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Revised Version of Thoughts on Jill Galvan's Interpretation of the Relationship Between Government and Technology in Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?

Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* is a science fiction novel set in a post-nuclear war America. The main character is a government-employed bounty hunter named Rick Deckard. Deckard is tasked with "retiring" androids. The androids he is hunting in the novel have escaped from Earth's Martian colonies and come to Earth; they have become so close to being indistinguishable from humans that they break down the barrier between machine and human. The world of *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* contains a plethora of other technologies that raise philosophical and ethical dilemmas as to how government should respond to them. Despite acknowledging that actors other than the government in this novel can use technology to their advantage, Jill Galvan overwhelmingly argues in her essay "Entering the Posthuman Collective in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*" that government has ultimately abused technology to become more omnipresent and omnipotent in the novel. In contrast to Galvan's vision of the symbiotic relationship between technology and government in the novel, I propose that the relationship is both antagonistic and cooperative. In doing so, I argue that Dick's representation of the danger associated with the use of technology as an instrument of oppression is not as ominous as Galvan suggests.

Galvan argues in her essay that the government in the novel benefits the most from communication technology in the novel. She starts by discussing the central role of the empathy box in the novel. The empathy box is a device used by humans to ‘merge’ with Mercer, the prophet of the novel’s quasi-religion called Mercerism. The process of ‘merging’ resembles an advanced version of virtual reality complete with physical sensation such as pain and visuals. She claims that the empathy box and Mercerism are “merely ... means by which the government controls an otherwise unwieldy populace” (Galvan 416). The empathy box offers a shared experience to all that use it, and through this shared experience the government is able to offer a form of government-sanctioned catharsis by establishing a place to relieve revolutionary thoughts in a manner non-threatening to itself. An instance in which we see the effects of the empathy box is after Isidore watches Roy Baty and the other androids torture a spider, an act which is traumatizing to Isidore because Mercer forbids killing, Isidore “saw his own hands ... [gripping] the twin handles of the empathy box”; Isidore uses the empathy box as an outlet for his emotions rather than expressing them to the androids (Dick 216). By allowing people to vent their anti-government sentiments and emotions in a controlled and highly realistic virtual space, they will not act on these urges in the real world. This outlet effectively safeguards the government in the novel from uprisings. Galvan also highlights an argument made by Scott Bukatman and Guy Debord that technology such as the empathy box “atomize the population and [reduce] their capacity to function as an aggregate force ...” (qtd. In Galvan 416, 417). In other words, people become so addicted to using their screens, or in the case of the novel, their empathy box, that they stop interacting with other people. By no longer needing to interact with other people individuals are unlikely to organize any form of resistance. In a similar vein, Galvan

refers to an exposé by Buster Friendly, a television star in the novel who is also secretly an android (416). He refers to Mercer as a “would be Hitler” in order to display not only the ability of something like an empathy box to provide catharsis, but also to transmit political ideology to those that use the technology on a constant basis (Dick 209; Galvan 416). During Isidore’s same use of the empathy box to cope with the androids’ torture of the spider, Mercer reassures Isidore that despite Buster’s exposé, he will still be there for Isidore as a place of catharsis regardless of him being exposed as a fake god, suggesting that the function of a religious figure to control the subjects of a government still worked even if they are aware of the phony nature of the profit (Dick 216). The final way in which Galvan argues that government has taken over communication technology in the novel is through the hijacking of other content creators, such as Buster Friendly, by monopolizing the television broadcast service. Through the monopolization of television, the government forces Buster Friendly onto a nationalized television channel in which the government controls the ads (418). The first time the reader is introduced to Isidore, he is watching a government ad “which Isidore found himself forced to listen to”, as the only channel on the television is run by the government (Dick 18). By placing ads on the same stream of media that Buster Friendly appears on, a character who is seemingly anti-government, the government is able to ensure that those who might be persuaded by anti-government sentiments are also being indoctrinated by government propaganda at the same time.

Although the technologies discussed by Galvan are used by the government in the novel to control their populace, there are both direct usage of technology by anti-government individuals and groups and theoretical usages left open by the novel. Although in Dick’s novel

the empathy box is arguably used to invoke a shared experience as a means of catharsis, one can easily imagine the same technology employed to achieve the exact opposite effects. Due to the ability of the empathy boxes to offer a convincing reality to their users, such a device could be employed by anyone from a private corporation to a political group as a means to mobilize people to fight for whatever their cause might be. The most prominent use of technology by an individual oppressed by the government is Buster Friendly himself, who “chips away at Mercerism” (Dick 74). As previously discussed, the viewpoint that Mercerism and the empathy box are actually government tools is exposed to the general population by Buster Friendly’s broadcast of his exposé. As for the nationalized television channel that plays pro-government ads in conjunction with Buster Friendly’s show, there are two major points to be made: first, it is possible for other actors, such as large technology companies, to monopolize distribution channels and push their own agenda. Overarching control of media is already being implemented by actual companies such as Facebook and YouTube in the real world, so it would stand to reason that a group as powerful as these real-world examples, such as the Rosen Corporation, could achieve the same goal of monopolizing a media distribution channel in the world of the novel. The ability of other groups to monopolize media channels suggests that such a scenario is not restricted to just a government and could give rise to a non-state actor challenging the control of the government by using media channels to build support for their own goals, which could be self interested or altruistic.

Although Galvan mainly points to the government's use of technology as a means to dissociate and control the individual, she also touches on the use of technology to stratify humans and androids. Despite only touching on this topic in relation to the Voigt-Kampff test,

the theme of stratification through technology is actually highly present in the novel. Within her essay, Galvan brings attention to the importance of androids and the Voigt-Kampff scale, as the test serves as definitive proof that androids are socially acceptable to exploit (419). Use of technology to definitively prove that a group is less than human has major historical roots, such as the subjugation of African Americans and placing people into a genetic hierarchy, which occurred with the Third Reich. In a similar vein, the use of fertility and intelligence testing to stratify the humans is another major way in which the government is able to maintain control in the novel (Dick 19). The choice to create distinctions between humans in the novel seems to be a deliberate attempt to discredit non-normals, such as Isidore, who are not able to distinguish natural from synthetic, as seen when Mr. Sloat mocks Isidore for feeling empathy for the fake cat (Dick 77). A less discussed implementation of technology used to segregate individuals in the novel is the ability of space travel to separate the rich from the poor. In conjunction with space travel, using the androids to lure the rich off world works to further disconnect the rich from the earthbound humans still living on Earth. The government, by gifting an android that provides for “YOUR UNIQUE NEEDS ...” to the wealthy as an incentive to move them off-world, have removed any motivation for the rich to try and help those stuck on Earth (Dick 17). Not only do these technologies serve the same goal as the medical tests as a means of separating the wealthy in the novel from being influenced by the suffering of those on Earth, but it also places those who live off world as almost godlike beings who have ascended the struggles of humanity. By shaping the image of life off world as the fundamental desirable goal, the government has given those on Earth an almost unachievable goal of emigrating to Mars as motivation to continue to work on Earth.

Many of the specific implications of technology presented to stratify society in *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* have no other other purposes, but many of the underlying technologies that are controlled by the government in the novel display characteristics that question the ability for a government to maintain total control over them. Although the Voigt-Kampff test supposedly can be used to distinguish androids from humans, the test is easily foiled by Luba Luft, who cleverly leverages her perceived lack of understanding of the English language and pre-war culture to cause Deckard to question the underlying principles of the test. By doing so she makes him unsure if she is able to comprehend the questions being asked and calling into question the validity of the conclusions of the tests (Dick 105). Given the novel's tame expression of how unfathomably intelligent AI hypothetically can be, the fact that the government in the novel is already unable to devise an effective test to distinguish the current generation androids from humans does not bode well for the government's ability to continually control AI. The nexus six androids already show some abilities that surpass those of humans in the novel. It is not an unreasonable leap of logic to assume that future generation of androids will eclipse humans in all capabilities, at which point the foundational reason for the creation of the Voigt-Kampff test, proving the inferiority of androids to humans, becomes nonsensical. Similar to the example of androids, which are built by the Rosen Corporation in the novel, space travel sheds light on how dependent government can be on private infrastructure for cutting-edge technology. The novel explores the weakness of government reliance on the private sector for both androids and space travel by displaying that the Rosen Corporations ability to break laws with impunity. For example, Deckard does nothing when he learns that the Rosen Corporation

has advanced access to the listing of animal prices and allows for Rachel Rosen to be on Earth, disregarding laws against androids to be on Earth (Dick 46, 60).

Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* contains many instances of technologies that have their real-world counterparts being used by the government to oppress their populations. At the same time, the novel presents the growing difficulty of government to control these powerful technologies. Jill Galvan's essay "Entering the Posthuman Collective in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*" clearly lays out how the government is able to use technology to its advantage, but only does so in the snapshot of time the novel provides, leading to an understandably foreboding view of government use of technology. It is this dichotomy between the tone of the novel and Galvan's essay that sheds light on curious issues that many science fictions works fall prey to, their tendency to focus heavily on a single time period, often leading to the author assuming that the political structures that shape the world they live in will continue into the future. This focus on time and the inability to predict how quickly and randomly technology changes as well as the speed at which it is adapted by both individuals and the government should always be considered by a reader when attempting to better understand the world they currently live in, and the one that they inhabit in the future.

Work Cited

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