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Mortality and Empathy: The Meaning in Death
in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Humans have historically turned not just to their intellectual abilities but also to their presumed capacity for higher emotions, like empathy, to distinguish themselves from the natural and man-made world and ultimately to declare their supremacy over these creations. The post-apocalyptic society in Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* carries this praise of empathy to an even higher level. In this novel, a person's ability to take care of an animal is considered one of the greatest measures of their character as it presumably takes empathy to do so and therefore proves one's status as a human. However, there's significant hypocrisy in the claim that empathy is the most important quality in the novel's society. "Regulars" (people undamaged by radiation) treat "specials" (people of a lesser intelligence due to radiation damage) as useless, and exhibit no empathy when interacting with them. The hierarchical structure of the novel's society places "regulars" at the top, "specials" in the middle, and those with supposedly no empathy—androids—at the bottom. This societal structure also exposes the hypocrisy in the worldwide value of empathy as those who are at the top and considered the most human—and would therefore be the most empathetic—do not actually show empathy for those below them. Isidore is one such "special" who has been cast out of society but shows a greater sense of empathy than most "regulars." Moreover, Rick Deckard is a bounty hunter who hunts escaped androids for a living, a job with no room for empathy. However, the novel forges a link between the two, and the androids Deckard hunts, in representing how their confrontations with mortality deepen their senses of empathy. In Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* the depiction of androids and humans suggests that a greater

understanding of death can generate or increase feelings of empathy. In other words, the novel links a heightened sense of empathy to more intimate experiences with death. We see this pattern illustrated through the characters Rick Deckard, Isidore, Luba Luft, and the escaped androids (the Batys and Pris).

Rick Deckard's feelings of empathy at the beginning of the novel are distant, as is his intimacy with the concept of death. Deckard is around death often, as it is a byproduct of living on Earth in the novel, but he does not internalize the fear of death. For example, Deckard outlines the challenges of living on Earth, saying that emigration is the only way to avoid becoming a "special," a person whose mental and physical states are deteriorated compared to those of "regulars" (Dick 8). Deckard knows that staying on Earth will likely result in his becoming a special and his eventual death, but he's calm about this recognition, or at least appears to be. He brushes off this pressing issue, saying that he "can't emigrate... because of [his] job," which should, one would think, be relatively less important than his life (Dick 8). Soon after, Deckard has an interaction with his neighbor, Barbour, to whom he makes a casual comment about how Barbour's "horse could die" just as easily as his own sheep had—a taboo subject in a society where letting an animal die is "immoral" (Dick 13). Finally, Deckard also treats the danger of his job with very little weight. When his predecessor Holden is shot by an android, Deckard is "guardedly pleased" at this change as it gives him an opportunity; he doesn't at first consider the danger of this new position (Dick 33).

We can see how Deckard's disconnect from death leaves him with a distant sense of empathy reflected in his initial treatment of Luba Luft. He is aware that she's an android but needs her to take the Voight-Kampff test before he can retire her. Deckard knows that Luft is

scared and “trying to appear calm” but he ignores the emotional reasoning behind her wordplay and instead yells at her for not answering his questions (Dick 94, 95-96). Deckard is unable to empathize with Luft as he is treating her like a thing rather than another person. He does not consider her individual story and fears, just as he does not consider Holden’s story and suffering. At the start of the novel, Deckard has managed to dehumanize everything that surrounds him, and thus, has removed the emotional significance of death. His disregard of death has, in a way, stopped him from making distinctions between androids and humans, as, no matter who is affected, the deaths are equally insignificant to him. At this point in the novel, Deckard has not allowed himself to internalize the death that he has seen and, by association, has not allowed himself to feel empathy for those in perilous situations.

Despite still being distant from death and empathy, we can see Deckard’s position start to shift after Polokov “came close” to killing him (Dick 86). Deckard begins to question his ability to successfully retire the escaped androids while remaining alive after his run-in with Polokov, briefly considering “ask[ing] Rachael for help” (Dick 89). However, he doesn’t reach out, indicating that death is still a foreign concept to him and explaining why his interaction with Luft right after did not carry any trace of empathy on his end. The largest change in his empathy comes from Deckard’s run-in with Garland (Dick 115). After this interaction, Deckard goes back to retire Luft but finds it more difficult. In fact, when she is successfully retired by Resch, Deckard criticizes Resch for doing it solely because Luft was “needling” him, which only hours before, Deckard himself had been ready to do (Dick 124). After she is killed, Deckard voices his worries about being “capable of feeling empathy for at least specific androids” and his language begins to reflect these empathetic thought processes as he tells Resch to “Retire it; kill it now”

(Dick 124, 132). With this change in vocabulary, Deckard implies that he now understands how death is different from the mechanical phrase “retire.” He also uses it in reference to androids, which are widely regarded to be mechanical. In this choice phrasing, Deckard indicates that the concept of death is not purely human and it is a fate he does not wish anyone to suffer. Deckard’s urgency in trying to stop Resch once he realizes the latter’s intentions to kill Luft also shows that Deckard understands that killing her is as bad as killing a fellow human, and killing either is something you should not do. Deckard has developed a sense of empathy towards Luft and it is shown in his vocabulary shift and his distraught reaction to Luft’s death. As he is put into more near-death situations, Deckard begins to empathize more with androids, a concept foreign to him before.

In contrast to Deckard, John Isidore is a character who has an intact sense of empathy from the start. As a “special,” Isidore is deemed lesser than “regulars” due to his subpar intelligence but seems to feel empathy on a level that other characters cannot. As Vint points out, the novel implies that humans are “android-like” as long as we value intellect over empathy (112). While regular humans in the novel claim that empathy is what supposedly sets them apart from androids, they are also very prejudiced against those of lesser intelligence. With Isidore’s lowered intelligence, his empathy is free to reign supreme over his emotions and actions. This is not to say that Isidore does not value intellect and wish he were more mentally capable. Instead, Dick is implying that because Isidore cannot rationalize himself out of situations as other characters can, his logical faculties are unable to hold back his intuitive and empathetic ones. We see this in his actions towards a dying cat that he believed was mechanical. Isidore says that while he could logically tell the cat’s cries were fake, they still “tie[d] his stomach in knots”

(Dick 68). However, he also mentions that his superiors aren't bothered by "synthetic sufferings of false animals" as they had the mental capacity to understand the cat wasn't real (Dick 68). It seems that regulars may be able to use logic to distance themselves from the implications of death, but at the expense of empathy.

Isidore's empathy for animals also highlights the stark difference between true empathy towards animals and the commodity fetishism that, as Vint demonstrates, drives most of humans' interactions with animals in the novel, "rather than as a part of living nature with whom humans share being" (119). Isidore seems to be the only character truly capable of relating to animals in an empathetic way, a trait that leads to the contrast between his true empathy and that which is faked around him. Isidore focuses more on the social relationships he forms rather than the commodity ones. His understanding of social relationships is illustrated in his conversation with the woman whose cat died. Isidore suggests that they make a mechanical replica of the cat rather than replace it with a new, live, cat (Dick 75). As Isidore's superiors view the animal as a commodity, they logically wouldn't have thought this would be an option for the woman as a mechanical cat is significantly less profitable for her. Because Isidore has genuine empathy for animals and the people who own them, he doesn't view the animals as "commodities," allowing him to give this empathetic response to the woman of offering the mechanical cat to mimic the old animal's relationship with her. Vint discusses how making something a commodity also causes alienation and reduces the purpose of animals to status symbols. When something becomes property, we often forget the significance of its life and rights; hence, there will be a cognitive-action "gap between" what we know is right and how we will physically follow through and treat the animal (118). However, Isidore doesn't look at the animal as a commodity

or something whose value is determined in monetary terms alone; hence, he can give a response out of an empathetic understanding of the woman's pain.

Isidore's unique connection with empathy is brought about by his intimate relationship with death. He is actively in the process of dying due to radioactive "dust" warping his mind to the point where he is "deteriorat[ing] back down the ladder of evolution" (Dick 15, 68). Later in the novel, after meeting the androids[,] he realizes that "You have to be with other people... . In order to live at all" (Dick 188). By his own standard, he has not been alive as his status makes him an outcast who lives in the "virtually abandoned suburbs" (Dick 16).

Isidore's antithesis appears to be not just Deckard before his empathetic evolution, but the androids who are meant to be unfeeling and incapable of empathy. However, in Luba Luft, we see an android having fear of death as well as an understanding of empathy. The first sign that Luft is different than Polokov and Garland is her non-violent approach to handling Deckard. Luft opts for undermining the Voight-Kampff test with "language, in such a way that throws into question... previously unexamined structures of power" (Galvan 421). Galvan continues to analyze this approach by noting that rather than answer Deckard's questions, Luft chooses to ask questions concerning the context of what she has been asked. The fact that these evasions raise genuine concerns about the understanding and applicability of the test show how she is effectively undermining one of humanity's greatest sources of power against androids (420, 421). Luft's choice not to actively harm Deckard as the other androids have is the first indication that Luft may understand the concept of empathy. Luft also has emotional responses to threats, including fear and defensiveness during this interaction. She both "shudders involuntarily" and is seen to be "nervously fluttering" (Dick 94, 97). The first emotional response to the threat posed

by Deckard occurs when she is accused of being an android, and the second is just before she puts Deckard under threat until she can call the police (Dick 93, 97-98). Both of these situations put her on the defensive and make her confront the reality of death if she messes up. Finally, when Luba is shot at by Resch and ultimately killed, she turns away “in a spasm of frantic hunted fear,” showing, yet again, that she fears death. This fear of death indicates that she understands it intimately enough to want to avoid it.

Luft’s fear of death is likely linked to her attempts to understand and “imitat[e]” human “thoughts and impulses” (Dick 124). There are also hints that Luft is beginning to know human emotion and empathy intimately. When Resch and Deckard approach her in the museum, Luft is “absorbed” in a portrait of a girl with “wonder” and “awe” on her face. Deckard describes Luft as having light in her eyes and color in her face which both dim upon his interruption (Dick 122). The human emotion in the portrait is also being shown on Luft’s face, showing that she is learning to feel, or at least convincingly imitate, the emotions of others, something also known as empathy.

Finally, the Batys, two more of the escaped androids, also exemplify how intimacy with death inspires empathy and the desire to understand others. When the Batys first make contact with Isidore, they express very little empathy for the other androids’ fates. However, while there is little emotional attachment to the other androids, Roy Batty even delivering news of their retirement as if “it please[s] him to be telling this,” just knowing about the bounty hunter coming after them has forced the group to realize that death is following them at a close distance (Dick 143). Though the Batys show less empathy than other characters, certain moments highlight their capacity for it. We see empathy through Irmgard’s treatment of Isidore, giving him a “look of

compassion” and saying he’s the “first friend [she] think[s] any of [them] have found here on Earth” and that “maybe sometime [they] can repay [him]” (Dick 146, 147). She is sure to be kind to him despite knowing his intellect is lower than that of regular humans and especially lower than that of androids. Roy also shows empathy as he “let[s] out a cry of anguish” when Irmgard is shot (Dick 205). Soon after this, Deckard acknowledges that Roy loved Irmgard even though he had previously said that “An android... doesn’t care what happens to another android” (Dick 205, 95). Roy is able to feel the pain of losing a loved one as he is familiarized with death in a way that directly involves his own emotions and pain. A counterpoint to be made is that the androids don’t understand, or don’t care about, the pain they caused in experimenting on the spider. This is likely because they are still relatively young—their life span is four years at longest—so their understanding of death is juvenile even if it has evolved greatly due to being hunted (Dick 181).

Rachael is another interesting example of an android acting in an empathetic way. While Rachael has been sheltered as a show model of the Rosen Company, she is familiarized with death through her attempts to seduce bounty hunters (Dick 50, 182). Rachael is brought even closer to the concept of mortality when Deckard tells her that he’s going to kill the Batys and Pris that night (Dick 182). Rachael is able to imagine death more vividly as Pris, who is the same model as Rachael and therefore looks identical, is to be killed. Rachael admits to feeling “something like” empathy towards Pris due to “identification” and seeing Pris’ imminent death somewhat as her own (Dick 173). She then proceeds to admit that she had been “very close friends” with Luft as well as all of the rest of the escaped androids. She also admitted to trying to stop him from pursuing his mission that morning and “again, just before Polokov reached” him

(Dick 182). In these admissions, Rachael shows that she can experience emotions of friendship and possibly love or kinship as she is familiarized with the concept of death.

In Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Rick Deckard's experiences with death and the correlating growth in empathy, Isidore's close relationship with empathy and death, Luba Luft's attempt to understand humanity and empathy and fear of death, and finally, the Batys' love and empathy, however incipient it may be, show a relationship between intimacy with death and feelings of empathy. The pattern Dick's novel illuminates might seem familiar to us since proximity to death reminds us what we value most. When someone passes away, we cling to those who knew them well; when we age, we focus more on giving back to those we love; when we face a possible life-threatening situation, we remember those we care about and think about what we wish we could have said. These may not be universal reactions, but our understanding of our mortality often ties into why we feel and act as we do. If another consciousness can grasp the concept of mortality, they could develop the same emotional reaches as we possess. If we are unable to understand our mortality ourselves and express empathy towards others, we must also ask if we can consider ourselves superior to another species that has developed it on its own. Dick's novel raises the question about humankind's sense of superiority and if it is strongly founded. If it is possible for us to dismiss the development of our prized characteristics in another species, do we truly value those qualities or simply how they raise us "above" others in a moral sense?

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