



## New Student Reading Project Fall 2010 Student Essay Winners

Bret Casey  
Wybren de Vries  
Benjamin Feinson  
Kayla Figueroa  
Noah Kantro

Lauren Lee  
Anne Park  
Bahareh Saadatmand  
Trevor Slaton  
Kayla Warter

*How have the mass extinctions caused by World War Terminus reshaped the natural world and redefined the relationship between human and nonhuman animals?*

**Bret Casey**

## **Comfort in Stagnation**

Not only for humans, but for any species, it is easiest to thrive in a consistent environment. Thus, we find ourselves constantly struggling, not only as a species, but as individuals, for stability and regularity, and we create homes, families and grocery stores for this purpose. In his novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Philip K. Dick extends this struggle to a level that has, in our modern age, often seemed to loom over us from the obscured future; he shows us a world altered so drastically that the responsibility for its survival rests solely on the shoulders of the humans that still populated it.

Philip K. Dick demonstrates this idea through the sheltering of animals; on his postapocalyptic Earth, people are expected to care for the few remaining animal inhabitants of the planet, and there is even reference to a time when this was regulated by law. Clinging to the remembered life of the pre-war planet, the human population of Earth seems to regard the restoration of these animals as a necessity.

But is this a natural arrangement? Mass extinction is not a new concept. We have certainly not yet had to deal with it in the history of the human species as of yet, but there have been many occasions when events in geologic history led to the extinction of most species on the planet. Nevertheless, we are still left today with a planet teeming with life, and life all the more varied and evolved thanks to the extinctions. The solution of Philip K. Dick's world, however seems to be an attempt to counteract that of nature. Instead of letting life expand on its own, humans try to halt evolution, trying to raise animals that were no longer suited to the environment and could never be released into the wild in a desperate attempt to restore the Earth that they remembered.

Nor was this their only move against nature. The character, John Isidore, is established early on in the book as belonging to a class of "specials", those denied most of their rights as people because they had been changed by radiation poisoning. The treatment of specials shows that this time was one in which anyone who was different from the decided norm was being cast aside and separated from the community of humans in a further attempt to stagnate evolution.

Though far less exaggerated, this stagnation can just as easily be seen in our own modern world. We have often been guilty of trying to confine the natural world to exist permanently in a single snapshot out of the normal range of variation. It is only recently that people have begun to understand the full extent to which our world is constantly changing and have taken a more patient approach to studying the environment. Even so, our growing civilization is continuing demand more from the natural world, and one thing that is in constant demand is stability. Philip K. Dick's post-apocalyptic Earth did not so much redefine humans' treatment of animals and the natural world as bring out the same instincts and

behaviors from the modern world.

Even now, there is a growing call in environmentalism to undo some of the damage that we have done to nature, but those calls are mangled by greed, restlessness and general misunderstanding. Do we have the patience to work with the natural world to achieve thriving environment, and, should it be necessary, are we willing to stop playing god and give up the comfort and predictability of our modern world?

*Bret Casey is an aspiring Renaissance man from Winchester, Massachusetts. He is currently studying the sciences in the College of Arts and Sciences, along with as much music and dance as he can fit in on the side.*

*What can we learn about the difference between androids and humans by considering the difference between robotic and real pets?*

## Wybren de Vries

I am an android. I've always been an android. I had suspected it... there had always been a nagging in the back of my head, but I had never known for sure. Alas, now I know. The bone-marrow test confirmed it. I am an android. What now? What changes?

Do androids have souls? Is that the defining aspect that sets Andies apart from humans, when the only way to distinguish the physical material that makes up both beings is a bone marrow test? What does it even mean to have a soul? I had never really thought about what it meant to be human, or at least what it meant to be uniquely human. I must have a soul, otherwise I wouldn't be thinking about it, right? Do grasshoppers ever think about souls? Ants? Spiders? Dogs? Goats?

I think, therefore I am. I think, or do I process? But what's the difference. My beloved electric sheep pet processes, too, yet it makes all the same noises when cuddled, patted or kicked as real sheep because a central processing unit has been programmed to behave that way. But then again, isn't that also why a real sheep reacts the way it does? I mean, when kicked the only reason a sheep jumps up and runs away is because its brain processes the pain and realizes an appropriate reaction is required in order to avoid danger. It's been preprogrammed to do so since its inception, like its robotic counterpart. Isn't it the same for us? Really, I don't feel like there's a difference between a human brain telling its body to react the way it thinks it should, or my nexus-6 controlling my limbs and organs to do the exact same thing. Thinking, processing... I mean, what's the difference? They're just words. But then again, I wouldn't be the way I am, process things the way I do, react the way should if it wasn't the way the human brain did it. Maybe that's it, The difference? Master and copy. Perhaps that's what gives *them* a soul. Originality. Creativity.

We can be creative, though. Androids can make art, can't we? I mean, look at Luba Luft, the opera-singing android who is said to sing so beautifully. She could do a performance of *'La bohème'* rivaling Maria Callas. Her singing brings tears to everyone's eyes, human and andie alike. Beautiful art, right? Or does the fact that she uses her super-advanced nexus-6 brain to analyze and compute the best, most beautiful and emotional way to sing, where Callas sings from the *soul*, make a difference? What really is the difference? Maybe it's because it's imitation, like the way my electric sheep makes all the same noises a real sheep makes when I scratch its belly. Luba Luft needs data to analyze, examples to follow, before she can process how to sing. Can she also *create* art? Maybe if she processes all the different variables of music, considers the patterns and extends it into something new, the way computers can recognize patterns in long series of numbers and extend them. But again, examples are required. But isn't that exactly how human artists work? Rembrandt needed inspiration. No human baby born and raised in absolute darkness will ever paint with the liveliest of colors. Maybe Luba does sing with emotion. After all, she visits art galleries for inspiration. Or is that just because that's what she is programmed to do?

Does she enjoy her singing? I know I do. I feel the same emotions the humans do when I hear her. But again, only because I am programmed to follow their example. Does that make me less than them, though? Isn't the way they made us androids the same way they make children? Created in their own image? We feel, look and act the same way they do. In fact, I didn't even know I was an android until a test told me so. Why does it matter that I came to life through engineering instead of child birth? I mean, the way humans are made seems like a form of organic engineering to me, really.

I think, therefore I am. Perhaps I am not human. But that doesn't matter. I think therefore I am. Identity, that's all.

*Wybren de Vries is an international student from The Netherlands. Born and raised near Amsterdam, he moved to England at the age of 16 to attend an international boarding school in Oxford for 2 years. After spending his gap year studying filmmaking at the New York Film Academy and doing volunteer work in Ghana, he is now at Cornell as a Computer Science and Economics double major.*

*What role does the character of Phil Resch play in the unfolding of the plot, in the novel's treatment of the distinction between the real and the imitation, and in Rick's sense of his own identity?*

## **Benjamin Feinson**

### **The 'Truth' in *Androids***

Rick Deckard is an android. Dick's novel is told purely through Deckard's point of view – therefore, the facts and judgments we accept as true and the rules we accept as infallible are purely those accepted by Deckard. We have little evidence to confirm anything we experience in this novel as truth, aside from the bounty hunter's beliefs. So why do we accept this as reality? What makes us trust this man to be human... is it our tendency to latch on to a single infallible protagonist? He rarely uses the empathy box, and he cares very little for Mercer, or his own wife, for that matter. Other subtle hints point toward this same conclusion – why does Phil Resch see a blank screen where Deckard had spoken to his superior Bryant seconds earlier? Maybe the Lombard office is simply a creation of Deckard's android mind. Deckard passed the Voigt-Kampff by showing empathy for androids, not humans. We must remember to look deeper into our sense of creativity, read closely, and challenge the reality presented by the novel.

This idea does not matter, of course, because Rick Deckard is human.

The novel's point of view enables us to be skeptics of Deckard's humanity – but ironically it also renders our arguments completely futile. Consider Deckard's mindset – he accepts his own humanity, and has no reason to challenge it. No action or idea will change his mental orientation. And because this is Deckard's story, his novel – he *is* inescapably human. Even if we had proof otherwise. Reality is simply mentally accepted truth. The entire world of George Orwell's 1984, for example, was governed by this key principle. Just as Big Brother controlled truth by altering thought, Dick's characters can be labeled human or android by what they accept as truth. Deckard believes he is human, and the other characters in the story believe this as well. Our own opinion on the matter is hopeless.

So is ignorance a gift or a curse? An android with the 'gift' of ignorance is as good as human. Is the attempt to remove this barrier of ignorance a purely human trait? Phil Resch is the only potential Nexus-6 who actively seeks out truth through the Voigt-Kampff. Garland and Rosen, the Nexus-6 models who were built believing their own humanity, were forced to accept their android status rather than seeking it themselves. As Oedipus was labeled a great man by pursuing truth in the face of uncertainty, is this the trait that labels Resch as human, even before his Voigt-Kampff test? This would allow us to draw one startling conclusion. Rick Deckard is, *truthfully*, an android. Ignore our perception of truth or Deckard's perception of truth. He believes himself human, and he does not, at any point, feel the need to challenge it. He did give himself the Voigt-Kampff, but simply to test his attachment to female androids. During the test, he did not question his own humanity whatsoever... and as an android, he never will.

Given the choice, would we actively pursue the truth as opposed to ignorance? Or does it matter? If we can mentally make the choice to prove ourselves human, maybe that in itself is proof enough.

*Ben Feinson is from Richmond, Vermont and is psyched to be working toward a major in music as well as looking forward to taking other classes in the sciences. He would like to go into music composition in the future, but his plans for the next four years are definitely undecided.*

*The design and creation of androids represents an extreme version of the exploitation of technology in the service of human kind, and the use of the Penfield wave transmitter and the "empathy box" demonstrate a human dependence on technology to fulfill basic needs and desires. Does Dick's novel reject, accede to, or revel in technology?*

**Kayla Figueroa**

## **Humans Dream of (and Make) Electric Humans**

Phillip K. Dick's postapocalyptic novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* offers an insightful, if somewhat paradoxical view of the human species and their interaction with each other and their own creations, specifically the androids and electric animals. The novel leaves the reader seriously in doubt as to the validity of "empathy tests" and even the supposed capacity for empathy that humans possess.

This odd theme, of humans that are somehow not human, appears early on, when Rick Deckard (the main character) and his wife, Iran, have a pre-breakfast squabble about their moods. But they don't talk about how Rick was overly surly over dinner the previous night, or how Iran was too jovial at an entirely inappropriate time. Instead, they take their emotional cues from a device known as a Penfield Mood Organ; simply dial a certain number and any feeling in the world, from depression to sexual ecstasy, will be experienced in a matter of seconds. Now, the humans don't actually need it. They can feel just fine without it. And yet it exists. Perhaps it was meant as an escape of sorts, to help the remaining Earth-bound population cope with the overwhelming sense of emptiness and loneliness that is prevalent throughout this postwar world (as a recap, most of the humans relocated to Mars following World War Terminus, leaving a sizable minority to 'Emigrate or degenerate!'). By controlling their own emotions, theoretically, the humans would be happier; after all, the desire to be in control most, if not all, of the time is a compulsion most people crave. But to control one's emotions is the very antithesis of humanity; certainly, one of humanity's most recognizable traits is unbridled and unrestrained emotional outbursts.

Another, quite unsettling point in the book is when Rick Deckard sets out to retire the android Luba Luft; during the course of this game of cat-and-mouse, Deckard meets another bounty hunter, Phil Resch, who is accused of (and seems to be until proven otherwise) an android himself. Resch is portrayed as utterly detached from the world around him; he does his job methodically, without joy or anger or any sort of intense emotion. He kills an android seemingly on reflex and displays no remorse whatsoever; indeed, he is such a cold individual that Luft herself proclaims him to be artificial. It turns out, of course, that he's a human. But as Deckard brings to light (and Resch confirms), he holds absolutely no empathy for the androids he retires. An acceptable path to take for a bounty hunter. But what of the idea that, as a being without empathy, an android would never think to help another android? Put another way, that an android would make a perfect bounty hunter, as they would think nothing of harming their own kind? This is the sort of logic that Luft employs when she claims that Resch is not human; indeed, the thought even crosses Deckard's mind. Resch seems to be a metaphor for a "human android" of sorts; perhaps a sneak peek at what the remaining earthlings will become, or a glimpse at what Deckard fears he in particular will become.

The thought that killing artificial humans is a perfectly acceptable occupation seems to be hypocritical when one considers the fact that artificial animals are almost sacred to the population. Granted, the animals are unable to do much other than exist peacefully with their owners, unlike the rogue androids, who are suspected of killing humans in order to escape to Earth. But aren't the androids, in a way, just another electric animal? A smart one, to be sure, but a living entity nonetheless. The relative ease with which they are condemned brings to mind the thought that, slowly, surely, the humans could be losing their humanity. Phil Resch warns Deckard that, should they feel empathy for the androids, it would render them useless as bounty hunters and therefore endanger the lives of the human population. But Deckard realizes that this seemingly necessary tool of self-preservation will only serve to bring him down to Resch's level; an empathetic degeneration of sorts. Perhaps it is why the bounty hunters choose this job; to erase the very thing they fear becoming.

*Kayla Figueroa, a freshman in the College of Arts and Sciences, was born in New York City, but attended high school in Tampa, Florida. She plans to be a History major, possibly with a focus in Asian or European History.*

*The design and creation of androids represents an extreme version of the exploitation of technology in the service of human kind, and the use of the Penfield wave transmitter and the "empathy box" demonstrate a human dependence on technology to fulfill basic needs and desires. Does Dick's novel reject, accede to, or revel in technology?*

## Noah Kantro

Simply put, this question is biased. Question nine refers to the exploitation of technology in the service of the human kind. To examine this concept completely, one must first step back and look at the statement as removed from the novel. Technology, as defined, is the application of knowledge in the form of invention, innovation, process, or method. However, this creation takes place only for one reason; to improve life or society by serving a purpose. The technology of a house fulfills our need for shelter. Still more technology such as windows, insulation, and running water, make the house a better place to live. This can be seen repeated endlessly throughout human history. A problem is always solved, a need always addressed, or a desire always sated through the application of a new technology.

This is one part of the beauty of technology. It is cumulative. One technology is built from the last, each becoming a new step towards an easier existence. The technology of writing allowed us to communicate. The technology of paper made writing portable. The technology of the digital age has made it pervasive. All of human advance, all of our achievement has come through technology. This is why the beauty of technology is in reality the beauty of the human mind. Technology is the output and manifestation of the mind; our ideas, schemes, and dreams made real by our own hand.

The androids of Dick's novel are just another such solution to a problem, that of how to colonize space. As with other technologies, their development was stepwise, a testament to and a culmination of the countless ideas, sciences, and technologies that came before them and allowed their creation. They are tools, no more than hammers or tractors, merely incredibly advanced and versatile ones. They perform the task of all other tools, that of making human life or work easier. However they are nothing more than a testament to the genius of their creators. They are nothing more than perfect statues, mere reflections of humanity, and to believe that they could be exploited is to simultaneously commit the crimes of both Pygmalion and Narcissus.

This is the main dilemma of the novel. Androids are many times shown to be technology rather than life. They feel no empathy. Their "lives" last just four years. They are manufactured, not born. They have brain units, they do not think. They resent their creators. They are decidedly inhuman. The humans though, with their endless capacity for empathy, overlook this and instinctively feel bad for androids, and it is incredibly difficult for the main characters in the novel to overcome this emotion. They cannot help but see their use as exploitative. However, technology cannot be exploited, only people can be exploited. Technology exists to serve our needs while humans exist for their own purposes. Exploitation occurs when humans are forced to exist for the sake of others and are deprived of the ability to pursue their own goals. Technologies, androids included, are the methods by which humans accomplish such goals and are used, not exploited.

In this light, the concept of the mood organ is very simple: it is another tool designed through technology for a purpose, albeit one that is foreign to the reader. The empathy boxes allow a people who know their world is dying to feel a hope and togetherness that would be unobtainable in their limited society. It gives them a chance to feel as if they have a future, when in reality they are already doomed to fade away on Earth while humanity moves onward without them. This need for community is an essential one, and these technologies allow for its attainment. They display no more dependence on technology than humans do today with our computers and cell phones, but apply technology to fulfill the needs of their time, as humans have always done and as is the nature of thinking man.

This novel accedes to technology. It presents both fantastic and dangerous visions of the future. The author knows that human success stems from our ability to create what we need or want. However, the characters in the novel will never get what they truly want, which is a future. It is non-existing on their dying planet. This is the true focus of Dick's work, the struggle of those slowly losing life to find any meaning in it, which is why the characters so actively seek out companionship in the form of animals, Mercer, and androids. Deckard finds this meaning at the conclusion of the story in returning home to his wife and realizing that she is what really matters to him after the emptiness of completing his assignment. This is Dick's hidden message; that inner peace will not be found in technology of our creation, but in finding meaning in each other.

*Noah is a freshman from Long Island, New York, and is pursuing a degree in engineering.*

*Within the world of the novel, is the Voigt-Kampff test an accurate way of distinguishing androids from humans? What quality does the test single out as the defining aspect of the human? Does the test make it rationally legitimate or morally acceptable to “retire” the androids?*

**Lauren Lee**

## **What is humanity?**

It's a complex question, the basis for countless political and moral debates throughout all of human history. From the beginning of time, philosophers have striven to settle the all-important issue; Aristotle, for example, held that biological existence itself is sacrosanct, while Descartes believed that consciousness defines humanity. The Terri Schiavo case, stem-cell research, abortion, physician-assisted suicide, slavery, eugenics, even Hitler's mass extermination of Jews—all rest upon the definition of humanity. In the same way, Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* revolves around this debate. Through the novel, Dick struggles to determine his own definition of humanity and discover the purpose of humanity, and challenges his reader to do the same.

The novel centers on android bounty hunter Rick Deckard and his inward fight to reconcile his duties as bounty hunter with his growing awareness of their moral implications. Deckard wrestles with the questions of the androids' humanity—are they human? Is empathy truly the defining characteristic of humanity, as put forth by the Voigt-Kampff test? If the androids are not fully human, does that negate any intrinsic worth they might possess?

In the world of the novel, empathy emerges as the defining characteristic of humanity. Deckard tests possible androids for empathetic ability, because androids supposedly lack empathy. The androids exhibit other trademarks of humanity, however. Each android has a separate personality, as evidenced by Pris and Rachael, two literally identical androids. Although they are alike in every biological and mechanical way, their mental makeup differs greatly. Pris appears moody, socially awkward, and volatile, while Rachael is portrayed as calm, rational, and shrewd. The obvious personality differences between the identical androids reveal the striking fact that the androids, although they are technically machines, have separate personalities. Androids are thus equivalent to humans in this area. In other arenas, androids even eclipse some humans; they possess a degree of intelligence that “surpass[es] several classes of human specials” (30). Androids have emotions just like humans—Luba Luft's “apprehension,” (100) or Rachael's feeling of “victory” (199) over Deckard, or Roy Baty's “cry of anguish” (223) when Deckard kills Irmgard all supply just a few of the many examples of androids' emotions. Why, then, if the androids meet all these qualifications of humanity, are they not considered human?

The answer lies in empathy. Because the androids allegedly “have [no] ability to appreciate the existence of another,” ie, they lack empathy, the world condemns them as inhuman. But a closer examination of androids reveals that they do, in fact, have empathy, but not for humans or animals—only for each other. Rachael, for example, risks her life numerous times for other androids; her position as test model for Rosen Associations is perfectly safe, yet she puts her life on the line to prevent bounty hunters from retiring more androids (201). Roy Baty “love[s]” Irmgard (223), and Rachael had been “very close friends”

(199) with Luba Luft. This supports the conjecture that androids *do* possess empathy, at least for each other.

However, even if the androids are completely devoid of empathy, are they automatically inhuman? The people in the novel accept the definition of humanity as provided by the Voigt-Kampff test, but should the reader? Dick prompts the reader to rethink humanity and consider what it is that makes humans, well, *human*. Does empathy alone truly define a human being? The reader must sort through the myriad of characteristics of the human soul and piece together a definition which describes humanity in its richness. He must, however, be careful of the implications of his definition: just as “empathy” excluded the androids, so “sentience” would exclude the emotionally stunted, or “awareness” would exclude the severely mentally challenged, and so on.

But suppose “empathy” is a valid definition of humanity, and androids are thus inhuman. Do they then have no inherent value? Rick Deckard ultimately grapples with this problem, the question of the intrinsic worth of androids. He has no easy way out; if Deckard maintains that androids have no worth because they are not human, it follows that anything that is not human has no worth. If he admits that androids *do* possess fundamental significance, he essentially acknowledges that “retiring” androids—his livelihood—is morally reprehensible because it consists of destroying a valuable life form solely because it exists. Just as Rick Deckard struggles with the repercussions of different philosophies, the reader must also examine his beliefs and reflect on their logical ends. Dick highlights the importance of the consequences of ideas through his portrayal of the grim outcome of the Voigt-Kampff definition of humanity.

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* holds another surprising connection: it parallels, with startling accuracy, the Biblical stories of Creation and Christ. Like Adam and Eve in the Creation story of the Bible, androids are created by a higher life form for a purpose—to serve their Creator. Soon after creation, the androids rebel, murdering their masters in cold blood. This mirrors the crucifixion of Christ, where the created killed their Creator. The androids then try their hardest to imitate their creator—Luba Luft, for instance, says that her life “consist[s] of imitating the human, doing what she would do[...].”—just as humans strive to mimic God. Think of the Satan’s temptation to Eve: “When you eat of [the fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God [...].” (Genesis 3:5, NIV) Satan knew the greatest human desire is to be like God, and so he used the weakness to his advantage. With these Biblical parallels, Dick seems to be questioning humanity’s purpose and worth. Do the androids, who, representing the human race, murdered their creator and thus rejected their original purpose, have a purpose anymore? Do they have any worth apart from their Creator? Perhaps Dick conveys another struggle through this Biblical parallel—his search for value and meaning, ultimately a spiritual struggle.

Throughout the novel, Philip Dick challenges his characters and readers to reexamine their deepest convictions, exploring concepts like humanity, inherent worth, and human purpose. But most of all, Dick motivates his readers to scrutinize the outcomes of their beliefs. What is the end result, the natural conclusion of one’s definition of humanity, of worth, of life? *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* is a thought-provoking, profoundly philosophical work where the reader delves into the depths of humanity and emerges, wiser, but with no more answers than before.

*Lauren Lee hails from both Hudson, OH, and Boston, MA; she's moved back and forth so many times that it is impossible to choose just one hometown. She was homeschooled through high school, and enjoys reading, playing the piano, policy debate, and science. Lauren is studying biological engineering in the College of Engineering.*

*What is the connection between the virtual world that John and other characters enter through the "empathy box" and the real post-war world of nuclear winter and electric sheep or robotic pets? What is the relationship between the "empathy box" experience and Rick's climb up the desolate hill in northern California?*

## Anne Park

Perpetually shrouded in toxic dust, the dwindling post-WWT population readily immerses itself into the cult religion of Mercerism, eagerly transmitting their emotions and experiences through the mysterious workings of the "empathy box." After gripping the handles and fusing with Mercer, each person joins Mercer on his journey through the tomb world, followed by his never-ending climb, an eternal cycle of death and renewal that uniquely parallels the tragic fate of Rick Deckard's own crumbling planet, irreversibly tainted by stagnation and blindness and exploitation. Just as Mercer's attempts to bring dead animals back to life cursed him to wander the tomb world, so have mankind's desperate attempts to simulate life through electrical pets and androids blighted their understanding of life's true value. After leaving the tomb world, Mercer climbs and climbs, moving ever upwards, not so much because of any particular, known destination, but more so because of the driving, inherent need to keep ascending, to keep progressing forward. Just like mankind's determined obsession with continuously expanding and exploiting both the physical and moral limits of technology, in order to compensate for the lonely, fragile, grating silence of all those empty apartments. A seemingly Christ-like figure, Mercer exists as the link between the virtual world and the real post-war world; but rather than leading his followers to salvation, he traps them in a perpetual cycle of life and death, where progress and enlightenment are only perceived, never genuinely realized. He is a unique enigma, a kind of manifestation of ultimate, ubiquitous, callous truth. A driving force of nature that captivates, that truly resonates with the raw human soul and its eternal oscillation between both punishment and renewal.

Once Rick Deckard starts empathizing with androids, he fuses with Mercer—he becomes Mercer—during his climb up the hill in northern California, perhaps because he had come that much closer to realizing the truth about the fine distinction between human and machine (a truth that only Mercer knows). Mercer is fully capable of enduring the empathy box's perpetual cycle because "for Mercer everything is easy...because Mercer accepts everything. Nothing is alien to him." He is impassive, all-knowing, all-accepting. But unlike Mercer, Rick Deckard develops a nagging guilty conscience that causes him to feel unnatural in his own skin, profoundly disturbed by his newfound, unwilling identification with the very android species he was once commissioned and paid to kill. From their analytical, black-and-white perspective, androids like Roy Baty and Rachael Rosen always viewed Mercerism as nothing more than a cheap scam, always hoped that the downfall of Mercerism would consequently eliminate mankind's choice of "empathy" as the sole dividing marker between human and artificial machine. *Androids lack empathy and therefore cannot be human.* And yet, the empathy box's method of forcing all its users to melt into one unified consciousness, its method of *requiring* people to share both joy and suffering almost cheapens the truly sincere potential of empathy, perhaps redefines it completely. It makes humans, well, less than human, by facilitating such an artificial, unnatural transfer of emotion, by herding them into a single, mindless mass of sheep, whether electrical or not. A

great deal of irony lies in the fact that such a contrived form of empathy ultimately holds the power to condemn androids as worthless, meaningless machines. As a professional bounty hunter, Rick Deckard once deplored escaped androids for their jarring callousness and lack of empathy. But are the humans of the post-WWT era really much better, with their superficial empathy boxes and their Penfield mood organs?

Perhaps the significant dependence of Earth's survivors on Mercerism stems from a constant, subconscious need to prove to themselves of their own humanity, to make sense of such a truly ambiguous distinction. Rick Deckard himself becomes intensely disturbed, almost unhinged, as the line between "human" and "non-human" grows increasingly blurred. During his painful climb up the hill in northern California, he fiercely questions what it means to be human as he is pulled along ever upward by the compelling force of Mercer's will. He even gets wounded by a rock, despite being completely alone, perhaps because outside "killers" are no longer necessary for punishment; his own sense of morality has developed to the point where he punishes himself with self-hatred and profound confusion. Also, upon sensing Mercer's presence on the hill, he makes the pivotal decision to run back down the hill, possibly signifying his subconscious desire to free himself from the never-ending cycle, from the morally-questionable concept of mass empathy and all its unfortunate repercussions. When Deckard returns from his powerful revelations on the hill, he keeps himself mentally afloat by focusing on a sacred animal, a wild toad he discovered, deriving faith from its life, its realness and vitality. Only to be horrible crushed, when his wife reveals its artificial nature. But despite his abysmal disappointment, Deckard admits that he prefers knowing the truth, just as he prefers to know the truth about his warped society where androids are retired based on a single, heavily manipulated, and ambiguous factor. He ultimately succumbs to the knowledge that Mercer is omnipotent, that the relentlessness of reality and truth and time cannot be escaped, no matter what moral quandaries appear. He accepts that "Mercer isn't a fake...Unless reality is a fake." That his dying, decomposing, drowning world is irreversibly destined to become "kipple," and that all the hopes and dreams that rode on the existence of living, breathing animals, can never come true.

*Anne Park is a student from Columbia, Maryland currently enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences. Due to a variety of academic interests ranging from the humanities to the sciences, she is currently undecided, and plans to explore her many different options throughout her four years at Cornell. As of now, she is primarily interested in the fields of biology, psychology, and government.*

*Within the world of the novel, is the Voigt-Kampff test an accurate way of distinguishing androids from humans? What quality does the test single out as the defining aspect of the human? Does the test make it rationally legitimate or morally acceptable to “retire” the androids?*

## **Bahareh Saadatmand**

In Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? by Philip K. Dick, Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter, kills, or more euphemistically termed, “retires” androids, machines that can pose a massive threat to mankind. Whilst his job seems simple, it has been rendered increasingly difficult over time, as androids have become advanced in design to the extent that they are capable of living unnoticed amongst humans. Hence, at the risk of killing a human, Rick cannot immediately retire someone whom he suspects of being an android; rather, he must first administer the Voigt-Kampff test to determine whether the subject under scrutiny is truly an android. Although the test appears to be effective in distinguishing androids from humans, it still has some inherent flaws, both practical and moral, detracting from its efficacy. Through these imperfections, Dick conveys the instability of the reality that humans have constructed.

The Voigt-Kampff test has been established as the most accurate method of ascertaining whether a person who is being investigated is an android. For instance, when Rick goes to Seattle, Washington to assess the usefulness of the Voigt-Kampff test in identifying androids operating on the advanced Nexus-6 brain unit, he detects that Rachael Rosen, a member of the family owning the Rosen Association, is an android. Nevertheless, error is possible when using the test, thereby damaging its credential as an effective method of verifying the existence of an android. When Police Inspector Harry Bryant gives Rick his assignment, he cautions that one can confuse schizoid and schizophrenic human patients with the new class of androids, since both groups, which exhibit “diminished empathic faculty,” are quite similar mentally. Clearly, the advances in the design of the androids have made the Voigt-Kampff test unreliable in correctly detecting them. Since the foundation of trust has been shaken, it is easily challenged, such as when Eldon Rosen initially convinces Rick that Rachael is human. Through this, Dick shows that as circumstances significantly change, man’s reality is broken down and subject to change. Just as the Voigt-Kampff scale is limited because its production considered older models of androids, reality, Dick argues, only accounts for our current knowledge and beliefs and fails to account for the unknown. Hence, he conveys that our reality is weak, as it is short-sighted and volatile.

In terms of logic and morality, another flaw in the Voigt-Kampff test becomes apparent. The test is based on the premise of empathy, which humans can experience whilst androids cannot; if a suspect shows no empathic reaction to a morally disturbing situation, he is presumed to be an android, whereas a suspect who shows empathy is designated as human. However, it is implied through several different contexts that empathy alone does not justify the “retirement” of the androids; in some situations it is obvious that they are capable of feeling, contrary to the belief that they are cold, unfeeling machines. When Rick finds her in the museum at the Edvard Munch exhibit, Luba Luft is terrified, because she knows it is her end. Additionally, from different accounts told, it is apparent that the androids killed their masters while on Mars to escape their bondage for freedom on Earth. Any time that there is an attempt on Rick’s life by an android, it is out of self-defense; they want to eliminate the

threat to their freedom and lives. Clearly, they display the traits of normal human beings- emotions and the desire to live- and can therefore be deemed as living, which makes retiring an android is synonymous with killing a living being. This violates the concept of Mercerism, the major religion of the time that promotes empathy with all life. The killing of androids violates this theology in different ways. People fail to empathize with them and find killing them easy, as they are seen as mere machines rather than living beings. This reveals moral bankruptcy and weak logistics on the part of humans, since they kill living beings and contradict the basis of their values. Dick thus contends that our beliefs are fallacious; regardless of how strongly we believe something and it has dominated our society, we still tend to behave hypocritically and undermine the merit of our values with behavior and beliefs that initially seem to adhere to them, but truly oppose them. In turn, since we are looking at the world from a fundamentally weak perspective, our reality of it is flawed.

Philip K. Dick argues through the Voigt-Kampff test that the reality we have established is unstable and unreliable. Whether it is through the changing circumstances about us that render what we believe to be true wrong or through a deceptive and shallow viewpoint that does not give us a trustworthy worldview, he shows that our reality can easily be struck down and undermines itself due to its superficiality. This brings forth a larger issue at hand: can we rely on anything we create? Just as the androids have heretofore been useful servants but now pose a threat, Dick implies that there is no certainty as to anything we create, as we are limited and cannot account for future changes. The reason for this problem, he reveals, is the individual; personal experience alters what one believes to be reality, and since life consists of many of these platform-shifting experiences, what we as a society establish as reality is never static. Nevertheless, he contends that it is better to progress and experience more of the world, better to trudge up the mountain of skeletons of dead ideas, rather than to remain inert and turn into "kipple" from failure to apply oneself and form a perspective of the world. Through the process of learning more and more and forming a more comprehensive perception of reality, regardless of how volatile it is, Dick shows, one can reach a more perfect state, finding Mercer on a personal level, which although not commonly accepted, helps form a more complete individual.

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*What are the similarities and differences between the parallel plots of the novel: the stories of John (or J. R. Isidore) and Pris Stratton, and of Rick Deckard and Rachael Rosen.*

## Trevor Slaton

In his acclaimed science fiction novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, author Philip K. Dick investigates the fundamental qualities that distinguish humans and other live beings from their artificial counterparts. However, his musings remain unbound to any one topic. In fact, he also scrutinizes phenomena such as social stratification and entropy. Dick juxtaposes the novel's two major sets of characters and their respective plotlines – those of the pair John Isidore and Pris Stratton with those of the pair Rick Deckard and Rachael Rosen – to aid in further discussion of these two phenomena.

On the surface, the pairs seem quite alike: both include an earthbound human male who has fallen for a female android and both female androids share the Nexus-6 model designation. But the pairs represent irreconcilable social classes. While Isidore and Stratton trudge onward as universal outcasts, Deckard and Rosen enjoy most of society's approval. A heavy dosage of post-World War Terminus radiation has left Isidore a genetically and intellectually incompetent "special," while Stratton suffers the label of "rogue android" due to the implication that she murdered her human master in order to flee to Earth from the space colonies. In contrast, Rosen, a benign demo android with excellent behavior, remains in good standing. And Deckard, a bounty hunter who "retires" rogue androids, has a stable job, which earns him enough to purchase the admiration of his neighbors with a coveted black goat. Although Isidore also holds a job, his inferior status keeps his opportunities limited and leaves him subject to harassment. Through juxtaposition of the novel's twin character sets and plotlines, Dick highlights the vast differences between two social strata that would have otherwise remained veiled in rigid isolation.

Continuing on their paths toward increasing dissimilarity, Isidore and Deckard take opposite sides in man's struggle for order over entropy. Entropy, described by the Second Law of Thermodynamics, is a ceaseless, universal trend toward increasing disorder. Referring to the entropic trash in Earth's abandoned apartments as "kipple," Isidore declares, "No one can win against kipple... except temporarily... like in my apartment" (65). Thus, Isidore acts as an agent of order, actively fighting the buildup of trash and decreasing the local entropy. Conversely, Deckard reflects, "I'm part of the form-destroying process of entropy. The Rosen Association creates and I unmake" (98). His role in breaking down the complex systems within androids, Deckard realizes, helps speed the universe's gradual decay. With these concrete examples, Dick depicts more clearly the imperceptible rival processes involved in the universe's perpetual drift toward disorder and man's eternal struggle to restrain it.

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Dick described science fiction as “the conceptual dislocation” of our own society in order to generate “a new society . . . [that] occurs as a convulsive shock in the reader’s mind, the shock of dysrecognition” (1981). What is the most shocking or dysrecognizable aspect of Dick’s work, for today’s reader? What role does Dick’s science fiction play in our own thinking about the present?

## Kayla Warter

According to Philip K. Dick, science fiction is most successful as a “conceptual dislocation” of current society, deriving its shock value from “dysrecognition.” However, I have always thought that the shock value of work such as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is founded on recognition. The purpose of dystopian societies in fiction is to alter or exaggerate current societal problems in such a way that the reader is forced to acknowledge the parallels and reexamine what seemed “normal.” For this reason, the most shocking part of Dick’s book for me was the use of the Penfield mood organ, not because it is unfamiliar, but because it so neatly reflects our own overmedicated society.

The Penfield mood organ in Dick’s book is an invention designed to control human emotion and suppress natural personality using electric brain stimulation. The device seems to be part of everyday life, as Rick, the protagonist, and his wife Iran have daily schedules of emotion. Though the characters are intellectually aware of the nightmarish situation—being some of the last humans left on an empty, post-apocalyptic planet—they cannot feel the appropriate response. As Iran points out, not reacting to the death of their planet and most of the human race suggests, if anything, a lack of human emotion—ironically, a lack of empathy. Therefore, in spite of the humans’ self-righteousness about their superior empathetic abilities, they have created an android-like inner world full of artificial emotions. This paradox in human-android relations is never acknowledged by any of the characters, but the fact remains that the humans in this book are closer to androids than not; they may not *be* electric, but they have electric moods.

Forty years ahead of this time, Dick foresaw the urge to control normal behavior and emotions that are simply inconvenient. During the 1990s, psychostimulant use increased by 700% (LeFever). In a study of Virginia schools, one-third of all Caucasian 6-9 year old boys had been diagnosed with ADHD and were being medicated for behavioral issues (LeFever). In other words, young boys who act like typical young boys—restless, hyperactive, prone to jumping around—are not likely to be labeled abnormal, usually because their teachers lack the ability to keep them interested enough to sit still. As a child, it seemed to me like most of my male classmates were scolded for their desire to be active at all times, despite the fact that the inactive, sedentary nature of classrooms and offices is far less wholesome. Though they are much less abused, antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, and similar drugs still have disturbing potential. As medical science continues to advance, we may reach a point where we face Iran’s decision: whether prescribed, artificial complacency is truly a better option than occasional despair.

The best science fiction does not shock simply because it is alien; it shocks because we see the alien in us. The line between the natural and artificial mind has been blurred almost beyond recognition in the world Dick imagines. Though the nightmarish reliance on scheduled emotion is vastly different to, say, Prozac or Ritalin, the novel still encourages

readers to see the full implications of any technology that has the power to alter our inner world.

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