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## **“More Human Than Human”: Lacan’s Mirror Stage Theory and Posthumanism in Philip K. Dick’s Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?**

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“More Human Than Human”: Lacan’s Mirror Stage Theory and Posthumanism in Philip K.  
Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English

by

Richelle V. Finn

A.S. Delgado Community College, 2010

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## Abstract

In my thesis, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is examined using French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory. In the novel, humans have built androids that are almost indistinguishable from humans except that they lack a sense of empathy, or so the humans believe. The Voigt-Kampff Machine is a polygraph-like device used to determine if a subject shows signs of empathy in order to confirm if one is an android or a human. Yet, should empathy be the defining quality of determining humanity?

In his article "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the 'I' as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," Lacan refers to a particular critical milestone in an infant's psychological development. When the baby looks in a mirror, they come to the realization that the image they are seeing is not just any ordinary image; it is actually themselves in the mirror. This "a-ha" moment of self-realization is what Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory is based on. According to Lacan's theory, the image that the child sees in a mirror becomes an "Other" through which they will always scrutinize and pass judgment on, for it is not how they have pictured themselves to be in their mind's eye.

I hypothesize that the androids are humans' artificial and technological Other. It is my thought that Dick uses the conflict of determining the biological from the artificial, the effort to differentiate humans from androids and biological animals from artificial ones, to illustrate Lacan's psychoanalysis of the mirror stage and its importance in our continual search for determining what humanity is and who we really are.

Keywords: Philip K. Dick; *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*; Jacques Lacan; Psychoanalysis; Mirror Stage Theory; Posthumanism

## Introduction

In Philip K. Dick's masterpiece 1968 science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, World War Terminus has devastated the population of Earth and left the planet almost uninhabitable, compelling survivors to flee to Mars or one of several colony planets. The emigrants are given free android servants as an incentive to serve them in space. The androids are highly intelligent, sophisticated, and efficient machines; so much so that they are nearly indistinguishable from human beings. Occasionally, an android slave kills its master and flees Mars for safe haven on Earth. Thus, bounty hunters are employed by police agencies to protect the small but resolute communities of humans who reject emigration and those who cannot emigrate due to the harmful, unsafe effects of living on the post-apocalyptic Earth. The main character of the novel is one of these bounty hunters, named Rick Deckard. Throughout the course of the novel as he destroys or "retires" six of the aforementioned escaped androids, Deckard's sense of identity is shaken; he begins to question if he might be an android too and not a human like he is led to believe, due to his ever increasingly cold, distant nature: a trait that is believed to be embodied by the androids.

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* explores the ethical implications of enslaving the androids and, more importantly, androids are used by Dick as a tool to analyze and identify the true essence of humanity. Humans claim that the androids do not possess empathy; therefore, humanity's essence must be in their sense of empathy, or so their logic dictates. In the novel, a polygraph-like device called the Voigt-Kampff Machine is used to determine if a subject shows signs of empathy in order to determine if the individual is an android or a human, yet the question remains, should empathy really be the defining quality of determining humanity?

This all ties back into Deckard's anxieties about the androids and explains his uncertainty of what being human entails. As Dick himself stated,

The purpose of this story as I saw it was that in his job of hunting and killing these [androids], Deckard becomes progressively dehumanized. At the same time, the [androids] are being perceived as becoming more human. Finally, Deckard must question what he is doing, and really what is the essential difference between him and them? And, to take it one step further, who is he if there is no real difference? (Grace)

Hence, I propose that Dick uses the conflict of determining the biological from the artificial by the measure of empathy to illustrate Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the mirror stage and to showcase the importance of mankind's continual search for determining what humanity is and who we really are.

In order to help confirm my hypothesis, some research questions I sought to answer are as follows: 1) What does the idea of humans wanting to own biological animals as pets instead of artificial ones tell us about the mindset of the characters in the novel? 2) How does it represent the dichotomy of humans versus androids, the notion that androids are not real people? 3) What does the artificial toad at the end of the novel symbolize about Deckard and his sense of identity and humanity? 4) Is the Voigt-Kampff Machine intrinsically flawed? 5) Are humans really any different than androids? 6) Why is Rick Deckard's sense of identity shaken due to his interactions with the androids? 7) Is Deckard a human like he is led to believe, or is he really an android as he begins to suspect? 8) Lastly, how is this all related to Lacanian psychoanalysis, specifically Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory?

It is also interesting to note that Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories and Philip K. Dick's fictional works are both considered to be within the Posthumanism Movement.

Furthermore, in January 1966, "With the publication of *Ecrits*, a collection of [Lacan's] writings which includes the essay on the Mirror Stage, Jacques Lacan gains a wider audience among intellectuals," (Felluga "Lacan II: On the Structure of the Psyche"). Though his essay on the Mirror Stage was originally published in 1949, readers did not really take notice of it until the publication of *Ecrits* in 1966. Shortly thereafter, in 1968, the first edition of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was published. It could be merely coincidence, but it is curious that there are so many parallels found in Lacan's and Dick's works and so many examples of Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory found within Dick's novel that one must wonder if Dick had the theory in mind when Dick wrote it, even if only in his subconscious.

### **Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory**

In French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's article entitled "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," he describes the mirror stage of a child's development as, "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image--whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*," (Lacan 503). Additionally, according to the definition of the theory provided by the University of Hawaii's English Department, "...human infants pass through a stage in which an external image of the body (reflected in a mirror, or represented to the infant through the mother or primary caregiver) produces a psychic response that gives rise to the mental representation of an 'I' " ("Lacan: The Mirror Stage"). To clarify, Lacan refers to a milestone in an infant's psychological development in which when the baby looks in a mirror, they come to the understanding that the image they are seeing is not just any ordinary image, it is actually themselves in the mirror. This "a-ha" moment of self-realization in



early human development is what Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory is based on, and parallels Deckard's questioning of who he really is and what the androids are in relation to humanity. Therefore, this real-life phenomenon is the foundation upon which the Lacanian psychoanalytical argument can be made to provide some insight into the questions raised throughout the novel.

Lacan's ideas that arose from his studies of the mirror stage are fascinating to say the least, though at times it can be quite challenging to comprehend. According to Lacan,

This... specular image by the child at the *infans* stage... would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it... as subject. This form would have to be called the Ideal-I...

...this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being...of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality. (Lacan 503)

What this means is that an individual's identity is a construct behind which the real subject remains hidden. The development of this identity, what Lacan calls the "Other," happens during the Mirror Stage. The moment an infant looks in the mirror for the first time, whether figuratively or literally, is when the baby discovers the idea of the self. Before this happens, the child has no idea that they are an individual that can be separated from the world around them, and therefore there is no ego. Once the sense of self is discovered, this causes a split between one's real self and the formation of the "I", or the "Other."

When an individual discovers that the image in the mirror is of themselves, they further realize that it must be how others will perceive of them to be. Seeing the image of ourselves in the mirror for the first time and coming to this realization can be very shocking and thus can become a problem to the individual, since the image that one sees does not necessarily align with how they perceive themselves in their mind's eye. A person will then continuously strive throughout their life to bring that ideal self, or the Ideal-I, into fruition. For Lacan, the identity we show to the world is not who we truly are, yet we continuously strive to control the "I" to show to others what we want to appear to be. The image in the mirror becomes this "Other", through which an individual will always scrutinize and pass judgment on, for it is not their ideal selves.

Using these same principles outlined above, I hypothesize that in Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (referred to hereafter as *Androids*), the androids are the humans' artificial and technological Other which humanity continuously scrutinizes themselves against. The androids thus perform the function of the mirror image of a human's "self," both on a societal scale, through the human characters in the novel, and on an individual scale, through the eyes of Deckard. We see this in action when Deckard wonders why he doesn't feel any emotion when he retires the androids, and begins to question if he is in fact an android as well without knowing it. The anxiety that the humans have over the androids thus represents the dichotomy between the real self and the "I" or Other. Dick provides us with examples of this with the thematic battle between the biological versus the artificial.

## Importance of Electric Sheep

One of the main thematic threads woven throughout the text of *Androids* is differentiating the biological from the artificial. This is overtly demonstrated in the use of the Voigt-Kampff Machine to determine a human from an android, but there are other instances that further this overarching theme. The conflict between the humans and the androids is in fact mirrored by humanity's fascination with animals, or more specifically, the desire to own a "real" biological animal. Most importantly, due to the nuclear fallout from World War Terminus, biological animals are extremely rare and are highly coveted, much more so than artificial animals, though many humans cannot find nor be able to afford to buy a biological, or "real" animal. Therefore, artificial animals serve as a substitute for the "real" thing.

While literary critics seem fond of analyzing the role that the androids play in *Androids*, there is far less scholarship examining the role that biological and artificial animals have in the novel. This is quite a shame, as one can explore the implications of a larger growing number of artificial lifeforms being taken care of by humanity, even if many humans' concern for their pets is overshadowed by the fact that owning an animal seems to be a status symbol. What is important to note is that owning a pet, even an artificial one, can be seen as an outward sign of one's empathy. This phenomenon of owning biological and artificial animals and the impact this has in the larger context of the novel is explored in depth by Brad Congdon in his thesis entitled *Prophet of the Postmodern: The Problem of Authenticity in the Works of Philip K. Dick*. Congdon reiterates this notion that, "owning an animal is an important status symbol; not only does it show off the owner's wealth, since animals are so expensive, but it also proves how empathetic the owner is. This second distinction is just as important as the first, since empathy is what separates man from android" (Congdon 41). The importance of owning and taking care of

an animal is established early in the narrative when Deckard's neighbor tells him: "You know how people are about not taking care of an animal; they consider it immoral and anti-empathetic" (*Androids* 10). For the humans in the novel, owning an animal is so important as a living symbol of their humanity that many who cannot own a biological animal will care for an artificial animal in place of a biological one, though it is not ideal.

Animals are so important "as a symbol of both wealth and empathy, that virtually every character carries around *Sidney's Animal & Fowl Catalogue*, so as to correctly appraise the worth of real animals (and, presumably, their own humanity)" (Congdon 41). Deckard is also one who owns an artificial animal: in fact, he owns the "electric sheep" of the novel's title, yet he still longs to own a biological animal. After retiring three of the six Nexus-6 android fugitives, Deckard buys his wife Iran a biological "authentic" goat with the reward money he earned. Unfortunately for him, after he threatens to kill Rachael and once he retires the three remaining androids, Deckard comes home to find Iran in grief over the goat being recently killed by Rachael. From these important plot points, it is crucial to examine the role that animals play in the novel, as much of the plot revolves around the desire and acquisition of animals; the biological and artificial animals are symbolic of the conflict between humans and androids, and this "mirrors" the struggle that Deckard has with his own ontological status.

Quite remarkably, the artificial animals require the same amount of care as biological ones; humans have purposely programmed these animals to act like "real" animals in every way possible. Remarkably, these artificial animals bring to mind a real-life example: the 1990's toy phenomenon Tamagotchi, a "digital" pet that a child would have to feed, clean, and play with in order for the pet to grow up into adulthood. In every way, one could see how a Tamagotchi could become a pet to a child. Children did grow fond of the tiny pixels that resembled an animal on

tiny computer screens, to the point that a child would make their parents take care of their pets when they could not bring them to school, as their pet might get sick and possibly die if not taken care of properly. In this way, it is easy to see how humans can get attached to artificial animals just as much as a “real” one.

The artificial animals throughout the novel parallel the androids in that they are mistaken for their biological counterparts due to their striking resemblance to them. Even Deckard himself, who seeks out artificial lifeforms and retires them as his job, mistakes artificial animals for “real” ones throughout the course of the novel. This is quite problematic, and this issue parallels the implication that humans and androids could potentially be mistaken for one another as well. As Congdon notes:

Deckard, who seems especially obsessed about animals, is even fooled twice by electronic animals: first, at the Rosen Foundation, where he mistakes an ersatz owl for the real deal, and then at the end of the novel, when he believes he has discovered an authentic toad. That he is so easily deceived despite the fact that both species of animal are known to be extinct is distressing, to say the least, when his business is telling the real from the fake, and a mistake of such magnitude in his line of work could lead him to retire a human being. (Congdon 41)

This exploration of the implications of mistaking the artificial for the biological or “real” come to fruition by the end of the novel, in which Deckard brings home a toad that he found in the desert. After showing the toad to his wife, Deckard realizes that he had once again mistaken an artificial animal for a “real” one when Iran finds a control panel on the toad’s abdomen. The meaning of the ending scene with the artificial toad is explored in the article “Speciesism and species being in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*” by Sherryl Vint; here she posits that:

In the novel's final scene, Iran orders electric flies for the electric toad, a sign of love for her husband who is "devoted to it" beyond reason, beyond rationality, beyond reciprocity.... In this act of care for the electric toad (even though it has no economic status as it is not 'real') Iran and Deckard begin to find a way out of commodity fetishism. They are learning to treat the toad with kindness rather than as a possession because it is the social relationship--not the ontological status of the toad--that counts. (Vint 121)

Though I believe that it is Deckard that genuinely wishes to care for the artificial animals and Iran cares more about her husband being happy, I agree with Vint in that the change that we see in Deckard is best seen through the lens of how he treats animals, and even though the toad is not biological, he still wants to genuinely take care of it. The final scene completes Deckard's story arc of realizing that humans and androids, the biological and the artificial, are not so different; how of little importance it is to try and make one superior to the other. Deckard finally sees that the artificial is not in fact inferior to the biological, whether that be animals or androids. As stated by Deckard, "The electric things have their life too. Paltry as those lives are." (*Androids* 239). This mirrors his realization of human nature vs. the androids' nature as not being so different from one another as he realizes how humans can be cold, distant, and have a lack of empathy while androids are also capable of being empathetic.

While there seems to be a lack of analysis on the role that animals play in the novel, certainly, it is...

...only by realizing the centrality of animals can we perceive all the implications of Deckard's change. It is not... that Deckard risks becoming increasingly like the androids through his work as a bounty hunter; rather, the risk faced by Deckard and other humans

in the novel lies in realizing that they already are android-like, so long as they define their subjectivity based on the logical, rational, calculating part of human being. (Vint 112)

This ultimately brings up the question of Deckard's nature, and just how he fits in with the conflict of the biological and the artificial. Within the text, Dick never explicitly gives the reader a clear answer on Deckard's ontological status. The question remains: Is Deckard a human or android? Though I believe Dick leaves this question purposefully unanswered so the reader comes to their own conclusions, it seems to me that there is an added complexity and beauty to the story if one sees Deckard as an android. If Deckard is in fact an android, the ending seems to have an extra layer of meaning that would otherwise be absent. Eric Carl Link explains this added meaning to the ending by theorizing that:

It may be that Deckard's desire to own and tend to the needs of a living animal is, beyond the status symbol a living animal would represent, a type of wish fulfillment: a means to connect at some deep level with another living creature. The ending of the novel, in which Deckard's wife, Iran, notes that her husband is "devoted" to an electric toad, may itself hint at the empathic relationship between "electric" beings—Deckard and the ersatz toad in this instance. (Link)

Deckard as an android would show just how androids have learned to care for others, and have grown to understand their own emotions. It also would fit into the mirror stage theory quite well, as Deckard is seeing himself in the androids he is retiring, and he does not like seeing himself being a cold, heartless machine like the humans believe the androids to be. It also could explain why he becomes so devoted to the artificial toad at the end--maybe he sees himself in that poor, helpless toad on the side of the road and decides that it must need love and care just like he does. This would be quite a sight for the humans in the world of *Androids*--seeing an android, who has

made a living out of destroying artificial lifeforms, genuinely care for an artificial animal, not as a commodity and status symbol, but to be “devoted” to it instead, seeing a genuine bond between two artificial beings.

### **The Voigt-Kampff Machine**

As the main character Rick Deckard hunts down and "retires" the fugitive androids one by one, he slowly begins to question his own humanity. Deckard increasingly sees himself as dehumanized by becoming a cold-hearted killer. He realizes that the androids that he must retire are not so different from humans at all. Some of the androids' behaviors indicate that there is more to them than Deckard and the humans recognize; some examples include Luba Luft, who is an opera singer who is fascinated with music and art; Roy and Irgmard Baty, who declare themselves husband and wife; and the fugitive Nexus-6 androids who seemed to have travelled around together, which surprises Deckard as androids aren't known for working well in groups. So, if these are all false presumptions, how is Deckard to truly know if he has ever accidentally killed a human by mistake? Deckard is also a victim here, as he is programmed by society to believe these to be a part of an androids' nature. Therefore, the fault of not being able to differentiate between a human and an android does not actually lie within Deckard, but within the parameters of the Voigt-Kampff test.

The Voigt-Kampff Machine is a polygraph-like device that Rick Deckard and other bounty hunters use in order to test a subject's level of empathy. This empathy test “is the bounty hunter's first (and seemingly only) tool for discovering [androids] within the general populace. It works by having the subject respond to a number of questions, each one worded so as to induce an empathetic response” (Congdon 47). The machine tracks the physical and verbal reactions to



questions which are supposed to trigger an emotional response. A lack of empathy in a subject leads the examiner to determine that the subject must be an android; empathy is the most significant trait which androids lack and humanity has therefore deemed it as the inherent nature of mankind. Yet, is empathy really the greatest, most essential quality of humanity? Is this the most effective test for determining a human from an android?

These questions are addressed in Klaus Benesch's article "Technology, Art, and the Cybernetic Body: The Cyborg as Cultural Other in Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis' and Philip K. Dick's 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?'" , where the role that cyborgs and androids play in the works of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* are analyzed according to Lacanian theory; specifically Benesch uses the Mirror Stage theory to highlight how Philip K. Dick shows the main conflict of differentiating humanity from androids using the Voigt-Kampff machine as being fundamentally flawed. Benesch suggests that because...

...the test is devised according to a preset notion of what it means to be a machine, that is, the lack of emotional responses, it is doomed to replicate endlessly the false premises of the human observer.... the whole design rests on an inherent paradox: by presupposing the disinterestedness and emotional aloofness of the experimenter, the Voigt-Kampff scale betrays the same psychological markers as the non-person it seeks to identify.

The difference, then, between artificial and "natural" existence does not originate within the machine; rather it results from the paradoxical desire rampant in technologically advanced cultures to define humanity against the technological as Other and alien to human nature. It is thus... always the humans, and not the androids, who dream of electric sheep. (Benesch 390)

Essentially, the notion that androids do not possess empathy and therefore humans must possess this trait is proven to be a falsehood as Deckard interacts with the androids more and more throughout the course of the novel, and it is precisely through the implementation of Lacanian mirror stage theory that Benesch determines that the test itself is irrefutably flawed.

It is important to note here the fact that the androids look identical to humans in every way, physically speaking: "As with the androgynous characters,... we can neither be wholly assured of the visual markers of the human nor of those which define the identity of the cyborg. On the contrary, the very essence of the imagery of the man-machine turns on the fact that it resembles as much as it estranges the organic body" (Benesch 389-390). This makes the use of the psychological and physiological test of the Voigt-Kampff machine crucial in determining a human from an android, as there are no other reliable methods for differentiating the two species. The androids physically look identical to humans outwardly; this makes the androids, as in the Lacanian theory, humanity's Other. In this case, they are the artificial, machinal or technological Other. "Similar to Lacan's heterodoxical concept of identification," Benesch explains that, "...the machinal Other of this story appears to be but a doubling and distorted image of the spectator, a direct product and brainchild of the humans' mind. Moreover, Deckard's attempt to stalk and finally detect the technological Other through a combination of projections and 'gazing' refers to the Lacanian emphasis on the gaze as marker of the child's fascination with his/her own mirror image" (Benesch 390). This means that Deckard slowly realizes that the androids are not just some technological Other that humanity has created for itself to use as we please, but that the androids are actually a reflection on humanity itself. Humanity, and specifically our protagonist Rick Deckard, can be just as emotionless, cold, and logical as the androids, which makes sense as humans created the androids in their own image.

As one might notice, the Voigt-Kampff test is can be extremely problematic, if it is assumed that all humans must answer the questions in a certain way, especially when many questions would result in the identification of most 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans as androids. One of the most detailed descriptions of the test resides in chapter five, where Deckard tests Rachael Rosen, who, as he has been led to believe, is the daughter of Eldon Rosen, the creator and CEO of the Rosen Association. In reality, Rachael is actually an advanced Nexus-6 android, much to Deckard's astonishment. As Deckard asks Rachael the list of probing questions, "the reader may be surprised to discover that virtually all of the questions posed in the Voigt-Kampff test revolve around animals. Deckard confronts Rachael with vignettes centering on violence towards animals, such as a killing jar used by a butterfly collector, a bearskin rug, or a bullfight. These images of violence are intended to elicit a negative empathetic response" (Congdon 47). Yet, it must be noted that "[t]o the contemporary reader, however, many of the scenarios that are supposed to inspire horror from the average 'human' are everyday occurrences, such as calfskin wallets, boiling lobsters and fur coats" (Attaway 10). The reader may also see that an individual can answer the questions in a number of different ways, and it can be quite easy to manipulate the results of the test or be mistaken for an android if not responding the "correct" way. In the case of Rachael, "It is only due to Deckard's own intuition that Rachael is caught; the test itself fails to identify Rachael as an android" (Congdon 48). It seems that the Voigt-Kampff test, like the polygraph examination it closely resembles, is not a foolproof test, and that it can fail to detect what it is meant to detect. The test fails to see that individuals can react to these types of questions very differently, and that both humans and androids may not give the type of reaction that the machine and the examiner are looking for.

The failure of the Voigt-Kampff Test is with its parameters of how it distinguishes a human from an android, as an android can reasonably answer the questions in a manner consistent with human thought and logic but deem them not human because it does not elicit an empathic response. For example,

During her empathy test, when told about a banquet at which dog was served, Luba responds, 'Nobody would kill and eat a dog.[...] They're worth a fortune' (103), a non-empathic response that marks her as an android, but which is nonetheless consistent with attitudes toward animals displayed by the human characters.

... it is worth noting that most of Dick's audience would fail the Voigt-Kampff test. Its questions--about topics such as boiling live lobster, eating meat, or using fur--denote things that are commonplace rather than shocking in our world. (Vint 114)

Vint's analysis of the role of animals in the novel, the cold logic demonstrated by humans, and the instances of empathy shown by the androids all are important pieces of evidence that help support my hypothesis. It is only fair to determine that the empathy test is highly illogical and inconsistent with human nature.

One aspect of humanity that the creators of the Voigt-Kampff test failed to see is "what passes for 'empathy' among humans derives far more from a cultural construction than from any categorical essence," and that the Voigt- Kampff test emphasizes the "contrived nature" of this human quality (Galvan 415). One can just see that different contemporary cultures around the world have different conventions of what is right and wrong when it comes to animals. While the consumption of cow meat is prevalent in western countries, it is a major taboo in India where cows are considered sacred animals. Most in the West would be horrified and never would think to eat dog meat, but many people in several Asian countries do eat dogs regularly.

Another factor is that the reader can just look at the thoughts and actions of the characters in the novel and notice that they do not follow the conventions of what humans and androids are supposed to act like. The human/android dichotomy is severely undermined when one realizes that Dick is never explicitly clear whether Deckard himself is really a human or an android. Though I do personally believe Deckard to be an android, the ambiguity of this idea, “that a fully-fleshed character like Deckard could be an android....is held up by the fact that the androids in the novel often act in an empathetic and ‘human’ way, despite the supposed hard-and-fast rule of the Voigt-Kampff test, and, conversely, that none of the human characters (except the ‘chicken head’ Isidore) seem particularly empathetic” (Congdon 53). It seems as though Dick has placed this Voigt-Kampff machine in his novel, that is alike the polygraph in so many ways, as a commentary on trying to evaluate the thoughts and emotions of mankind by use of technology, which will always fall flat.

The Voigt-Kampff Machine, therefore, “is Dick’s satirical comment on humans’ utter dependence on machines. They have allowed machines to come between them and the measure of true authenticity. Machines know humans better than humans know themselves. Human empathy...is reduced to a number” (Shaddox 209). In this way, humanity is trying to scrutinize the image they see in the mirror by the only means they know how: ironically, by use of machines. The androids that humans seem to be so afraid of are condemned to death if they dare set foot on Earth, yet humans not only depend on the androids to take care of them on Mars and the colony planets, but are utterly dependent on all kinds of technology, including the Voigt-Kampff machine. In this way, the humans see their technological Other in the androids, and they fight to keep themselves separated from their mirror image.

## Androids as Humanity's Other

For Deckard and the humans in *Androids*, their mirror image, their Other, is the androids the Rosen Corporation has created to serve humanity. The androids become so alike their human creators that they become that source of anxiety, fear, and scorn, so much so that androids have been banned from living on Earth and must remain slaves to their owners on the colony planets. The androids are seen as an Other, as the mirror image that humanity desperately struggles to live up to. This brings to mind a real-life phenomenon of a group that wants to separate themselves from another group, i.e. the enslavement of Africans in the New World and the consequences of this horrible reality in contemporary American society. In Irina-Ana Drobot's article "*Flower-Power Tantra* By Claudia Golea And *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* By Philip K. Dick: Creating A Different Reality.", *Flower-Power Tantra* and *Androids* are compared and contrasted by the ways in which the texts help break our sense of what reality is and how the respective stories are told through these alternate realities. Specifically, Drobot delves into the nature of humans' relationship with the androids, and tells us how the androids are being treated as slaves and not as sentient beings with the ability to write their own destinies. This goes a little into critical race theory, as Drobot compares the humans' treatment of the androids to, "the problem of minorities. At some point, one android notices that even the animals have become protected by the law, that they have become sacred, while the androids are withdrawn, a word created to express their killing." (Drobot 43). It is easy to see how the androids are symbolic of real-life minorities in relation to Critical Race Theory, as "it [is] possible to illustrate how Dick develops the Other, particularly the robotic Other, as a means for effective social commentary, which is designed, in part, to reveal humanity's limitations and imperfections; furthermore, this will demonstrate how Dick expertly crafts the dual nature of the

androids as a means of expressing the robotic Others' need for liberation, and how both the androids and the specials the author depicts symbolize the manifestation of the Others' desire for recognition and inclusion in this new post-human era" (Humphrey 26). Dick makes a note to say that the androids are treated as slaves that are killed for disobeying their masters and escaping from the enslavement; one cannot deny the parallels between the treatment of the androids in the novel and real-life African slaves. African slaves were dehumanized and seen only as property, and they too could be killed if they disobeyed their owners or tried to escape and find their own freedom. This adds one more layer to the sense of what being seen as an Other means, and that once the Other is found, humanity will try to devalue and change how that mirror image is seen to the world. Just as white American slave owners tried to dehumanize and separate themselves from being seen in anyway alike their African slaves, humanity too is devaluing and separating themselves from their android slaves.

In the mirror stage theory, one's image of themselves in the mirror can become a source of anxiety, fear, depression, denial, and of scorn, as one struggles with coming to terms with accepting that image as truly a reflection of oneself. Deckard experiences this anxiety on a deep personal level as he interacts with the androids more and more; he sees that the androids are not so different from humans, since he notices that they are in fact showing signs of empathy, unlike what humans believe to be true. In spite of the fact that it will cost him all of his reward money for retiring the six fugitive Nexus-6 androids, Deckard believes he must buy the "real" goat: "The expense, the contractual indebtedness, appalled him; he found himself shaking. But I had to do it, he said to himself. The experience with Phil Resch--I have to get my confidence, my faith in myself and my abilities, back. Or I won't keep my job" (*Androids* 148). This is when Deckard begins to question his own humanity, and feels that he needs to buy the goat in order to reaffirm

his own sense of self, his own belief that he is a human. Deckard needs to assert himself as a human “after he encounters various situations that call the distinction between [androids] and humans into question, and the only way he knows how to do that is to buy a real, authentic animal, to function as an external symbol of both his success and his reified empathy” (Congdon 52). He fears the Other that he sees in the mirror through the interactions with the androids, and hopes that he is not one of them.

What is ironic about this is that this may in fact be one of the best lines of evidence for Deckard actually being an android. Deckard’s fear that he is seeing his own reflection in the androids he retires is “one of the more poignant, though subtle, suggestions that Deckard may in fact be an android, and this is born out even by the wording used to describe his mental process” (Congdon 52-53). After seeing fellow bounty hunter Resch kill the androids with no ounce of remorse, Deckard’s anxious thoughts are described as follows: "Possibly his encounter with the bounty hunter Phil Resch had altered some minute synapsis in him, had closed one neurological switch and opened another. And this perhaps had started a chain reaction" (*Androids* 152). Here, through the phrases “minute synapsis,” “closed one neurological switch,” and “opened another [switch]” one can see how Dick is equating Deckard with the inner workings of a machine. In this way, Deckard’s conflict and self-doubt of his humanity is the best example of androids being the Other through which humanity scrutinizes in the mirror, as he himself might not even be a human like he would ideally want to be.

A theme that Dick continuously returns to throughout the text which define androids as humanity’s Other is the fact that not only androids are revealed to be empathetic, but that the humans are struggling with feeling genuine emotions. The androids are becoming more human-like, while the humans are shown to be quite android-like; as the androids are shown having



empathy, there are several examples throughout the novel of humans failing to express empathy. This fact is not only shown through the actions of Phil Resch but also with Deckard and his wife Iran. Both Deckard and Iran seem dependent on a device called the Penfield Mood Organ, a machine that controls and adjusts the emotions of its users. Deckard uses the mood organ to wake himself up and make him feel better about doing his job as a bounty hunter, while Iran schedules herself a “six-hour self-accusatory depression” after observing all the empty apartments around them (*Androids 2*). Deckard argues with his wife about dialing in the depression and how she might stay in a depression due to feeling it so long from the mood organ. Iran responds that she needed to dial in the depression session as she “realized how unhealthy it was, sensing the absence of life, not just in this building but everywhere, and not reacting--do you see? ... But that used to be considered a sign of mental illness; they called it ‘absence of appropriate affect’” (*Androids 3*). The fact that Iran realizes that she isn’t “feeling” the way she should feel about all the empty apartments around them speaks to the idea that humans wish to set themselves apart from androids with their sense of empathy, and that she is seemingly acting in a way that humans believe androids to be. It is “ironic that Iran chooses to remedy her estrangement from real humanity by engaging in an artificially-induced emotion... her statement is revealing, since the ‘absence of appropriate affect’ which she feels--and which she indicates Deckard feels but is entirely unaware of--will later be identified as a defining characteristic of androids” (Congdon 42). Later, Deckard sees the irony in the fact that the androids seem to show more genuine emotion than even his own wife; as Deckard states, “Most androids I’ve known have more vitality and desire to live than my wife. She has nothing to give me” (*Androids 83*). Though Iran is acting particularly machine-like for a human, she seems to be more in tuned to herself, and sees that she is not empathetic when she thinks she should be.

Deckard, on the other hand, is particularly harsh with his thoughts of his wife throughout the novel, especially in the very beginning. He sees flaws in his wife that he is clueless as to not recognize many of the same flaws within himself – at first. In the beginning of the novel, Deckard is arrogant and self-centered, and seems blissfully unaware that he possesses many qualities that should be found in androids. For example, he criticizes his wife, and even thinks about divorcing her because she has “nothing to give” to him, he believes that taking care of an electric sheep is demoralizing and constantly thinks about buying a “real” animal with his bounty money, and he thinks about the retirement of the androids only in terms of financial gain. It is entirely hypocritical of Deckard to criticize his wife, his electric sheep, and the androids for lacking empathy when he lacks empathy as well. If we define humanity as empathetic beings above all else, then Rick Deckard does not seem to fit that definition of a human. His character growth in the novel models how the androids have begun to have a sense of empathy, which addresses the notion of Deckard being an android.

### **Empathy Defines Humanity?**

The one defining trait that humans deem to set themselves apart from androids is having a sense of empathy. The human characters strive to be seen as empathetic and fear how cold and unfeeling the androids seem to be. Unlike how we humans may define ourselves as a species in our society today, in *Androids*, humanity does not distinguish themselves from other lifeforms by a higher intelligence, as one could argue that the androids have surpassed humans in that regard. "Empathy," as believed by the humans, "existed only within the human community, whereas intelligence to some degree could be found throughout every phylum and order including the arachnida" (*Androids* 30-31). What is important for humans in *Androids* is how they treat others

and care for other living creatures, or at the very least, how they wish for others to perceive them as altruistic and empathetic. For Dick, “the key to being human... lies in kindness—in humane treatment of others—and this kindness can manifest itself in both heroic and noble efforts to help humankind and, at the other extreme, in small altruistic gestures made toward another being (and this second variety of kindness is the more common in Dick’s works)” (Link). Small altruistic gestures are how empathy manifests itself in *Androids*, exemplified with Deckard’s care for the artificial toad in the end. This small act of kindness is how humans define their existence, as “kindness is fueled by empathy: if one can empathize with others, one can understand their challenges, their shortcomings, their suffering” (Link). Therefore, a lack of empathy is what defines an android’s existence, or so the humans believe. Yet, as we have seen throughout the course of the novel, humans can lack empathy just as much as androids can possess it. Dick shows us through his work that without empathy, humanity may as well be machines without a soul. As Dick writes in his 1976 essay “Man, Android, and Machine,” a human being “without the proper empathy or feeling is the same as an android built so as to lack it, either by design or mistake. We mean, basically, someone who does not care about the fate that his fellow living creatures fall victim to; he stands detached, a spectator, acting out by his indifference.” What is important here is that living beings should be kind and care for one another, whether that be human or android.

The main reason that humans use to justify the hunting down and killing of the androids is the supposed lack of empathy in the androids. It is this idea that the humans hold-- that empathy is an inherent quality of humanity-- is called into question throughout the text: “[Humans] are distinguished by their ability to feel empathy. But is this really true? The novel seems to question this idea at some point. The hero, the bounty hunter, is determined to wonder

at some point whether he himself is not an android. How come that he can kill androids in cold blood? Did he do that psychological test himself?" (Drobot 43). Deckard's identity of being human is shaken when he hunts down and retires the Nexus-6 androids, especially after Luba Luft hints at the notion that his memories "could be false memories, i.e. the memories of another, referring to psychology, Freudian psychoanalysis and all sorts of experiments, as is the case in the novel, with a generation of androids inside whose minds memories of human beings were introduced" (Drobot 43). This is evidence of the uncertainty of what qualifies as a measure of humanity that is seen as the truth, and further established by the parameters of the Voigt-Kampff test. Believing that empathy is the one factor for determining humanity is shown throughout the text to be problematic and unfounded. As we have seen many instances where androids are shown to possess empathy while humans seem to lack empathy and need devices like Empathy Boxes and Penfield Mood Organs to feel genuine emotions, the Voigt-Kampff machine and the line of questions that bounty hunters use for the test are inherently flawed. Congdon explains, "By identifying empathy as the one human trait that cannot be reproduced, Dick points to empathy as our most human, our most authentic, of characteristics. ...but it is problematized from the first page, even before the novel establishes empathy as the true mark of humanity, and is further exacerbated by the Voigt-Kampff test" (Congdon 51). So, can humanity really claim to have the monopoly on empathy?

Why can't the humans see that the androids are living beings too, but just built using different parts than humans? Why does humanity have such anxiety over society entering a posthumanist world where androids walk among humans as equals? It is so futile to try to differentiate humans from androids, since both are alike in almost every way. Humans can be cold, heartless, and prone to violence at times, and these qualities can be just as intrinsic to a

human's life as it is to an android. Jill Galvan's article "Entering the Posthuman Collective in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*?" addresses many different aspects of posthumanism within the novel, including the evolution of humanity, the blending of nature with technology, and the search for the self within in the twenty-first century. She explains that,

The electronic image brings this question to the fore, and further it reveals the firm boundaries of the human collective as wholly fictional. Dick's human characters naively pride themselves on their empathic unity and derogate technological constructs as inherently secondary to biological ones... Yet as we have seen, machines have not only infiltrated the human collective, but have also become an integral part of the establishment—an ineradicable element of human day-to-day existence. (Galvan 418)

Many scholars believe that life in the twenty-first century will be one of Posthumanism, and that the biological will be integrated with the technological. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* demonstrates just how much that is a true statement.

When delving deep into the novel's conflict with the concept of empathy, one begins to see that it is actually

...[the] human characters in the novel [that] work to undermine the concept of a transcendent or pure human quality. One of the most problematic characters, for Deckard, is Phil Resch, a bounty hunter whom he briefly comes to believe is an android. He is convinced of Resch's inhumanity by the cool calculation of his demeanor--in a sense, he shows the lack of appropriate affect. It is Resch himself who begins to conclude that he might be an android (111), and Deckard is so appalled by the fact that Resch enjoys killing that he doubts the other bounty hunter's humanity (120). (Congdon 51)

When Resch takes the Voigt-Kampff test and the test determines that he is human, Deckard is quite shocked at the results, as Resch has a complete lack of empathy towards the androids. For Resch, this is not a problem, but Deckard realizes that he is beginning to feel empathy for the androids. He soon asks Resch if he believes androids have souls, but soon realizes that the problem lies not with Resch, but with himself. Deckard has an epiphany: "I'm capable of feeling empathy for at least specific, certain androids ... There's nothing unnatural or unhuman about Phil Resch's reactions; it's me" (*Androids* 124). Deckard sees that feeling empathy for the androids is what is not normal in his society, as humans ordinarily do not feel anything for them.

Several of the androids that Deckard encounters throughout the novel, particularly Rachael Rosen, Pris Stratton, and Roy and Irmgard Baty, seem to possess empathetic qualities, or at the very least, seem to be emotional and human-like, which is in sharp contrast to many of the humans. Pris first introduces Isidore to Roy and Irmgard Baty as her "best friends" and Isidore assumes she is a human (*Androids* 130). Another strong indication of the androids' capacity for empathy is the fact that Roy and Irmgard consider themselves to be husband and wife, and Roy cries out in sorrow for Irmgard when Deckard kills her. This act compels Deckard to "accept that Roy, an [android], is capable of love, even though love, presumably, requires empathy. Furthermore, Rick acknowledges the relationship between the two by referring to Irmgard as "Mrs. Baty," a categorization that would be off-limits to [androids]. This is no doubt due to the action of the novel, which has deconstructed the binary of human and android to the extent that Deckard himself no longer believes in the firm distinction" (Congdon 54). These are just a few of the examples found in the novel of the androids contradicting the notion that humans are the ones who feel empathy, while the opposite can be said of the humans.

Though not only are humans more like androids in their lack of empathy at times and the use of technology in their everyday lives, but the reverse is also shown to be true; androids can be just as empathic as humans, since "a few of the androids Rick deals with exhibit what appears to be caring for their own kind and even, in some cases, for the humans with whom they interact." (Galvan 414). Galvan here is particularly referring to when Deckard comes home to find his newly bought biological goat has been killed by Rachael. The reason she did it is not stated, but we can certainly speculate, and all the reasons point to Rachael having some strong emotions in order to commit the act in the first place. Galvan further speculates: "[Deckard] returns home to discover that Rachael has pushed [his] goat off the roof. Why? Because she is jealous of his love for the goat, or in revenge for his killing her friends...? Whichever interpretation one chooses, the action is not consistent with the official picture of android psychology, which like Dick's essays insists that androids are incapable of feeling loyalty or indeed feeling anything at all" (Galvan 415). If the Voigt-Kampff machine could analyze the androids' actions in those instances, then, "the scenarios that Rick proffers to his android suspects would not, should they generate an apathetic response, differentiate androids from modern Americans." (Galvan 415). Not only do the humans act like androids, but the androids also act like humans. So, are humans and androids so different? Mankind's mission in trying to distinguish humans from androids is a futile effort. The androids do have empathy and resemble human fallacies regardless of what the humans might want to believe. Like Lacan's Theory of the Mirror Stage, humans may not like what they see while looking at the androids (their mirror image), but it is certainly not a false image. Humans are capable of great compassion, but also at times can resemble cold, unfeeling, killing machines. It seems that Dick is showing us a future in which humans are destined to incorporate technology more and more into their lives, to the point

that humans and androids are indistinguishable from one another, despite humans remaining in denial of this fact. *Androids* “repudiates the idea of a confined human community and envisions a community of the post human, in which human and machine commiserate and co materialize, vitally shaping one another's existence” (Galvan 414).

### **Conclusion**

Whether or not Dick had Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory in mind, consciously or subconsciously, while writing his novel or not, one cannot dispute that there does seem to be a parallel between Lacan’s work on the mirror stage and Dick’s groundbreaking novel. I believe that my findings have only scratched the surface of what philosophical, psychoanalytical, and posthumanist insights one can find in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. Dick's beloved science fiction classic novel's importance is still vital in our continual search for answering questions of identity: what being human really is, if empathy really is a defining characteristic of humanity, and the role technology has on us as a society and as individuals in the future. We have always sought out the questions brought up in the novel, and Dick in particular “was perennially interested in the question, what makes a human human? From his earliest short stories forward, Dick separates the question of what is human from issues of mere biology, and, as a result, manufactured artifacts, robots, and even aliens can be more human than those individuals who—although biologically human—are driven by anti-humanistic motivations (and, at the most extreme, can be possessed or driven by pure metaphysical evil itself)” (Link). From the original novel, to the two film adaptations of *Androids*, 1982’s *Blade Runner* and 2017’s *Blade Runner 2049*, these philosophical questions are still being explored to this day. It is my hope that my research into the novel through the lens of Lacan’s Mirror Stage Theory can



contribute to this continuing dialogue that Philip K. Dick's work inspires in us; I hope for us to see our true selves, beyond the image that we see in the mirror, just as Rick Deckard did.

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## **Vita**

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