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Utopian Literature

5th May, 2022

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Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep – the ethical conundrum of what it means to be human

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Philip K. Dick questions what it is to be human, to be real, and employs empathy, an apparently human-only emotion, to blur the line between androids and humans. Real and unreal exist side by side, however androids are reviled because they lack empathy, and this crucial distinction is the foundation of human existence in the grim future. Dick makes the case that empathy is not solely a human emotion. Some androids, like some humans, appear to be able to express empathy. Dick's notion that real and unreal exist only in the imagination of the individual is demonstrated by this divergence from conventional thinking. If something exists as real in one's mind, that person can feel it as reality regardless of the truth in reality, which begs the question: *what is human?*

Rick Deckard, the story's protagonist, is a bounty hunter whose mission is to "retire" hazardous androids. Because humans are adjusting to a new environment, it is difficult for them to cope with the daily realities of life after the conflict. Rick, on the other hand, is grappling with internal issues as he begins to doubt what is right and wrong in terms of his life choices. As the novel unfolds, Rick Deckard begins to question the ethics of his profession while also developing empathy for the androids. Rick, on the other hand, manages to shift his attitude on

life and what it is to be human in just twenty-four hours. Vicariously through Rick's experiences, Dick constructs a plot for the reader to examine the ethical implications of what constitutes humanity over the course of the novel.

The subtleties and scientific technicalities being relied upon to accurately conceive a notion of humanity illustrates the severity of the problem at hand – to what extent does one have to empathize with another to be labelled human? The Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test is given to test the androids, as “empathy... existed only within the human community” and “it would tend to abort an organism's ability to survive” (Dick 14). When Rachel, an android, displays empathy later in the novel, it raises questions about what it is to be human, or perhaps suggests that androids can be "human" as well. The exam used to establish humanity assesses empathy in difficult social situations as well as cruelty to animals. Even in that test, the only difference between the new NEXUS-6 type androids and normal humans is in the delayed nerve responses in the eyes, which differ by a fraction of a second between the two "species" (Dick). Deckard mulls this over after learning of the death of a fellow bounty hunter at the hands of an android. Most species can prey on other organisms for sustenance and thus survival if they lack empathy. The androids must then share this characteristic with lower species and slaughter humans without hesitation. Dick almost offers this comment as a justification for the idea that humans are superior to other species and androids because we can feel empathy through Deckard.

The concept of what it means to be human is genuinely subjective and imprecise. "What if a person is born as a human but lacks empathy for others?" or "what if an android has the ability to think beyond the box?" (Vignemont 182). Many people, such as psychopaths, or evolved androids with the ability to sympathize with others, lack the ability to empathize. Many characters in the narrative who are technically human are depicted as ruthless and lacking in

humanity, such as Philip Resch and Rachel Rosen while other androids showcase remarkable empathy.

Humans use memory to communicate with one another and form relationships. Memory, on the other hand, bears minimal effect in the narrative. (Misselborn 111) Furthermore, their memories are usually implanted artificially. To demonstrate this concept, scientists advanced technology to the point where they were able to implant traits in an android's brain, including all fabricated memories and information, effectively transforming them into a human being. Dick demonstrated how memory is unreliable and has a positive relationship with time: as time passes, memories of the past get more distorted. As a result, prior memories are completely meaningless because they are always warped. Dick attempts to underscore the notion that memory is both futile and faulty in humans, as our memories are continually altered.

Human's absolute truth is the belief that things are unmistakably something, that one may be certain of an idea, statement, or object's reality. Because the separation of the object from the certainty of itself is totally abolished only in absolute knowing, it is the truth of every mode of awareness (Arn). Objectivity can be asserted when someone accepts something as absolute truth; there is no room for question or duality. In the novel, the notion of absolute truth is deeply ingrained in the debate between humans and androids - whether or not there is truly a difference between them. Dick's understanding of the meaning of life is the presence of empathy, which is what makes someone 'human,' according to the Voight-Kampff test. The protagonists struggle with this throughout the novel; Deckard applies the V-K test on Rachael, but when it fails, she is presumed to be a human who lacks empathy. Deckard resents the electric sheep he receives to replace his sheep, because he does not believe it loves him back (Dick). This same approach is

what enables him to quickly track down androids; he does not regard them as beings who deserve to live because the test indicates that they lack empathy.

The novel is heavily influenced by humanity and its proclivity for nihilism (Kerman). Deckard, who is frequently depressed, muses about life and existentialism in this nihilistic manner throughout the novel: he wondered if Mozart had had any intuition that the future did not exist, that he had already used up his little time. Maybe I have, too, Rick thought as he watched the rehearsal move along. This rehearsal will end, the performance will end, the singers will die, eventually the last score of the music will be destroyed in one way or another; finally the name "Mozart" will vanish, the dust will have won. If not on this planet, then another" (Dick). The Voight-Kampff test is the gold standard for determining if someone is a human or an android; it measures empathy, which is regarded to be the most important distinction between the two. The fact that this is a plausible option to being an android reinforces the protagonists' nihilistic outlook; society has devolved to the point where it is perfectly natural for people to have no feelings for one another (Hollan 391). In the novel, the character of Phil Resch is totally human, but we soon learn that he lacks empathy since he enjoys killing for the sake of killing (Dick), blurring the line between human and artificial. It also demonstrates the widespread lack of empathy individuals have for other beings, a manifestation of global nihilism. This demonstrates that humans, such as Phil, can be devoid of humanity, as Phil appears to enjoy killing, and that empathy is an illusion to keep humans and androids apart, rather than a human-only emotion.

Humans are dehumanized to an extent that begs the question – when does a human cease to be one? (Hall). As is the case with Deckard's wife Iran, most citizens of the sci-fi world appear to be individualistic, desensitized, and utilitarian. Iran is a prime example of individuals relying on "mood organs" to manufacture artificial feelings. John Isidore, the novel's second protagonist,

is a stark contrast to "regular" individuals. He has the ability to empathize with all living things, making him appear more humane than his peers. Despite this, Isidore exists on the periphery of a society that labels him a "special" since he is one of a small group of regressed individuals with low intelligence (Dick).

Distinguishing between genuine and artificial intelligence to establish what constitutes humanity should not become a goal in and of itself, and the notion of human nature should encompass far more than the ability to feel empathy (Wheale 302). Rachael exacts vengeance on Deckard by slaughtering his newly purchased and extremely valuable Nubian goat after he spurned her affection and she claimed that he loved his goat more than her. Through this behavior, she demonstrates her ability to be envious and thus demonstrates a very human characteristic. Furthermore, the title encourages readers to ponder androids, their dreams, and the reasons for their departure from Mars to Earth (Dick). The ability to feel empathy for androids that is not influenced by religion or community can be considered a sincere sensation and their most human feature.

The innate hypocrisy of mankind as it disregards androids' 'superficial empathy' and claims empathy as being unique to humans, exposes another fault in social organization and diminishing human superiority in the novel (Vignemont 187). Humans are separated into two types from the beginning of the novel: regular and special. People who do not meet social reproduction or cognitive norms are called "specials" and are unable to travel or marry. They are seen as so inconsequential by society that their presence is simply ignored in history. Similarly, this society uses intelligence metrics to eliminate specials, a minority group, so that the regulars can begin a fresh chapter in human history on Mars free of inferior DNA (Dick). In both cases,

society reveals its passion for 'excellence' by avoiding those with undesirable characteristics and valuing empathy over intellect. The androids in the story revolt against humanity and constantly pursue to liberate, yearning of a better existence on Earth. They are not accepted on Earth, however. They are despised and pursued by bounty hunters, who regard them as dangerous "murderous illegal aliens," people incapable of feeling empathy and hence posing a threat to human society.

Downplaying the humanity of the androids, Dick reasons that man's treatment of minorities and inherently differently perceived individuals is decadent in the realm of this debate (Kerman). Having an animal is a sign of rank in human society, as well as a way to exhibit one's compassionate nature Iran remarks: "You know how people are about not taking care of an animal; they consider it immoral and anti-empathetic". Because of this widespread belief, as well as the scarcity and high cost of real animals, people frequently purchase and care for electric animals as if they were real animals. The androids are considered expendable and will-less, as seen by their being hunted and slaughtered while electric animals are treated with love and care. When Rick meets the android Garland, he rationalizes: "It's a chance anyway, breaking free and coming here to Earth where we're not even considered animals. Where every worm and wood louse are considered more desirable than all of us put together" (Dick).

In conclusion, one has to wonder: is a human the epitome of what it means to be human? Or can he be better? In Dick's novel, often, the androids appear to be more human than humans, particularly when it comes to emotions. Rick remarked, "Most androids I've known have more vitality and desire to live than my wife". When Rick kills Roy's wife Irmgard, he "let out a cry of anguish," to which Rick replies, "Okay, you loved her," demonstrating that androids may feel

love, or when Pris is taken care of by Isadore, she begins to cry unexpectedly. When Pris sees her acquaintances Irmgard and Roy, they appear to have warm body language and are happy to see one other. This is also evident when Isadore breaches Mars and how she found it, and she responds that "all Mars is lonely." Much worse," and "The androids...are lonely, too," demonstrating that androids may experience loneliness. These emotional displays show that the androids are humanized as they have spontaneous emotions, while the humans are dehumanized as they control their emotions like programmable machines. Loneliness, apathy, empathy, regret, sadness, agony. If one can not differentiate beings on the premise of these traits, then is there a need to differentiate at all? When does one specie evolve into another? When do two beings converge paths? When does the distinction no longer matter? Dick masterfully elaborates on the answers to these questions in this post World War novel and amidst dark times and chaos, illuminates a world of inclusivity and rationality in the face of divisive conflict. Embracing unity, developing understanding and encouraging acceptance – that is what being human means to him.

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