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# Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? by Philip K. Dick

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***Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by**

**PHILIP K. DICK**

Del Rey, 1996 \$18

Reviewed by **JOSHUA SCHUSTER**

Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (first published in 1968), a book I reread almost every year, has become one of my favourite guides for living in the Anthropocene. The novel takes place in a post-apocalyptic near-future, a time when Earth has lost almost all of its animals and most humans have left for other planets. Everyone remaining on Earth has become a vegan, effectively by default since no one dares eat one of the few remaining animals. Devotion to animal care and hyper-sensitivity to environmental trauma have become the new markers for being human. In the midst of all this, rogue cyborgs have arrived on Earth and are posing as humans, replete with sexual desires, nostalgia for communion, and social aggressions. The animal/human/machine nexus forms the basis for contested life in this world of veganism, extinction, widespread pollution, advanced artificial intelligence, disabled humanity, and planetary melancholy. This pretty much feels like Earth's future now.

The novel's protagonist, Rick Deckard, is provided with an exam apparatus that can supposedly detect the difference between a human and an android. The "Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test" is a series of questions that actually examines the subject's devotion to veganism and animal care. The Voigt-Kampff test measures reaction time of one's involuntary moral sentiments—blushing, capillary action, and pupil dilation—so any hesitation in showing the proper moral outrage gives the subject up.

Here is Deckard with his test subject Rachel (who proves to be android):

Deckard, reading rapidly: "You are given a calf-skin wallet on your birthday." Rachel: "I wouldn't accept it." (48)

Next one: "You have a little boy and he shows you his butterfly collection, including his killing jar." Rachel: "I'd take him to the doctor" (49).

Next one: "You're sitting watching TV . . . and suddenly you discover a wasp crawling on your wrist." Rachel: "I'd kill it" (49).

Deckard: "Now consider this. You're reading a novel written in the old days before the war. The characters are visiting Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. They become hungry and enter a seafood restaurant. One of them orders lobster, and the chef drops the lobster into the tub of boiling water while the characters watch." Rachel: "Oh god, that's awful! Did they really do that? It's depraved. You mean a *live* lobster?" (49-50).

How did you do on the test? Rachel, who fails, asks Deckard if he's ever administered the test on himself. Living through the pile up of multiple environmental distresses and longings today involves continuous self-questioning, self-testing, and self-experimenting. I want to propose then a new test, inspired by Dick's and borrowing in format from Thomas Nagel's essay "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?" (1974), another work whose title is a question and which is best understood as an animal/human/machine account of living in Anthropocene times.

Here is the test. And remember, reaction time is a factor:

What is it like to be stuck between species?

What is it like still to be stuck on Earth?

What is it like to be the water under the bridge?

What is it like to be a bat after the great bat die-off?

What is it like to be between shifting gears?

What is it like to be a machine that endlessly spits out “what is it like” questions?

What is it like to be a sentence?

What is it like to have a “you”?

What is it like to like?

What is it like to put your finger on it?

What is it like to put your fist in it?

What is it like to feel how most of your body is made up of soup?

What is it like to be an advertisement that does not celebrate commodity fetishism?

What is it like to like what it is?

What is it like to outlive life?

What is it like to end an energy regime?

What is it like to think like a mountain that gets its head sheared off for its minerals?

What is it like to be a manifesto without a future?

What is it like to wear another animal’s skin on your feet, legs, arms, chest, back, and head?

What is it like to walk into store after store devoted to the buying and selling of something alive?

What is it like to live on a planet made only of gardens?

What is it like to look on these words one hundred years from now?

What is it like to unleash colony expansion disorder?

What is it like to intentionally have no intentions?

What is it like for a form to never formalize itself?

What is it like to burn up a whole planet?

What is it like to bury a whole planet?

What is it like to grow a new planet out of an old planet?

What is it like to breathe the weather in and out your body?

What is it like to be the reason that technocratic reason ran out of reasons?

What is it like to be the ball?

What is it like to name a geological age after yourselves?

What is it like to never be considered human enough to begin with?

What is it like to drop a million seeds  
underneath yourself?  
What was it like to like?  
What is it like to collapse in upon yourself?  
What is it like to carry all the garbage you  
made in a year on your back?  
What is it like to live on a planet populated  
only by white elephants?  
What is it like for the Earth to opt out of this  
Earth?  
What is it like to not be *in* the business but  
to *be* the business?  
What is it like to be like water in water?  
What is it like to clean water with water?  
What is it like to be made out of nothing but  
questions?  
What is it like to run out of questions?  
What is it like to emerge from another's  
likeness?

What is it like to have a quadrillion cells in  
your body, 90% of which are bacteria,  
fungi, and other symbiotic microbes?  
What is it like to have your climate shaped  
by capital, patriarchal power, and species  
self-interest?  
What is it like to spend most of your day  
clicking?  
What is it like for somebody to love us all?  
What is it like to live up to your environs  
like you live up to your ideals?

**JOSHUA SCHUSTER** is an associate professor of English at Western University. His first book is *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (University of Alabama Press, 2015). He is currently working on a new book *What Is Extinction? A Cultural and Natural History of Last Animals*.