

Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep

Philosophy Essay

Having seen written and filmed visions of the future, one would think that by now we would all be moving around on flying skateboards and in hovering cars and that we would have our breakfast served by helpful, patient and understanding robots, under the risk that these robots go berserk and start taking over the world. The people who imagined such a future should have given the world a few more years to develop in such a way, since smart-phones and tablet computers are still the most progressive gadgets of today. On the other hand, there are a significant number of cameras and tracking devices following every suspicious move one makes, practically everyone has access to our most intimate data and some governments enabled themselves to make “undesirable” people disappear. This would mean that most visionaries were pretty right about the way in which society would (d) evolve, but they were slightly over-optimistic when it came to technological breakthroughs.

This is why I find it interesting to read about changes in the world and in the human mind various authors expected to have happened by now – because most of them are currently happening, and people are turning away from each other and focusing mainly on themselves and their personal success (by “personal success” I mean money and power). Philip K. Dick depicted this estrangement in detail in his 1968-novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and I have been fascinated by it ever since I started playing the videogame *Blade Runner* when I was 14 years old. For that reason I chose to write about how Dick thought everyday life would look in the year 1992, which is when the novel takes place (on January 3rd, to be precise). First I will give a short outline of the story’s plot and analyse the story according to Todorov’s criteria of the Fantastic and Brooke-Rose’s theory of the encoded reader. The major part of this paper will consist of the description of the state of society after World War Terminus, the things that surround the humans who stayed on Earth and those who migrated to colonies on other planets, and of a description of the status of androids per se, as well as compared to electric animals.

1.2. Plot overview and analysis

Philip K. Dick (born in 1928) takes us to the year 1992, 24 years after the novel was written. He introduces us to Rick Deckard who works for the San Francisco Police Department as a bounty hunter and whose job is to “retire” androids (“replicants”) that have fled from extraterrestrial colonies and come back to Earth. Deckard just received a new challenge – to retire six Nexus-6 androids that are almost impossible to discern from real human beings. With the bounty of 1.000 \$ per retired “andy” Rick could finally buy a real animal instead of having just an electric replacement that would embarrass him in front of the neighbours if they ever found out. After facing a few obstacles and intrigues, Deckard finally manages to retire the six replicants in one day, making him the SFPD’s best bounty hunter, a role for which Deckard has become too weary after his

whole life turned upside down and he lost faith in all the principles that led him through the story.

Dick immediately takes us into this new future, he is not offering any rational explanations for why he believes the world would look like this in the future, and the reader doesn't feel the need to ask any questions. According to Todorov's criteria of the fantastic (1975:54-57) this novel fits into the category of the instrumental (scientific) marvellous, since all of the novums (Shippey, 2005 – citing DarkoSuvin) are introduced as if they were completely normal, everyday things that aren't meant to provoke any awe in the reader. The determination of the text is balanced, according to Christine Brook-Rose's theory (1981:122-124), which means that the reader is neither over- nor under-determined, he or she receives the same amount of information as the characters in the text, mostly through dialogues and the thoughts of the characters.

The novel is one of the dystopian genre, which had its climax after the Second World War, and in which societies worse than those of our time are described (Wegner, 2005:88-91) through topics such as overpopulation, urban decay, environmental catastrophes etc., which were all major concerns in the years when the world was expecting a third World War. Estrangement and alienation between people and the search for identity, or, to be more specific, for what it means to be human are also issues frequently touched upon in this kind of literature.

Part II – Earth after World War Terminus

“... no one today remembered why the war had come about or who, if anyone, had won.” (Dick, 2005:11) These are the words Dick uses to describe the absurdity of war – it usually starts due to insignificant reasons and causes pain and loss to everyone involved. There can never be a real winner and the effects are felt for years afterwards. This particular nuclear war completely altered the face of Earth – most of the population emigrated to colonies on other planets because their homes got covered by a veil of radioactive dust, most of the vegetation disappeared and animals became extremely rare. This gloomy atmosphere is nicely depicted in the film Blade Runner which was based on the novel, and in which it is clear that the sunlight doesn't even reach the street-level of the city due to all the dust and smog.

2.1. The colonization program

Even before World War Terminus had the people of Earth started to move to other planets and build colonies there. But, as Dick writes in Chapter 2, “... now that the Sun had ceased to shine on Earth the colonization entered an entirely new phase.” (2005:12) Large amounts of people began to emigrate in the search for a new home where they wouldn't be exposed to radioactive dust and where they could start over and try to live a normal life. The government and the UN encouraged these migrations, their scientists modified the Synthetic Freedom Fighters, a prototype of the android (as described in Chapter 2) which was supposed to assist humans in their migration. Later

each human would receive an android servant specially designed to fulfil the needs of its master, as a “welcome gift” to their new homes. Those who decided to stay on Earth were constantly exposed to radioactive fallout. The remaining population was divided into “regulars” (those who passed the IQ test and had acceptable reasons to stay on Earth) and “specials” (those who were considered to have insufficient mental capabilities, it was forbidden for them to emigrate and they were sterilised because their reproduction was undesirable). Regulars were obligated to visit a doctor on a regular basis, because the dust could soon turn them into specials too. That is why a popular TV slogan says: “Emigrate or degenerate! The choice is yours!” (2005:5) – Earth was no longer safe and the longer one would remain here, the greater the chances were for the dust to take effect.

2.2. Dust and kipple

The most important motifs Dick uses to describe the atmosphere on Earth after WWT are silence, dust and kipple. The silence is described in Chapter 2 and it is felt by John Isidore, a special who lives all by himself in a massive empty apartment building. Since most of the population has left Earth, most of the buildings are empty and one can find themselves often being completely alone. Isidore feels the silence radiating from every pore of the building – from the appliances that had stopped working years before that, from the walls and from the ceiling. He felt as if the silence possesses a power of its own, as if its goal were to take over all the objects (and people!) and, finally, as if the silence had come alive, to claim its throne among everything there is.

Another thing that is slowly occupying the routine on Earth is kipple, a term coined by Dick himself. Kipple are objects such as junk mail or gum wrappers people fail to throw away. Kipple then accumulates and “reproduces itself” (2005:52), it spreads all over man’s daily environment. According to John Isidore, “No one can win against kipple”, one can try to fight it with non-kipple, but as soon as one surrenders or leaves, kipple will take over and, eventually, completely occupy the universe. Buster Friendly, a popular TV-personality whose importance I will elaborate later in this paper, warned that this would cause the ultimate decadence of Earth by saying: “...Earth would die under a layer – not of radioactive dust – but of kipple.” (2005:69)

While the accumulation of kipple can at least be postponed, and the silence can be avoided by staying in the city surrounded by people, the dust is one thing that is completely independent of human influence. As already mentioned, the dust is radioactive fallout which remained on Earth after the nuclear war, and which still influences the mental and physical health of the remaining population. The effects of dust are well seen in the description of Hannibal Sloat, Isidore’s boss:

“The dust, over the years, had eroded him; it had left his features gray, his thoughts gray; it had shrunk him and made his legs spindly and his gait unsteady. He saw the world through glasses literally dense with dust. For some reason Sloat never cleaned

his glasses. It was as if he had given up; he had accepted the radioactive dirt and it had begun its job, long ago, of burying him.” (2005:60)

The dust cannot be evaded, under its influence humanity on Earth would soon decay, and the only culprit is humanity itself, starting pointless wars and destroying what does not belong to them.

Part III – Humanity’s favourite pastimes

Humans would certainly cease to be humans if they would simply surrender to the depression and the silence. Life goes on, and there were things to do, people to judge and rituals to perform. It would be pointless to continue living without being able to take care of a real animal, without fusing with Wilbur Mercer or laughing at Buster Friendly’s perpetually interesting jokes.

3.1. Animals

The nuclear war wiped out most of the vegetation and almost every animal species known to mankind, starting out with owls and other birds and then affecting the others as well. Being in possession of a real animal is a symbol of status, but it is also an obligation – not taking care of an animal and trying to restore the fauna on Earth is considered to be an act of moral turpitude. But real animals cost money, and the prizes are displayed in Sidney’s Animal & Fowl Catalogue, which is carried around by almost every human being hoping to be able to afford a real animal one day. Until that day, it is a social requirement to at least have a replica, even though it is, as said on page 6, “gradually demoralizing”. One does not simply admit that their pet is a fake one, which is why even animal repair services have to look like real animal clinics, so that this whole façade can be preserved and no one has to feel bad. People will always strive to earn enough money to buy a real animal - still, there is no money in the world that can resurrect extinct species, so even the owl belonging to the powerful Rosen corporation is proved to be a fake in the end. The death of an animal presents a heavy emotional burden for its owners, and it is no exception to have an identical replica of the deceased animal built.

3.2. Mood organs

In this reality mood-altering products are either illegal or have to be prescribed by a doctor. In Philip K. Dick’s world a Penfield mood organ is a must-have for every household. Using the mood organ that stimulates the brain and alters a person’s disposition toward the world, one can choose with what mood they will wake up – setting D, for example, makes one feel “well-disposed toward the world” (2005:1) in the morning. There are several hundred moods one can choose from to schedule for the days ahead, reaching from “The desire to watch TV, no matter what’s on it” (mood 888) to the “Awareness of the manifold possibilities open to me in the future” (no. 481). By dialling a mood combination on another person’s mood organ, one can easily

manipulate other people in order to win arguments or persuade them into doing things the dialler wants them to do. One can also dial oneself into a depression and undergo the risk of causing harm to oneself.

3.3. Mercerism

Ever since there's been humanity, there have also been religions, cults, belief in deities. In the world of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, everyone is under the influence of Wilbur Mercer. By grasping the handles of the empathy box everyone owns, one undergoes a fusion with this old man who is climbing a mountain. The purpose of this ritual is to connect with every other person who is doing this same thing at the moment, to share emotions with others and to exchange the deepest thoughts with Mercer. It is considered polite to use the empathy box when one is feeling truly happy or grateful, and to share these positive feelings with those who might not be as satisfied at the moment. This strengthens empathy, a feeling characteristic of mankind only and a concept that is of utmost importance in the novel's world. By holding the "handles of empathy" (2005:7) one finds out about Mercer's past – in his childhood he was able to resurrect animals by turning back time, until "the killers" found out about his talent, forbid him to use it and eventually attacked his brain with radioactive cobalt, which altered Mercer's state of mind and at first sunk him into a pit of dead creatures. After a while, the creatures came back to life and Mercer started ascending with them, lost them, and since then he climbs the hill alone. Those who use the empathy box find themselves ascending with Mercer, being hit by rocks supposedly thrown by the killers (an entity of absolute evil) and, through these wounds, feeling Mercer's pain and becoming one with him. People, who could not stand this torment which would grow the higher they climbed, have even been known to die during the fusion.

Later in the novel, Buster Friendly announces some shocking news: Mercerism is a hoax! Buster's team of scientists discovered that the hill and the sky in the scene of Mercer's ascent are artificial, that the rocks are made of plastic and that Wilbur Mercer is, in fact, played by an unknown, failed actor. Although this revelation shook the belief of many Mercerites, John Isidore did not stop believing. When he heard the news, he approached the empathy box and once again fused with Mercer, who admitted that everything Buster said was true. However, nothing has changed, Mercer was still there, and so was John Isidore, and Mercer promised to always be there and never judge anyone. Afterwards Mercer begins to appear outside of the empathy box, he manifested himself in front of Rick Deckard to warn him about the androids and to support him. "For Mercer everything is easy, he thought, because Mercer accepts everything" (2005:182). This is why Mercer says that he himself is not a moral person – because he accepts the good and the bad. For that reason he told Deckard it was alright to retire the androids, and Deckard could not comprehend this tolerance of his actions. Towards the end of the novel, Deckard got so tired from everything he had done that, for a moment, he became Mercer, climbing and being hit by real rocks, and nothing except for him existed.

According to this, the collective mind of people could bring things into life although they were scientifically disputed. This would mean that empathy is a feeling above the individual, something connecting all the people on a higher level. I will return to the notion of empathy and its significance later.

3.4. Buster Friendly & His Friendly Friends

Buster Friendly & His Friendly Friends is a popular TV and radio programme in the novel. Buster Friendly is a TV-comic beloved throughout the whole Solar System, and John Isidore refers to him as "... the most important human being alive, except of course for Wilbur Mercer..." (2005:55) Buster's show lasts for 23 hours every day, and Isidore finds it peculiar that he has time to tape both the radio and the TV show without ever repeating himself in content. In addition, his guests are always lovely females with whom he always engages in witty, non-repetitive conversations, despite having them in the show every other day. Although Isidore loves Buster, he cannot help being irritated by his constant mocking of Mercerism, and in the end it was Buster who exposed the truth about Mercer, after having announced his exposé for days. Isidore, despite being a special, came to the sharp conclusion that Buster and Mercer are fighting over the human minds, trying to win over as much control over humanity as possible. Isidore's boss agrees and considers Buster to be equally as eternal and immortal as Mercer (2005:61). This is proven to be false when the androids admit that Buster is one of them, which means that he has an approximate lifespan of four years. With this the reason for Buster's disrespect towards Mercer is explained – androids cannot comprehend the notion of empathy, and to them something that connects the humans in such a way is simply ridiculous.

Part IV - Androids

The first humanoid robots were called Synthetic Freedom Fighters and they served as a weapon of war (2005:12). After the war ended, they were modified in order to assist in the colonization program, and later they became one of the motives for emigrating – each emigrant would receive an android subtype of their choice, "...and, by 1990, the variety of subtypes surpassed all understanding, in the manner of American automobiles of the 1960s."(2005:12) One could order an android to be a servant or cheap (or rather free) labour, it would be designed to fulfil all of its owner's needs. Even though they resemble humans and often act like them, androids are considered unequal – people refer to them as "andys" and they use the neutral form 'it' to talk about them.

From time to time it would occur that a group of androids rebels and decides to go to Earth, after having killed the people who were standing in their way to freedom. This is where Rick Deckard and the other bounty hunters come in – their job is to track down, test and retire the returned androids. The job is quite risky, but the bounty makes it worth the risk. And, since androids lack the capacity of empathy, they are inferior to human beings and thus perfectly legal to kill. Certainly, a bounty hunter is not allowed to

simply run around and laser his suspects – first he has to test whether they really are androids or not, and this is done with the Voigt-Kampff Altered Scale.

4.1. The Voigt-Kampff Test

The Voigt-Kampff scale was designed to determine whether the subject being tested is a human or an android. The test equipment resembles a polygraph and it is supposed to measure the level of empathy and affect in the subjects. The principle is that only humans, who are used to undergoing the fusion with Mercer, are capable of feeling empathy. It is not entirely reliable because, as Deckard's boss explains on page 30, the test could easily label schizoid or schizophrenic persons as androids due to their equally unempathic reactions. The SFPD is worried that the test will fail to work on the new model of androids, Nexus 6, which would leave them without a dependable method for detecting androids.

The test uses two gauges to establish the movement of the eye-muscle and capillary reaction. The examiner presents the subjects with various hypothetical situations, and the subject has to respond accordingly. When, for example, he or she presents the following situation: "You have a little boy and he shows you his butterfly collection, including his killing jar." (2005:38), the examiner is trying to determine how and whether the subject will react to the situation of butterflies being killed. The verbal response is utterly unimportant in this case, only the physical reaction matters, because it cannot be consciously controlled. The largest problem arises when the android does not know that he or she is an android. In this case, it takes many more test questions to determine the truth. If, after that, the examiner is still uncertain, the subject can be admitted to a bone marrow test which is slow and painful when applied to living subjects, but it is also the only bullet-proof method.

4.2. The Nexus-6 model

Nexus-6 is an android model designed by the Rosen association, a major manufacturer of androids. According to Eldon Rosen, the colonist market demanded a progressive form of android, which would resemble a real human almost completely, so as to be the ultimate companion in the process of colonisation.

The brain structure of the Nexus-6 is extremely complex, they "...have two trillion constituents plus a choice within a range of ten million possible combinations of cerebral activity. In .45 of a second an android equipped with such a brain structure could assume any of fourteen basic reaction postures." (2005:23) The Nexus-6 is intelligent, fast, skilful, and it can barely be distinguished from real humans. Deckard is afraid of them for that reason – because they almost undermined the Voigt-Kampff scale, the only method he knows that is adequate for detecting androids. His weak point are especially the female Nexus-6 – Rachael, whom he slept with, Pris, who looked exactly like Rachael so it was hard for him to kill her, and LubaLuft, whose opera-singing and taste in art fascinated him, and for whom he thought that she seemed "genuinely alive"

(2005:112). As John Isidore said (2005:129), the Nexus-6 are intellectual and able to think abstractly, which is why they are so difficult to distinguish from humans. This is also what motivated the group of androids Deckard was after in the novel – being equally (or even more) intelligent to humans was not enough. They wanted to feel the sensation of togetherness and be considered alive, and not just as mere machines.

4.3. Androids vs. humans: Empathy

Empathy is the main notion in the novel, it is what defines people as people and it is the only positive thing that was left after World War Terminus. As a matter of fact, it is the only thing stopping humans from starting new wars and completely self-destructing. The fusion with Mercer is therefore highly important, in that it strengthens empathy between persons who do not even know each other, but who at that moment became one with Mercer and everyone else. Dick sees man as a herd animal (2005:24), and the whole herd depends on every single unit. Other animals, mostly those who depend on hunting, would starve if they felt empathy, because they would feel reluctant to kill their victim.

Androids are incapable of empathising. They can develop a sense of identification (as Rachael did with Pris, since they are the same type of android) and they can wish to be alive (in the film *Blade Runner* the android Roy Batty was driven solely by the wish to live longer than 4 years; when he found out this was impossible, he became furious and killed his maker), but they will never be able to feel what a human being feels. Because of this lack, androids often react mercilessly.

“For Rick Deckard an escaped humanoid robot, which had killed its master, which had been equipped with an intelligence greater than that of many human beings, which had no regard for animals, which possessed no ability to feel empathic joy for another life form's success or grief at its defeat - that, for him, epitomized *The Killers*.” (2005:25)

According to this, Deckard does not see androids as being merely different or inferior, no, he sees them as the ultimate enemy of Mercerism and everything human, and therefore it is not morally wrong to retire them. He also compares them to electric animals, feeling contempt towards both “species”. The electric animal does not appreciate the existence of another being (2005:34) and neither does the android. In the end, one can without any problems be considered as the inferior or superior version of the other.

The androids are aware of the difference between them and humans. When Isidore took them in, they knew that, unlike Isidore, a fellow android would have turned them in first thing in the morning. Deckard also noticed that there exists no real sense of unity between androids when Garland had no problem with blowing the cover on the whole “alternative” police department. Something that is a moral taboo for humans, such as making an animal suffer, is no problem for an android who thinks completely logically – if a spider could survive and move around with only four legs, then why does it need the other four? (2005:162)

Some other characteristics that distinguish androids from people can be found in the novel. Firstly, in life-threatening situations, they would simply resign, as if all their life force was gone: "Mechanical, intellectual acceptance of that which a genuine organism - with two billion years of the pressure to live and evolve hagridding it - could never have reconciled itself to." (2005:157) So, maybe in these situations, androids feel as if they had never even been really alive, and therefore easily resign to the fact that they are going to die. Secondly, Roy Baty let Deckard into the apartment when Deckard pretended to be John Isidore – Deckard later calls androids "stupid" (2005:178) because they obviously could not distinguish the nuances between two completely different human beings. They also miss some common knowledge that humans have – for instance, when Pris didn't know what bean curd (tofu) was (2005:118), and she was aware that that was something only an android wouldn't know – so they would always raise a certain degree of suspicion, no matter how well they would adjust.

Androids are yet another example of man wanting to play God, and as long as he can acquire enough money doing this, he will be hard to stop. The market required androids to look as authentic as possible, and the Rosen association complied with these requirements. So they created beings completely aware of themselves, with the ability to think and comprehend, but unable to control their "physical, sensual passions" (2005:154) – a time bomb ready to explode any second, a time bomb that has been denigrated since the moment it came into existence. Therefore I can empathise with the androids' actions in a way, because they just wanted to be treated the same as "real" human beings, and it is no surprise they were happy when Buster revealed that Mercerism, and maybe even empathy, was just a swindle. Now humans wouldn't have an advantage over androids anymore. But, as it always happens, it was easier for the humans to kill off their problems rather than solve them in a non-violent manner, or maybe even (but that would just be too radical) learn from their mistakes and cease to do them.

Conclusion

After World War II, it was no surprise that most authors lost their faith in humanity. One could not simply witness what one human being is capable of doing to another and then stay completely indifferent. There was only one thing left to do – write a novel and try to warn the world about the possible consequences of its behaviour.

This is precisely what Philip K. Dick has done. In every aspect of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* can we see criticism towards society: Deckard's relationship with his wife, with whom he barely converses (they do talk, but there is no real communication behind that) and who voluntarily falls into a depression just so she could feel something; the Rosen association, producing androids so similar to humans, that it could easily happen that a real human gets retired instead of an android, just for the sake of profit; the commercials, aggressively inviting people to emigrate and start a new life with their custom android servant. Dick knows that the more people grow distant from each other

and focus on their own needs, the higher the chances are for a new war which would bring society's doom.

Luckily, there is a way out, something that should connect each one of us and something they should start teaching in kindergarten. It is called empathy, and it is one of the things that distinguish us from other species, in fact, according to Dick, it is the only thing that can actually prove that we are humans, and not just human machines.

If we could just work on that, and have a bit more respect for other people's feelings, maybe "human" would stop degenerating into a pejorative term and start standing for a being that is rational, civilised and empathic again.