

Philipp K. Dick's „Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?“

Philipp K. Dick's „Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?“ is a dystopian science-fiction novel from the year 1968. Back then it was not an instant hit, unlike what one could expect from today's perspective. Now, many years after its first publication, it is a classic in science-fiction literature and spawned two very successful Blockbusters in „Blade Runner“ (1982) by Ridley Scott and „Blade Runner 2049“ (2017) by Denis Villeneuve.

Story:

After so called World War Terminus has ravaged the Earth, and left its atmosphere full of radioactive dust, everybody who could afford it has left the planet and emigrated to Mars. To incentivize people to do so, they are being enticed with the promise of personal androids, humanlike robots, serving them. The company manufacturing and continually improving these androids, to become more and more humanlike, is the Rosen Association. Sometimes androids rebel, kill their masters and escape Mars as to not be found. This is why on Earth the police departments hire bounty hunters to kill those fleeing androids. This is called retiring them.

Seeing as after World War Terminus, animals are close to extinction as well, owning a live animal has become a status symbol. Due to this, buying one has become very costly. For poorer people, all that is left are lifelike looking and acting robot animals. Owning an animal is one of the main ways people in this world thrive for fulfillment.

The other is a religion called Mercerism. It is based around connecting emotionally with other people all around the world, using „empathy boxes“. When using one of those, people can feel the emotions of everybody else who is connected at the same time. They live through a kind of group hallucination in which they become the eponymous Wilbur Mercer, climbing a mountain and getting hit by stones without being able to fight off their attackers.

Plot:

The book follows the bounty hunter Rick Deckard who is assigned to „retire“ six androids of the newest type. The main way to tell apart alive androids of the last few generations from humans is testing their emotional response to certain thoughts and situations (the so called Voigt-Kampff test). He hopes to replace his current electric sheep with a real animal, with the extra money from this situation. This would not only secure his social standing but, as he hopes, improves his wife's mood, who tries to break out of her routine by artificially inducing depression with her „mood organ“, a device which can with the press of one button put the user in any mood he desires.

First he wants to figure out if the test is even able to tell apart these new androids from humans. To do so he flies to the Rosen Association's headquarters where he meets up with Rachael Rosen, who the test seems to falsely flag as an android, which would mean that the police may have killed

humans before. With this the Rosen Association tries to blackmail Rick into getting off the case, but after retests her he is certain of the fact that she is an android, which they finally admit and he leaves.

After this he meets up with a police officer, who tries to kill him. He realizes this is one of the androids he is looking for and eliminates him. His next potential target is an opera singer who calls the police on him when he tries to test her. In comes a police officer who Rick has never seen before. The officer detains him and takes him to the police station. Thinking this is all just a misunderstanding Rick does not mind, and expects this all to be cleared up in an instant. To his surprise he is brought to a different police station he has never heard of, where he is accused of being an android with artificial memories. They get their own bounty hunter Phil Resch, who wants to test Rick, as well as the officer after getting suspicious of him. While Resch is away to get his equipment, the police officer tells Rick that the whole station is nothing but a hoax, admitting to being an android and also calls Resch an android with fake memories. When Resch gets back, he kills the officer and they escape the police station and fly back to the opera singer. After admitting to be an android and teasing Resch about being one too, he kills her and asks Rick to test him too. It shows Resch to be human with sociopathic tendencies and Rick to be human but with empathic reactions to at least certain androids.

With the money he made from the bountys, he buys a goat to try to lessen the burden on his conscience and to improve his wifes mood.

After this his supervisor calls to let him know the remaining three androids are suspected to hide in an abandoned building and wants him to go there as soon as possible to finish the job. Because he is not sure if he can go on, physically and emotionally, he calls Rachael Rosen to ask her for help. She declines but does not want him to go either, so she agrees to meet him at a hotel room if he does not go this night. They start to drink and talk, and after some time Rachael realizes one of the last androids is the same model as her, and wonders if this will make it harder for Rick to kill her. Later on they have sex and admit their feelings to each other.

After this, Rachael admits to having done this with many bounty hunters before, to dissuade them from continuing their line of work. Rick threatens to kill her, but realizes he can not do it. So he leaves her and heads for the last three androids on his own.

In the meantime, the three androids have gotten to know the only other person who lives in the abandoned building they chose as their hideout, an individual named J. R. Isidore whose brain is damaged by radioactivity and whose intellect is below average. But upon their first meeting he does not recognize them as androids, but even after finding out he treats them as human beings and wants to help them.

When they realize Rick is coming, they set up an ambush for him. The one looking like Rachael tries to trick him, but after he kills her he feels relief because he realizes if she had not attacked him, he would not have been able to kill her. After this he kills the remaining two once they attack him. While Isidore is crying about the people he lost, Rick goes home to his wife where she tells him that a girl, who he recognizes as Rachael, stopped by and killed their goat.

He then flies out to an uninhabited area to think about the events. There he finds a toad and takes it back home. After his wife finds out the toad is electrical and not real like he thought, he feels incredibly down. But while he is asleep, his wife makes the preparations necessary to take in the toad and keep it as a pet anyways.

Utopia and Dystopia:

Utopia:

Utopia is „an ideal commonwealth whose inhabitants exist under seemingly perfect conditions“ (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 2024). The name itself means nowhere or no place on the one hand, and best place on the other hand (Rach, 2016), indicating its ambivalent nature in that it is a place to strive for but never to be reached.

It was first conceived by Thomas Morus in 1516 when he published his book "A truly golden little book, not less beneficial than enjoyable, about how things should be in a state and about the new island Utopia", which satirizes the society he lived in and offers up an alternative. A little island named Utopia, that has a society without money or private property, goods are shared and everybody is free to follow whatever religion he wants to (Rach, 2016).

Throughout the years there were lots of ideas on how this dream of a perfect society and on how to implement them. Especially the twentieth century was full of this, among them the Soviet Union, China under Mao or Nazi Germany (Duncombe, 2012), which will be discussed further in the chapter on dystopias.

Utopia in „Do Android Dream Of Electric Sheep?“:

In the book the obvious utopian dream for any person left on a ravaged and destroyed earth is to leave for Mars, the metaphorical carrot on a stick, where there are no problems and everybody has their own androids to serve them, care for them and fulfill their every desire.

For the people who can not afford or do not want to leave, Utopia, as a dream or goal to aspire towards, is found in empathy. On one hand this is seen in their desire to own and take care of live animals, and the common belief in Mercerism wherein humans connect and share their emotions.

On the other hand this is seen in the hunt for fleeing androids, and the distinction that is drawn between humans and androids by their ability to feel and express empathy. This naturally raises questions about the definition of humanity itself and if there ever will be machines that could qualify as humans.

Dystopia:

Dystopia is „a very bad or unfair society in which there is a lot of suffering, especially an imaginary society in the future, after something terrible has happened; a description of such a society“ (Cambridge, 2024). Usually, as already indicated in the paragraph on utopias, they come into existence by trying to force an utopic idea or societal norm onto a society that is not ready for it. In the process either the idea has to suffer to make it fit, or the people living in the idea. A perfect example for this is Mao Zedong. A convinced communist in the beginning, once he acquired power

he oppressed his people and put his main focus on staying in power and acquiring wealth for himself, while his people died of famine. (De Fenffe, G. D., & Dammüller, E, 2024). This is the way utopias end up most of the time in reality. A Dystopia is stuck between wanting to be something great, an ideal to aspire to, and the struggle it has to go through to be implemented in the real world. This is most likely one of the reasons a utopia lives up to its name as a nowhere place. It is easy to think up a better world, but incredibly hard to create one.

Dystopia in „Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?“:

The discrepancy between living on Earth, after it was ravaged by World War Terminus, where only those who can not afford to escape and a few who do not want to live, and life on Mars where there seem to be no problems is a textbook definition dystopia. The only thing humans on earth can cling to is empathy, which is at the same time being threatened by their own people who continue to improve androids to become as humanlike as possible, thus creating the scenario that one day there might be machines that can show and feel empathy just as humans do. If that were to be the case, and if empathy is the defining human trait, where do we draw the line between humans and machines. Can a machine that reaches a certain level of empathy be classified as a human, or would a human who does not reach that certain threshold be classified as a machine? And if a machine does reach this level of empathy, should a human feel towards it like he does towards another human?

Those are the questions the books main charakter Rick Deckard has to ask himself, and maybe in a few decades we will as well. But we do not yet know if they can be answered at all.

The Perfect Transparent Society:

According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau a perfect transparent society rests on nothing being secret and everybody being able to know everything or at least finding out about it if he is interested. Contrary to this a dystopic version of this utopia either keeps things secret from its inhabitants or uses this transparent society to suppress them, like in George Orwell's „1984“.

In a spin on this thought, „Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?“ does neither of these. Instead it asks the question if what we perceive to be real is actually real and where the line is between these two.

Humans can control their emotions with the press of a button and change their mood to whatever they like, whether it be the „Awareness of the manifold possibilities open to me in the future“ or „self-accusatory depression“. They own animals, but for those who cannot afford them there are cheaper electric versions that seem completely lifelike from the outside. They take part in a collective hallucination where they can feel the emotions of other people all across the planet and share their own, while climbing a hill and getting hurt. The wounds they get from this translate to their own bodies out of the hallucination.

The androids sometimes seem more human than the humans that hunt them on the premise of them being machines. Even so they are killed, because humans are not able to accept them into their society as equals. This may be out of fear, because if we are able to create machines that are equal to humans, maybe even better in some ways, what reason is there still for humans to exist?

An other point of view for this is the fact that the question „What is human?“ is hard to answer. By hunting the androids there is a clear line drawn between humans and non humans, which in turn answers the question „What is human?“ with „Not an android.“ (LitCharts). Even though this is not a real answer, it serves the purpose to unify humanity by presenting it with a common enemy.

In a way, it could be described as a dystopian perfect intransparent society, in that it is not clear what is real and nobody can say for sure, neither the reader nor the characters. In the later half of the book Rick Deckard has what are described as hallucinations, but they also interact with the world around him. So whether they are real is again up to whatever one wants to believe.

What is real is decided by what enough people think is real, and what they accept as real. It all depends on your perception.

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