft, who pretends not to understand Deckard’s questions from the Voight-Kampff test. Posing as a German opera singer, she throws Deckard’s conceptions regarding android rights and identity into considerable confusion.

“[Deckard begins] These questions will deal with social situations which you might find yourself in; what I want from you is a statement of response, what you'd do.... You're sitting watching TV and suddenly you dis-cover a wasp crawling on your wrist.”[...] “What's a wasp?” Luba Luft asked. “A stinging bug that flies.”[...] “Tell me the German word.”[...] “Wespe,” he said, remembering the German word. “Ach yes; eine Wespe.” She laughed. “And what was the question? I forgot already.” “Let's try another.” Impossible now

to get a meaningful response."You are watching an old movie on TV, a movie from before the war. It shows a banquet in progress; the entree.. .consists of boiled dog, stuffed with rice." "Nobody would kill a dog," Luba Luft said."Before the war," he grated."I wasn't alive before the war.... Was the movie made in the Philippines?" "[...] But your response," he said. "I want your social, emotional, moral reaction." "To the movie?[...] I'd turn it off." "I don't understand 'Currier' or 'Ives' or 'decor,'" Luba Luft said; she seemed to be struggling, however, to make out the terms.[...]"With rice, like in the dog. Currier is what makes the rice currier rice. It's Curry in German." (Dick 70)

Luba Luft's evasions throw Rick off his guard and gain her valuable time to defend herself. In this scenario the very form of the Voight-Kampff test through its rapid fire questioning at the personal level indicts the android. The face-to-face questioning is a symbol of the unilateral flow of state power – Rick Deckard as the unfailing agent of the state, through his questions entraps the convict without allowing her any benefit of doubt. According to Jean Baudrillard,

“the absolutization of speech under the formal guise of exchange is the definition of power”. (Baudrillard)

Luba aims for the demolishing of the Symbolic order that threatens to annihilate her, and her efforts throw Deckard's preconceived notions into disarray. After she is accidentally killed by Deckard, Deckard finds himself questioning the very definition of an android on the basis of the feeling of empathy. The figure of Phil Resch confuses him all the more – bent on the perfect conviction of the rogue androids, Phil Resch is more like a machine than a human in Deckard's eyes. His own handling of the matter triggers the feeling of empathy for the androids in his mind:

“Always he had assumed that throughout his psyche he experienced the android as a clever machine-as in his conscious view. And yet, in contrast to Phil Resch, a difference had manifested itself. And he felt instinctively that he was right. Empathy for an artificial construct? he asked himself. Something that only pretends to be alive?” (Dick 112)

Deckard realises he is capable of feeling empathy for “at least specific, certain androids” (Dick 113). Resch's dismissing of his epiphany as “lust” reinstates Deckard into the biological mastery of the human subject as the helm of the creation. Deckard, however, tries to alleviate his doubts by justifying his bounty hunting through spending his earnings on a live goat, chosen from Sidney's Catalogue. Participation in the activities of purchasing and pandering to the accepted status symbol of having a

live animal as being one of the most empathetic of individuals in the dying human community restores a little bit of stability to Deckard 's notions of android – human relationship . This is short-lived , because Rachel kills the goat out of spite and leaving Deckard in the throes of self-doubt . His encounter with Luba Luft brought him into deeper and more sincere empathy with the androids :

“...his experience with the bounty hunter Phil Resch had altered some minute synopsis in him, had closed one neurological switch and opened another (Dick 137)” (Dick, 137)

It is fitting that Deckard's epiphany takes place in cybernetic terminology – through this language Dick shows that Deckard has finally acknowledged the ontology of posthuman collective – where man's biological status alone does not guarantee his superiority over the non-human aspects of existence . His rejection of Mercerism is a step forward in doing away with the segregationist politics of the state : as a bounty hunter he is also a murderer and therefore a non-human . This loss of selfhood paradoxically brings him into contact with his inner humanity , buried as it was under the kipple of his own selfish ego .

I would like to reiterate from Dick's 1972 speech “*The Android and the Human*”

“...we can learn about the artificial external environment around us, how it behaves, why, what it is up to, by analogizing from what we know about ourselves.” (Dick 128) (Dick, 128)

Deckard's dealings with androids provide a powerful analogy to how one can cope with the ever-increasing dependence on artificial intelligence . Technological involvement is a given in the ontology of the twentieth century – however it is not a license to let go of one's innermost self as human : rather , it should lead to the evolution of newer forms of interdependence , that add to and enrich the meaning of what it means to be the only species on the planet capable of putting itself into another's shoes - in short, to be human through empathizing .

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