
Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* New York: Doubleday, 1968. Pp. 210. ISBN: 978-1-61523-359-5.

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Book Review

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, authored by Philip K. Dick and published in 1968 by Doubleday provides a comparative view of the intricacies of the human emotional psyche. The story, told through the protagonist Rick Deckard, sheds emphasis on the visceral capacities of humans as compared to android artificial intelligence. Dick's acclaimed novel, which explores the manufactured relationship between man and machine, provides the reader with a rich insight into the rooted, yet often concealed, differences between human characteristics and the rigid traits of robots, providing a tangible contrast between human idiosyncrasies and electronic creations. The novel poses the important question of what it means to be human. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* served as the basis for Ridley Scott's dystopian classic film *Blade Runner*, and it is to Philip K Dick's imagination's immense credit that neither the book nor the film appears irrelevant even in today's date. The story was undoubtedly ahead of its time. Indeed, seldom a year goes by without some technological advancement that brings Dick's 1968 vision of the future closer. Hovercars may be a while off but the likes of video conversations and genetic tweaks are clearly in the present. The initial pages introduce "mood-organs," (Dick 3) which are activated to suppress or increase emotions in a needy populace. It's tough not to draw parallels with the internet which is constantly on, always available, yet never truly genuine. Deckard visits his artificial sheep "chomp [ing] away in simulated contentment" (Dick 42) on the roof right after the argument with Iran over the mood organ. This juxtaposition is undoubtedly intended to get us to consider whether the sheep's simulated contentment and the optimism Deckard has just dialled for himself are any different. Deckard's ideas regarding his discontent with owning the artificial sheep instead of the genuine one he once owned are on the status that each one transmits as a commodity rather than a difference in his relationship with the electric animal, whether it be affective or otherwise.



Deckard clearly states that “I’ve given it the same amount of time and care as I did when it was real” (Dick 196).

The novel since the beginning assumes a jarring prosaic structure since it contrasts with the usual lyrical, dramatic, or complex form that one might expect in a novel; Dick’s story is perhaps a bildungsroman for the cybernetic age, exploring the awakening of the posthuman subject. The plot is set in a post-World War II disaster zone, with radioactive dust destabilizing the remaining humans both mentally and genetically. A large proportion of the population migrates to colony worlds, indicating the presence of advanced scientific achievements. The ones who are left back are either too poor or are ineligible for emigration— the “specials” (Dick 15); owing to their decreased intelligence. As technology advances, androids grow indistinguishable from humans, stressing the need for bounty hunters to retire them. Developed from the perspective of Rick Deckard, a real-life bounty hunter, the novel may show the inferiority of androids on Earth. Deckard is specifically tracking a group of androids, including Pris Stratton, Luba Luft, and the Batys, who landed on Earth together. In the novel, bounty hunters use the Voigt-Kampff Empathy test to discern between androids and innocent citizens, which assesses an individual’s reactions to a sequence of emotive stories. The degree of indifference displayed by a participant is proportional to the likelihood that they will border on an android. Meanwhile, humans take pride in their ability to empathize because they believe in Mercerism, a religion. Every Mercerist has an empathy box, which, when touched, allows them to experience the thoughts and pain of a religious leader named Mercer. Nonetheless, in my opinion, the novel’s subtle use of sarcasm is critical in prompting readers to consider whether a clear distinction can be formed between humans and androids if empathy is the only criterion.

It was humans who built the androids. The same humans that brought about the heinous World War Terminus also brought about a dehumanized and polluted society that resembles the neon hell that we frequently see in cyberpunk novels. The author tries his best to depict the world his characters live in, but his emphasis on the plot and its symbols caused the surroundings to be somewhat neglected—with the exception of the last few chapters, where you can actually feel the building, the wasteland, and, ultimately, the nature Deckard encounters. Throughout the novel, there is a certain ominous atmosphere drawn up in the placement of words; the statements so lucidly put so as to never allow the questioning doubt of what alternative may occur.

In the narrative, animals are viewed as commodities instead as living beings with whom humans share existence. The relationship becomes estranged and alienating. The novel’s depiction of the blurred line between genuine and manufactured animals highlights the potential for living nature to become a commodity that appears to be alive but lacks social connections with humans. At a certain point, the novel depicts an android torturing a spider to determine the number of legs it can lose while still walking. It is at this point, the androids’ true nature is revealed, and sympathy for them is lost. This image can also be interpreted as a disinterested experiment, similar to how scientists can conduct painful trials on living organisms without regard.

The metaphors are many and even in departing from his use of convoluted language, the author manages to create a lilt. Philip K. Dick creates an intriguing rift between the opposing cerebral and intrinsic visceral complexity of the human and robotic forms by blurring the distinctions between man and our artificial counterparts. The plot never stops complicating; it weaves itself into a tighter ball of yarn and just as one thinks that they have gotten a hold of the loose end, another knot appears.

Overall, it is a compelling read and the readers are made to bolt upright at the startling revelations that are peppered throughout the book at intervals.