

Philip K. Dick's Human Vision

by **Kyla Bremner**

Philip K. Dick "was constantly asking the questions of "What is reality?" and "What is human?" in his writing. These themes are found in his books. Both of these questions he could never fully answer. But, in his hundred or so short stories and around fifty novels he continues to ask these questions and tries to answer them in some form. In all of Dick's attempts to answer these questions he seems to have become the world." (Future Boy, 1999).

In **Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?**, part of Dick's exploration of humanity and what it is to be human is through an examination of how humans as a group or society create and subsequently reinforce their own realities. Dick's critical satire of the humanity of Western culture through the transposition of 'real' cultural phenomena into the science fictional world of Androids. This displacement of certain ideas that humans have believed in and enacted from a real to imaginary society exposes their fundamental 'inhumanity' through their facilitation of the essential hypocrisy and inclination for 'evil' in human society through the construction of a false reality is therefore one of the primary themes of this incredibly multi-layered yet concise piece of sci-fi.

Dick's fascination with the idea of reality stemmed from his own mystic experiences and psychiatric problems (Future Boy, 1999). He struggled with his own perceptions of what was real, and because of this had many encounters with psychiatrists and psychoanalysts at 'rehabilitation centres'. References to schizophrenia recur throughout the novel, and although Dick himself did not seem to suffer from it as a prime example of the instability of reality. "What about the world of a schizophrenic? Maybe it's as real as our world" (Dick, quoted in Future Boy, 1999). Dick believed that it is more correct to talk about realities in the plural rather than the singular (Future Boy, 1999). The psychological and scientific medical fields and their discourses that influence the defining of the normal, the sane, and the singular 'real' are discussed and his use of the Voight-Kampff empathy test on android subjects. I will discuss how Deckard uses this test to reinforce the 'reality' which he lives, and how this is akin to the way scientists such as eugenicists and psychiatrists have used their own tests on patients to create a social reality that they have defined and thus created.

As we read the novel, we are, at first, inclined to believe what Deckard's thoughts tell us in terms of what is right and wrong in his society. That he is a bounty hunter who gets paid to 'retire' androids, man-made replicants of humans. Rick Deckard is employed by some sort of government and since what he does is legal, even essential to keeping the world 'safe', it is easy for the reader to assume it is ethical as well. The problem with what he does so neither does the reader. It is not until we read between the lines of Deckard's prejudices that we begin to see the true inhumanity of his actions and the society in which they are enacted. In the opening scene of the book, Deckard's own wife is murdered by a cop hired by the cops" (p. 7). The truth of this accusation is slowly exposed as we learn more about the androids and why they are non-human.

The classification of the androids as non-human holds many echoes of the Nazi decrees against the human rights of Jews in the Third Reich, and the historical American disregard for the rights of black slaves before the American Civil War. The basis for the determination is the Voight-Kampff scale that Deckard uses, or the Bonelli Reflex-Arc Test used by Phil Resch. The German and Italian names of the tests perhaps allude to the fascist regimes of Hitler (Mein Kampf perhaps?) and Mussolini, and the crimes against humanity which both the regimes perpetrated less than thirty years before Dick was writing this novel. The enslavement and murder of androids is justified on an arbitrary basis of what constitutes human, just as American slaves and European Jews were classified as subhuman because of the emphasis of differences such as skin colour or ethnic heritage, as were emphasised by medical scientists of the times.

The idea that the androids are not human because they are artificially created through feats of genetic engineering, and because they are biologically and empathically distinguishable from 'real' people seems reasonable at first. It is only when the specifics of the Voight-Kampff tests are discussed do we realise the essential irrelevance of their results to determining 'humanness'. In fact, the test is a startlingly little difference, both biologically and empathically, there actually is between 'humans' and 'androids'. The Voight-Kampff test measures eye and capillary dilation induced by a blush response to a series of 'moral dilemmas' posed by the investigator. There are two factors that make the test's results irrelevant. The first failing of the Voight-Kampff test is that often it is not measuring whether or not subjects respond to the questions, but how quickly they do so. When Deckard catches Rachel with his final comment that his briefcase was babyhide, she has an emotional response as the "two dial indicators gyrate frantically. But only after a pause. The reaction had come too late. He knew the correct reaction period down to a fraction of a second, the correct reaction period; there should have been none." (p. 48). This delayed reaction time is what is tested by the Bonelli Reflex-Arc Test. As Resch explains, "The reflex-arc response taking place in the upper ganglia of the spine requires several microseconds more in the humanoid robot than in the human nervous system...We try it a number of times, of course, varying in both the android and the human. But by the time ten reactions have been measured, we believe we have a reliable clue." (p. 49). Getting the correct reaction time gives them a clue as to how to interpret their test results. On top of this uncertainty is the irrelevance of the time anything other than proving that there is a microsecond of difference between the nerve response of a human and an android. On what basis on which to classify an android as inhuman? It seems that the tests really reinforce the essential sameness of the androids while desperately searching for some slight difference in physiology and direction of empathy on which they can base their discrimination.

The second flaw of the Voight-Kampff test is its reliance on the idea of a concrete moral standard. "What is the basis of your Voight-Kampff test, Deckard?" Resch asked him. "Empathic response. In a variety of social situations. Mostly having to do with animals." (p. 92). Since there has not been a dramatic loss of animal life from the planet, these questions regarding animals pose no ethical dilemma for the reader. "You are given a calfskin wallet on your birthday" (p. 40-41) would elicit a 'normal' response of "I'd thank them and put it in my pocket" of the readers of the novel. Yet within Dick's world, any response other than extreme shock and horror, such as Rachel Rosen's response, "I wouldn't accept it...Also I'd report the person who gave it to me to the police"(p. 41), would indicate sociopathic and 'inhuman' qualities. The cultural definition of 'normal' is exposed to be an arbitrary creation of social values at that given time in those given circumstances. (Cultural definitions are arbitrary, but they are not arbitrary in the sense that they are not based on any shared values or experiences. It is not surprising that they do not

the androids are forcibly kept socially separate from the humans in their defined roles as slaves, it is not surprising that they do not share the same values as humans. In fact, in relation to the social values of the reader, the androids who have empathy for each other, compared to humans who have more empathy for animals (or at least they seem to value them more) than for the androids, seem more 'human' than the rather unempathetic characters such as Deckard and Resch. This exposure of Deckard and his psychological testing as a ridiculous determination of 'humanness' is pretty much a satirical parody of psychoanalysts and their techniques for determining the 'abnormals' in

This link with the psychiatric medicalisation of the normal is further emphasised by Deckard's conversation with Bryant regarding the Voight-Kampff scale, and by many of Rachel's responses while taking the test. Deckard and Bryant's discussion of Lurie Kampff, who used the Voight's scale to make the Voight-Kampff Altered Scale, and who wrote an article entitled "Role-taking Blockage in the Undeteriorate" (p. 33) is deliberately portrayed as a psychiatrist in the mould of the likes of late nineteenth-century sexual psychologists such as Heino Krafft-Ebing, both of whom were instrumental in laying down the foundation from which Sigmund Freud developed his theory. Wilhelm Reich, a Marxist sexologist who worked with Freud before disagreeing with him and branching off on his own (Weeks, p. 2-3) surprisingly, the "Leningrad psychiatrists" (p. 33) also disagreed with Kampff in his certainty regarding his altered scale. The similar methods of building psychiatric models from earlier ones, as well as conflicting ideas of the 'professionals', are distinct reminders of early twentieth-century sexual psychoanalysts. The curious similarity between the name of the Voight-Kampff test, Krafft-Ebing's name, and the manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, seems to link the three in a manner that suggests they are all interrelated; that it was the psychologists who created the dangerous creation of identities classified as socially undesirable, which the Nazi regime then used to justify their extermination of Jews, homosexuals, and other 'undesirables', just as Deckard and his contemporaries use the 'empathy' test to justify the androids as being a dangerous way. Dick gives us a clue at the sexologists of our own society's construction of the dangerous 'abnormal' when Deckard's statement regarding a picture of a naked woman which seems to be totally irrelevant to empathic response. "Is this testing whether I'm gay or whether I'm homosexual?" (p. 41). This is also perhaps Dick's comment on the McCarthy era in the US and the way in which gays through their psychiatric categorisation as mentally ill in the 1950s. In addition, Rachel's response to Deckard's psychoanalytic test where he shows her a picture of a little boy and he shows her his butterfly collection, including his killing jar" (p. 41), that she would "take him to the doctor" (p. 41) is a clear indication of the extent to which certain behaviour in our society has been categorised as deviant and in need of medical intervention, and how that deviant is a culturally specific construction.

Dick's portrayal of Deckard, and more so Resch, as the true sickos is explicit. When Deckard sits and appreciates Luba's aria before murdering her, stories of Nazis who made Jews perform for them the night before they were gassed are conjured up. Resch's recommendation to Deckard to go to bed with a female android and then kill her (his "grainy, hardened smile remained" (p. 111)) is a gross reminder of the atrocities of which humans and humanity are capable. Dick seems to believe that the atrocities in the real world, to which he alludes, such as misogyny, nuclear war, and Nazism, are justified through an enforced alteration of reality by the means of false definitions and a lack of empathy for other human beings. The fact that Deckard cannot kill Rachel after he sleeps with her shows some sort of empathy for her that he cannot feel for the other androids (his true humanness), yet he is unable to see out of the 'reality' in which he has existed for so long in which androids are a dangerous 'true humans'. It is Deckard and Resch, the supposed defenders of humanity who are in fact the ones who are destroying it, and this is done with the help of the false psychiatric tools that they use to confirm their version of reality.

The behaviour of the bounty hunters is contrasted by that of the androids. The androids' appreciation for the fine music of Mozart, the art of Munsch, and literature of the pre-apocalyptic world are indicators of their true humanity. Dick himself was very knowledgeable about music and he was very knowledgeable about classical recordings (Löfgren, 1998). As well, the androids display an sense of appreciation for the well being of others that is seen nowhere else in the book.

This ability for empathy may easily be overlooked by readers as they get caught up in Dick's fantasy world. The horror that the reader feels when the androids cut the legs off the spider is a quite an amazing indication of how well Dick has created his world, and how the reader gets sucked into it. Considering how easily most of us kill insects in our world, the horror of the reader to the spider scene is amusing as a certain level of hypocrisy and willingness to judge is revealed in the reader herself. Perhaps Dick was playing with his readers, getting them to believe what Deckard did regarding the androids without realising that it is foolish to believe what you are told without questioning and examining its fundamental truth. The point is that the name you call something doesn't change the reality of what it is. "The basic manipulation of reality is the manipulation of words. If you can control the meaning of words, you can control the people who must use them" (Dick, as quoted by Future Boy, 1999). Calling an android a machine can still not remove its humanness, only others' perception of it. Just as labelling someone a psychopath or schizophrenic can serve to remove their essential humanity in the eyes of society.

This reading of Dick's *Androids* does not interpret his ideas regarding the psychiatric discourse that has arisen since the end of the last century as all favourable. The creation of the 'other', or in this novel, the android, has led to unprecedented human atrocities as seen in the last Second World War. Dick's implication of the psycho-medical field in the social facilitation of the dehumanisation of the 'other' through 'proving' essential inhuman differences in them is damning in the least. From his own experiences with psychiatrists, and his own strict concept of reality, Dick is perhaps making an argument that sometimes the doctors are perhaps more sick than the patients. Through the deconstruction of the bounty hunters as inhumanely prejudiced members of a fascist society, Dick is also deconstructing the society of our time. What is good in **Androids** is perhaps what is bad in our world, such as our propensity for extreme lack of empathy for and desecration of animals and other races and religions, or our ease at creating an 'other' to persecute. We must recognise the hypocrisy and inhuman society, but that recognition must then be turned upon our own to see that our is no better, and perhaps is worse in many ways.

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