

Philip K. Dick and Philosophy



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04

Ewe, Robot

ALF SEEGERT

At the beginning of the movie *Blade Runner*, the camera zooms inside the vast arcology of the Tyrell Corporation, where—amid a swirl of cigarette smoke propelled by ceiling fans—Detective Holden is administering the Voight-Kampff (V-K) test to job applicant Leon Kowalski. Holden wants to find out if Leon is truly human, or a dreaded humanoid replicant instead—an android. He uses the test to register Leon’s eye dilations in response to questions about animals in distress. In this exchange, Leon Kowalski knows what a turtle (or tortoise) is, but—at least as far as we can tell—he doesn’t feel what it would be like to be one. And that’s the problem.

HOLDEN: The tortoise lays on its back, its belly baking in the hot sun beating its legs trying to turn itself over but it can’t, not without your help, but you’re not helping.

LEON: What do you mean I’m not helping?

HOLDEN: I mean, you’re not helping. Why is that, Leon?

Leon’s responses to these questions, as registered by involuntary changes in his pupils, become the litmus test for what will qualify him as human—or (in his case) not. Specifically, the test records the subject’s expression of empathy, the ability to experience the sufferings of another as if they are one’s own. The capacity for empathy, however, turns out to be a deliciously problematic basis for demonstrating human uniqueness. Empathy is rooted primarily in a subject’s ability to identify

imaginatively with another being. Put another way, to demonstrate his humanity via empathy, Leon must be able to simulate the experience of someone or something else in his own consciousness by virtually “stepping into its shoes,” and then responding compassionately. Ironically enough, the very criterion required for human beings to demonstrate that they are not android simulations is their very ability to simulate in the first place! However, if you are a simulation yourself, like Leon, you can’t empathetically simulate the experiences of others as well as humans can.

The V-K test is doubly ironic in that android replicants in *Blade Runner* do in fact show at least some significant empathy for each other (witness Roy’s mourning for Pris after Deckard shoots her), whereas the grimly noir-ish setting of the film reveals that human empathy—even for fellow human beings—is in very short supply. And empathy proves altogether absent when it comes to a Blade Runner’s feelings for the replicants he brutally “retires” to keep Earth safely android-free: the audience winces as Deckard shoots Zhora in the back, but Deckard doesn’t. If one’s humanity inheres in one’s capacity for displaying empathy, then in crucial ways the android replicants of *Blade Runner* might just be (to use the Tyrell Corporation’s motto) “more human than human.”

The justification for the V-K test is largely to relieve the anxiety human beings feel in never being quite sure if they are interacting with another human, or with a soulless and supposedly empathy-free android. If an android can successfully pass itself off as a human, then on what moral basis are humans entitled to enslave androids as they do? The capacity to make clear human-android distinctions through the V-K test thus becomes a crucial way for humans to maintain existing power hierarchies. As a result, android verisimilitude and human-made testing equipment co-evolve in a sort of “arms race,” with each seeking to outwit the other. But the pervasive Dickian anxieties evidenced in *Blade Runner* (and in Dick’s novel on which it was based, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) extend well beyond any concerns that androids might pass for human beings. Although this external threat drives much of the plot in both stories, a deeper internal anxiety lurks: namely, that I might not be human myself.

How Animals Make Us Human

This anxiety over identity expresses itself in both literal and figurative possibilities: in both *Blade Runner* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, not only do machines become more like humans, but humans become more like machines. Philip K. Dick expressly raises this concern in his 1972 essay “The Android and the Human”: “As the external world becomes more animate, we may find that we—the so-called humans—are becoming, and may to a great extent always have been, inanimate.” For Dick, authentic selfhood—if one dares use the term “authentic” in a Dickian context—seems to inhere in our felt relations with others. As Dick himself puts it in “Man, Android, and Machine,” “A human being without the proper empathy or feeling is the same as an android built so as to lack it, either by design or mistake.”

Dick’s concern over the properly human expression of empathy pervades *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* In the post-apocalyptic wasteland of the novel, Rick Deckard is a bounty hunter whose job is to “retire” renegade androids. However, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is as concerned with human relationships to animals as it is with the threat of android infiltration, for animals have gone nearly extinct after World War III and most people have migrated to the offworld colonies to escape lingering radioactivity and urban decay.

Because there are scarcely any creatures left on the Earth other than humans, people are denied communion with other selves not of their own making, namely, “real” animals. Lacking more-than-human relationships, these remnant humans dread the possibility of devolving into something less-than-human themselves. This anxiety over one’s own authentic humanity drives Deckard and others in the novel to acquire “real” animals at any cost in order to actively demonstrate their empathy—even when it means brutally “retiring” trespassing androids to make the required payments.

In the movie *Blade Runner*, you would likewise expect that showing empathy for others (animals especially) would be the royal road to conclusively demonstrating your humanity. Strangely enough, it isn’t. Whereas in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* human identity is secured through empathetic relationships with non-human “animal others,” in *Blade*

Runner a person's humanity is validated primarily through the displaying of photographs. This "self-validation via snapshot" authenticates human identity through images, not relationships. When the replicant Rachael wants to prove she is not a replicant, she hands a photo to Deckard and says, "Look, it's me with my mother." In line with Jean Baudrillard's theory of the "precession of simulacra," Rachael does not say, "This is a photo of me with my mother." The photo itself (in her estimation) becomes an authentic, self-grounding artifact which need not refer to any external referent: the simulation is the reality. Deckard, in turn, displays a profusion of old sepia-tone photographs on his piano, an orgy of evidence for a supposed abundance of human relations. But these photos are ancient, and consequently, suspicious. He evidences no current relations at all, a possible hint that he might be an android himself attempting to overcompensate for such lack.

In "On Photography," critic Susan Sontag points out how such deployment of photos can act as surrogate families, virtual substitutes for real relations that authenticate relationships by documenting the loved one's absence. To authenticate their humanity, the characters in *Blade Runner* thus employ simulations that require no tethering to actual experience or to the lives of others, whereas those in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* depend intimately on relations with other living creatures. As a result, the film's criterion for humanness appears to demand no escape from the cell of the self, whereas the novel demands an embrace of otherness and (to use philosopher David Abram's phrase) care-based relations with a "more-than-human world."

For Philip K. Dick, however, what exactly counts as "more than human" (and "more human than human") can get a little bit tricky . . .

Narcissism in a "More Human than Human" World

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Deckard wants to use his bounty money to buy a real sheep to replace the electric one that chomps "in simulated contentment" in its fallout-ridden pastoral enclosure atop his apartment building. Though his ersatz black-faced Suffolk ewe from a distance bears the marks

of the real—enough to fool the neighbors—Deckard wants more than just the social status that comes from owning a real animal. He wants to demonstrate his capacity for empathy by relating with a genuine “Other.” Moreover, he wants to be sure that his own existence registers on the consciousness of another genuine subjectivity.

In Deckard’s view—at least early in the book—androids and synthetic sheep only simulate awareness, and as a result fail to be “Others” in a moral sense, because they have no selves of their own. Deckard’s interaction with a sentient non-human animal (like a real sheep) is required in order to affirm his own humanity: he must be convinced that he exists for it. (Deckard’s fellow bounty hunter Phil Resch, seemingly an android himself because of his predatory cold-bloodedness towards his android prey, defends his humanity purely on the basis of his dedication to a pet squirrel named “Buffy”!) To invoke Gertrude Stein by way of Isaac Asimov, in Deckard’s insentient electric sheep “there’s no there there”: his ewe-robot will be forever incapable of self-awareness, denied the capacity to say (or even think) “I, Robot.”

In these ways, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* raises a fascinating problem that twentieth-century media theorist Marshall McLuhan dubbed “Narcissus as Narcosis.” In his book *Understanding Media*, McLuhan argues that the Narcissus myth is misread when construed as that of a boy falling in love with himself. Although the myth tells how Narcissus becomes captivated by his own beautiful reflection in a pool—becoming insensitive to all else—McLuhan argues that Narcissus doesn’t realize that the reflection he so adores is really an image of himself at all. In just this way, McLuhan continues, technological extensions create the illusion of otherness when they actually only provide a hall of mirrors for infinitely reflecting humanity back to itself.

Digital devices, androids, and animal surrogates like Deckard’s synthetic sheep re-spin human beings into ever-new and tantalizing guises, but ultimately offer nothing back to us except more of us. As a result, Narcissus produces narcosis, or numbness, by dulling sensations that would otherwise reveal that we’re really only in contact with—and only seem to desire—our own productions and our own reflections, not contact with genuine “others.”

Philip K. Dick satirizes the numbing and narcotic effect of technology in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, where both Deckard and his wife Iran experience emotional states not by responding to other beings, or even to each other, but instead by dialing a mood on demand using their Penfield Mood Organ. Similarly, in a world practically devoid of non-human others, empathy itself must be technologically mediated via another method of self-programming. By using their Empathy Box, a device that allows Deckard and his wife to fuse emotional states with other users and vicariously experience the pains of the sainted Wilbur Mercer, they can “perform” their humanness in ways androids in the novel cannot. But Mercerism, the religion dedicated to this use of virtual empathy, ultimately proves to be as synthetic as the grass-chewing electric sheep on Deckard’s roof. Still, for most people, these “virtual others” prove to be good enough because they generate the effects of relationship even if they lack its substance.

Empathy in a “More Human than Human” World

Imagining what it is like to be someone other than oneself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.

— IAN MCEWAN

Deckard persists in his determination to bathe in the aura of an actual animal, rather than settle for a simulated one—and the hefty price-tag involved requires that he become less human himself in the process. By selectively applying his own capacity for empathy, Deckard kills certain non-humans (androids) to earn the money to obtain and care for other non-human beings (animals), thereby ultimately “validating” his own actual human being.

He thought, too, about his need for a real animal; within him an actual hatred once more manifested itself toward his electric sheep, which he had to tend, had to care about, as if it lived. The tyranny of an object, he thought. It doesn’t know I exist. Like the androids, it had no ability to appreciate the existence of another.

As with all good science fiction, Dick's novel cannily critiques the author's own present day. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was published in 1968, an era which offered plenty of drugs, television, and countless other potentially alienating surrogates in place of concrete relationships. Today we might add the Internet and a bevy of portable digital devices.

For McLuhan, this condition of technologically mediated narcissism is so addictively numbing that, whether we like it or not, it effectively truncates our nerve endings of all input other than that provided by the media interface itself. (Witness those drivers too distracted by texting or talking on the cell phone to be able to steer or brake properly.) As McLuhan puts it, Narcissus was insensate to the cries of even the beautiful nymph Echo because "He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system" (p. 63). Likewise, our devices become self-enclosing worlds that shut out those relationships not themselves mediated by such devices.

For Deckard and other humans who chafe at the limits of technological self-enclosure, animals represent a guaranteed passage into authentic "otherness," returning blood and feeling to deadened nerve endings and shattering the narcissistic mirror through the power of a certifiably "real presence." Deckard thus longingly thumbs his dog-eared Sidney's pricing guide for animals (the novel's parodic equivalent to a Kelley Blue Book for cars, if not to holy writ) calculating just how many androids he has to "retire" before he can at last acquire a real sheep (or even better, an ostrich, or a goat).

Dick further ramps up the anxiety level by making it impossible for his characters to be sure if they are ever actually interacting with an "authentic" non-human other at all. Just as the latest android models threaten the reliability of the V-K test, even close inspection of one's ostensibly "real" sheep, ostrich, or goat might fail to disclose its status as a supremely clever simulation.

In this way Dick reconfigures a classic philosophical conundrum, the so-called "problem of other minds." Because we can never experience the subjective states of other beings—instead only having access to their externally manifested appearances and behaviors—we can never be sure that these "others" have actual minds of their own. In philosophical formulations of the problem, the concern is solipsism—is it possible that I am the

only mind in the universe and all these seeming “others” are only projections of my own mind? In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Dick extends this anxiety to the world at large. Deckard’s encounters with nature and non-human animals are always at risk of being so haunted by human-created simulations that no guaranteed relationship with an authentic non-human “other” remains.

Deckard nonetheless wields the hope of escaping outside the circle of species-solipsism by encountering an “other” so certifiably other that it cannot possibly have been manufactured. Near the end of the book Deckard inexplicably finds a lone toad (a real toad!) in the California desert—a creature marked with an “E” for extinct in his Sidney’s catalog. His eyes open wide with astonishment and glee. Unlike Holden’s interview scenario involving the desert tortoise in *Blade Runner*, he immediately demonstrates his empathy with concerned action. In his excitement he gently picks up the toad and brings it home in a cardboard box—a “box” that Deckard hopes will signify authentic care in ways that his use of the Mercerists’ Empathy Box cannot.

So this is what Mercer sees, he thought as he painstakingly tied the cardboard box shut—tied it again and again. Life which we can no longer distinguish; life carefully buried up to its forehead in the carcass of a dead world. In every cinder of the universe Mercer probably perceives inconspicuous life. Now I know, he thought. And once having seen through Mercer’s eyes, I probably will never stop.

But when he shows the toad to his wife Iran, she discovers something disturbing: “still holding it upside down, she poked at its abdomen and then, with her nail, located the tiny control panel. She flipped the panel open” (p. 241). The toad is artificial. In the nuclear wasteland of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, it seems that the desert of the real offers safe habitat only for virtual creatures.

The Shock of Being Alive

The shock of encountering something which is other is the shock of being alive: isn’t it amazing that there is that, and not just me?

—NEIL EVERNDEN, *The Social Creation of Nature*

The narcotic effects of technology in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* incarnate precisely the concerns Marshall McLuhan expressed over techno-narcissism. By encountering nothing but ourselves and our own creations, we become immune to the call of the more-than-human world. Instead, to invoke Tyrell's motto again, we find ourselves beholden to a synthetic world which vies to become "more-human-than-human!" The consequences of such narcissism are particularly susceptible to a critique by twentieth-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who warns of the dangers in how we "enframe" Being in our encounters with it.

Specifically, our uses of technology constrain Being, in all its possible ways of unfolding, to one monolithic image, namely, a technological "world picture." This "picture" is created by human beings and exclusively for human beings—and we mistake this human construction of reality for reality itself. For example, instead of being understood as having its own otherness, agency, and purpose, the Earth becomes nothing more than use value, a "standing reserve" awaiting its quarrying by humans. We shape the infinite facets of Being into useful, recognizable forms according to the way technology appropriates them: a forest becomes no more than "board feet," a mountain "mineral resources," animals "food production units."

As a result, Heidegger would contend, we confuse Being with the image we stamp onto it, and like Narcissus, we fall in love with this image, not realizing that we put it there ourselves. The consequences desecrate the earth and dehumanize ourselves. As media scholar Kevin DeLuca tweets (making ironic use of the medium), "The orientations of cell phones/new media truncate our reciprocal relation with the Earth, stunting our senses and incarcerating ourselves in a technosoliloquy."

In case the threat of lost contact with the other doesn't seem like such a big deal, we might need to seriously consider a major concern Dick's novel raises, namely that our very human identity is in fact constructed through such relations. Likewise, Deep Ecologists and thinkers like David Abram insist that such relationships with the "more-than-human world" are not "add-ons" but are instead utterly basic to our humanity:

Humans are tuned for relationship. The eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils—all are gates where our body receives the nourishment of

otherness. We are human only in contact, in conviviality, with what is not human. Direct sensuous reality, in all its more-than-human mystery, remains the solid touchstone for an experiential world now inundated with electronically-generated vistas and engineered pleasures; only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can we learn how to orient and to navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us.

If Abram is right, then human identity is—as Dick suggests in *Androids*—necessarily relational. Unless we routinely interface our bodies with the not-us, then through our isolated self-engagement we risk losing something essential to what makes us human. It's not just the Earth that is threatened, but ourselves. Lacking a vital connection to more-than-human others, we are, like Deckard, in danger of devolving into quasi-human simulacra. The hypermediating modes of contact that our digital devices and networked computing provide should therefore give us serious pause and make us question to whom, exactly, we are networked—and who gets excluded.

We ought also to consider whether or not as human individuals we still possess the bandwidth needed to experience the world invoking more senses than the visual, and ask if we still remember the protocols required to connect ourselves with the furred, creeping, burrowing, flying, and flowing inhabitants of the earthly landscape. Do we hear the hum of insects anymore, or only that of our desktop machines? In accord with Jean Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra," digital tweets have become more present for many people than those uttered by birds.

The Lives of Electric Others

But everything I've been arguing buys completely into Deckard's notion that electric sheep and androids are nothing more than clever simulations with no actual selfhood of their own. When his toad dismayingly proves to be artificial—and Wilbur Mercer is exposed as a paid performer on a stage set—Deckard initially despairs at the pervasive inauthenticity of what little he has left in his world. His nostalgic pastoral impulse to reclaim a lost golden world in which humans and animals engage in reciprocal care and communication (if not communion) has proven unobtainable. In order to cope, he has no option but to reprogram his responses. He must employ a

new mode of simulation of his own in order to make his own life meaningful, namely, to make himself believe that what he thought to be lifeless isn't. In this recognition, his gloom lifts a little in a muted epiphany when he says "The electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are."

In *Blade Runner* Quaid may make a similar realization, ultimately finding more humanity in Roy Batty's self-sacrifice than in any of the supposedly human beings he finds in Los Angeles, himself included. And when he discovers the origami unicorn that Gaff leaves for him, the glint in his eye might mean more than just hope for Rachael, the replicant he has come to love: namely, he realizes that he, too, might be a replicant himself. And astonishingly enough, he seems okay with that—or, at least, willing to make it work.

Likewise, in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, instead of having to find redemption in an escape "outside" the realm of technological simulation, Deckard instead comes to accept it: "Mercer isn't fake . . . unless reality is fake." Does he now see "through Mercer's eyes" in an animistic way that invites all beings, electric ones included, into his circle of moral concern? How much Deckard's response merely demonstrates a grudging concession to the inescapable virtuality of reality, and how much it might represent a genuine acknowledgment of synthetic selfhood ultimately remains unclear.

Exhausted from his pursuit and his termination of the remaining rogue androids in the novel, he lets his wife program the Penfield Mood Organ to setting number 670, "long deserved peace," and he finally sleeps—having been programmed to do so. (One has to wonder: does he now dream of electric, or actual sheep?) As he rests, Iran wonders what this new electric toad eats. "Artificial flies, she decided." She looks up "animal accessories, electric" in the yellow pages, and for Deckard's toad she orders "one pound of artificial flies that really fly around and buzz, please . . . I want it to work perfectly. My husband is devoted to it."¹

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