

International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme

English B - HL

Extended Essay

Category 3 – Literature

Title: The Portrayal of Empathy

Research Question: In what ways does the concept empathy help or blur the boundaries between the humans and androids in the novel “Do Android Dream of Sheep?” by Philip K. Dick ?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep is a 1968 dystopian science fiction novel by American writer Philip K. Dick. It was written during the cold war, at a time with different nuclear advancements and technological tension. The novel was initially modestly received but then was nominated for the Nebula Award for Best Novel in 1968 and later was recognized in the Locus Poll for All-Time Best SF Novel and later become one of Philip K. Dick's most influential works. In this novel, the relationship between humans and androids are articulated. The novel explores the philosophical and physical difficulties of living in a post-apocalyptic world. The story is set in a world which was catastrophically damaged due to a nuclear global war. With the radioactive fallout rendering the planet uninhabitable, most humans are driven to off-world colonies, causing mass emigration. Due to the war leaving Earth radioactive and hardly livable, animal life is nearly wiped out. Those who remain living among the devastation are surrounded with artificial substitutes for the natural life and what was once there. Within this wipeout, real animals are considered to be valuable, which makes owning a real and living animal be seen as a status of power and wealth. While some own real ones, some people must settle for fakes that are hard to distinguish between real ones due to being unable to afford real animals. The more the animals are worshipped, the more the androids are degraded. The differentiation is a sign of empathy: a mimic of a human being that cannot empathize with others and an animal that needs human care. Therefore, animals also play a role in evoking empathy unlike androids.

Artificial life, which are called androids has become increasingly indistinguishable from humans. The society's struggles to maintain distinctions between humans and artificials are depicted in detail. Advanced androids are called Nexus-6 models, which can imitate humans in ways such as physical appearance, human intelligence and behavior. Within such realistic abilities, distinguishing between human and androids become increasingly difficult. While they were designed to serve humans on off-world colonies, android servants decide that their existence is bereft of hope. This leads them to murdering their possessors and flee back to Earth in an attempt to try and pretend to pass as a human.

Due to this, police assign bounty hunters to hunt the androids down and "retire" them. Retiring is another word used for murdering; it is the police's way of softening the way the action sounds. However, the need for such profession only highlights the instability of the boundary between human and android. Rick Deckard, the main protagonist, is a bounty hunter. His job is to kill androids and distinguish an android from a human. Rick believes that millions of years of evolving is what made humans empathetic and that machines which are designed and created cannot hold the same values. Rick is shown as mainly concerned about his image and social status. His social status is lower than his neighbor's, who owns a living animal. After getting assigned for the job, Deckard thinks about the animals he could buy with the bounty money. It is also one of the reasons why he took up the job in the first place. This also shows the lack of empathy from Rick's side towards androids. Killing them only to raise his social status is a sign of his indifference towards what he considers machines.

Considering the theme of empathy in the novel, this essay aims to investigate the aforementioned concept focusing on how empathy can have a dual role in determining

the line between humans vs androids. Therefore, I have generated my question as : *In what ways does the concept empathy help or blur the boundaries between the humans and androids in the novel “Do Android Dream of Sheep?” by Philip K. Dick ?*

2. MEANS TO DISCERN HUMANS VS ANDROIDS

2.1 VOIGT-KAMPFF TEST

According to the Voigt-Kampff test, the interviewed person is human only if they pass the test. This raises a question. If humans are identified from androids only from their emotional responses to certain questions, would a person who gave unnatural or different answers be considered non-human? If a human who doesn't have emotional values fail the test, this would mean they are not an actual living being. If a schizoid human does not pass the test, they would be “retired” which would lead to a human being being murdered for being something they are not. Not every human is the same, which means they have different responses to different scenarios. Empathy being a criterion to whether determine a person is a human or not is faulty. Human empathy can vary on different cases. This also shows how the test can be faulty at times and should not be completely relied on.

Throughout the novel, the Voigt-Kampff test which is the only method to distinguish between androids and humans is deprecated and pictured as deceptive. The method is shown unreliable as it has appeared. When Rachael Rosen takes the test, she gets declared as an android. However, Rick gets tricked by Eldon Rosen, Rachael's uncle, who insists that the test is faulty. Eldon Rosen's attempt to deceive Deckard almost

becomes successful due to him getting bribed. Eldon Rosen also says: “[Y]our Voigt-Kampff test was a failure before we released that type of android [the Nexus-6]. [...] Your police department – others as well – may have retired, very probably have retired, authentic humans with underdeveloped empathic ability, such as my niece here. Your position, Mr Deckard, is extremely bad morally. Ours isn’t.” Within this quote, it is said that the Voigt-Kampff test, which is the main distinguisher between a human and an android, is faulty. This also blurs the boundaries between a human and an android, as the only sorter that separates a human from a machine is implied to be incorrect.

While it is believed that having empathy or having strong emotions is the key factor to differentiating an android from a human, after the nuclear war very little humans remain the same way, they used to be. People are un-empathic and many of them are severely depressed, which leads them into making it hard to differ from androids. The key factor to not being an android is starting to diminish.

The Voigt-Kampff test was conducted by offering androids specific scenarios that took place in the future and which took place among the followers of Mercerism that might morally or emotionally challenge them. It is mostly designed to detect the subtlest of psychological responses. Its use also symbolizes that humanity is no longer self-evident and must instead be verified through scientific ways. The Voigt-Kampff test is also conducted by using technology to differ humans from androids, which are products of technology. This also makes the test’s ways ironic.

However, this test can also be easily manipulated. When the Rosen Association, the inventor of the Nexus-6 models, notice how the protagonist Rick Deckard is killing androids at a quick pace, they invite him to trick him into thinking his test is faulty with

the help of another android, Rachael Rosen. This also shows how unreliable the test can be, as it can be manipulated with someone's will. Without an accurate result, Rick Deckard might confuse an android with a human or confuse a human for an android, which might lead to killing a human being by mistake. This blurs the line between a human and an android since it shows that the only thing that can distinguish between a human and an android, which is empathy, can be manipulated. It also shows that if the only distinguishment between humans can be hard to notice, then the difference itself might not be as evident as humans are led to believe.

2.1.2 MOOD ORGAN

To retain a shred of their humanity, people start depending on different technical devices. These devices are the Penfield mood organ, the empathy box and television. The Penfield Mood Organ is named after a real-life neurosurgeon, Wilder Penfield. The Mood Organ is a machine that adjusts one's mood and emotions by sending electrical impulses to the brain. Within using the Mood Organ, someone can change their mood. It helps people control their emotions. The empathy box is a network that can connect multiple people together to experience the suffering of the religious figure Wilbur Mercer, who is also the main figure of Mercerism. Its main purpose is to help humans avoid their loneliness. The television itself has entertainment, which shows that life has not completely stopped since the nuclear war. It is an attempt to keep at least some aspects of people's lives alive. An example for the usage of the Penfield Mood Organ could be shown through Iran, who is Rick's wife. In the beginning of the book when Rick wakes up, he programmes his Mood Organ to regulate his emotions. On the other hand,

his wife Iran wakes up upset. When Rick mentions that she could simply adjust her mood into a better one, she tells him not to touch her settings. It can be said that Iran was tired of feeling emotions, even though she could easily shift her mood. Therefore, Iran chooses to be upset. This is one of the ways humans deal with emotions in the novel. With humans adjusting their own emotions through an Organ, it can be said that humans themselves cannot experience feelings they used to be able to experience before the war and that they need an Organ to feel emotions. Humans are not the way they used to be before the disaster, and they are starting to lose one of the main attributes that they have that distinguishes them from an android: emotions. Using a Mood Organ, an artificial machine to regulate emotions shows that humans cannot experience the same emotions on their own anymore. This suggests human empathy can also be technologized. Needing a machine to feel blurs the line between an android and a human as humans are supposed to rely on their emotions to differ from androids and yet they are using machines to feel, which is ironic. While empathy and having emotions are considered the marks of humanity, the Mood Organ itself shows the contradictions that occur within human beings.

3. EMPATHY IN THE NOVEL

In the novel, empathy is depicted as one of the key traits for a human to have. It is commonly believed that empathy is the final remaining factor to distinguish between a human and an android, as androids are physically and intellectually indistinguishable from humans in every other way. This emphasis reflects a society desperate enough to preserve at least a single difference in the face of technological advances that have

rendered to the point where androids can be mistaken for human beings. Therefore, it can be said that in this post-apocalyptic world empathy functions as a necessity rather than a simple feeling.

3.1 EMPATHY WITHIN HUMANS

The society has two ways of distinguishing whether someone is a human or an android: either a bone marrow analysis which is a process that is both painful and long, and also illegal to perform on somebody without permission or the special test called the Voigt-Kampff test. For the test, a special religious experience is used. Among the society, Mercerism is a religious experience that allows people to unite and experience each others pain. Mercer is the mysterious figure, and also the religion's main figure who shares his physical feelings with others. The people who come to the rituals are visibly saddened and upset after enduring what he has throughout the years. This experience shows that Mercerism's purpose is to make people experience empathy in a way that presents it as a communal experience rather than an individual trait. Unlike humans, it is believed that androids cannot experience such empathy which is a factor of their differences. Within these, humanity must rely on empathy to sustain life. Empathy has become more than just a feeling and turned into one of the main tools to distinguish between the living and the artificial.

3.2 EMPATHY WITHIN ANDROIDS

However, as novel goes on, the line between the humans and androids blur. Androids start to show signs of empathy which is considered a solely human trait. As the novel progresses, it is being hinted that androids can feel human emotions as they start demonstrating emotional awareness, manipulation and vulnerability which only mirror human emotions. This change is shown through different androids through the novel.

3.2.1 LUBA LUFT

An android that shows signs of emotion is Luba Luft. Luba is an android that Rick was ordered to retire. However, Luba's soft yet strong voice and her clever antics manage to evoke a sense of empathy in Rick. Her love for art makes it hard to kill her for him. This shows that even though at the beginning of the novel, Rick had no empathy towards androids and would kill them only to raise his social status and buy an animal, as time passes his emotions towards androids are starting to evolve. It was shown that he appreciated the android's skills, which leads to him feeling empathy for its life. However, despite that he still ends her life. After the change of emotions, Deckard reaches out to Rachael to meet up in a hotel room which she agrees. At some point, Rick even considers marrying her which would mean marrying an android. When they meet, they have sex.

3.2.2 RACHAEL ROSEN

After their affair, Rachael reveals her true purpose, which is to manipulate bounty hunters into developing empathetic feelings towards androids. The reason why she

slept with Rick was to persuade him to stop killing her android friends: Irmgard, Pris and Roy Baty. This is Rachael's way of using empathy to fight back against the bounty hunters. Rick Deckard gets upset and frustrated; however, he does not harm Rachael in any way because he values her too much to do so. He gets upset on how his own empathy has made it easy for him to get manipulated. This also shows how Rick's point of view for androids start changing. At the start of the novel, Rick saw his own purpose as to simply "retire" or in other words, murder androids. However, with this event it can be said that Rick himself has started changing his mind, even though he himself has not realized it yet. Him getting upset over Rachael's actions, an android whose existence he used to consider unworthy shows that his previous emotional detachment has started fading even though he does not want to admit it to himself yet. Empathy only becomes a defensive construct that can be used to justify the retirement of androids.

In the novel, androids themselves claim to acknowledge that they lack the capacity to experience human emotions. When Rick mentions an android officer that androids do not exactly cover for each other in times of stress, the android agrees and even makes a comment of its own: *"I think you're right; it would seem we lack a specific talent you humans possess. I believe it's called empathy."* However, this statement clashes with Rachael's actions. Rachael herself manipulates bounty hunters and seduces them in order to gain their empathy and keep them from retiring other androids, which could be considered as an act of empathy itself. Even though Rachael is a "fake" being, she still manages to invoke heavy feelings of empathy in humans. It can be said that androids themselves are having trouble in what to believe and are affected by what are implied to them by humans and their actions.

Pris, a friend of Rachael's can also be mentioned for android's view of empathy. Pris lives with Irmgard and Roy as well as a man whose name is Isidore. Isidore himself invites them to stay with him. Isidore is impaired. Being so affected from the radioactive fallout, he is labeled a special. A special is someone who fails to get a certain result in an IQ test therefore it is forbidden for them to flee Earth or reproduce. He finds a living spider, which is a rare creature, and eagerly shows it to Pris. But Pris, an android, starts torturing the spider within another android. They start plucking the legs off the spider. This horrifies Isidore. However, it is stated that Pris is doing the torture out of curiosity and not because she wants to harm the animal or for a desire to cause pain, almost like a child. While Pris does not intend to cause pain, she also does not recognize pain as significant. There is no emotion other than a childlike curiosity. While Isidore is horrified, feeling distress for the spider, cruelty implies awareness of pain. What Pris has done shows the absence of moral framework, and a lack of emotion. This also shows the difference between humans and androids. Humans know how pain works while Pris does not. This could be because Pris is newly manufactured and does not have enough experience to understand the concept of torture. However, this part of the novel also signifies the emotional difference between humans and androids and highlights androids lack of empathy.

3. CONCLUSION:

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, Philip K. Dick builds a post-apocalyptic world after a nuclear war. The theme of empathy is one of the main centerpieces. In the beginning, the novel offers a simple statement: humans possess empathy while

androids do not. Humans have emotions while androids do not. Therefore, 'retiring' androids is morally justified as they are considered as machines with no emotional development. However, as the novel continues there are many factors that influence this idea to the point it becomes faulty. Even though at the beginning of the novel having empathy is associated with being a human being, it is later shown that the line between humans and androids are rather blurry, despite humans being the one with emotions. One of the main factors that shows relying on empathy only to distinguish between a human being and an android is faulty would be the Voigt-Kampff test. The Voigt-Kampff test is conducted by inspecting people's reactions to different scenarios and then analyzing whether they are a human or not based on their reactions. This process requires having enough empathy to react to the scenarios given; however, some humans, for example schizoid humans do not give strong reactions to these tests. Schizoid humans are humans that do not have much emotional capacity and therefore appear neutral to emotional stimulants. Therefore, despite being a human, one might end up being classified as an android and get 'retired' which is another word for getting killed. Through the narrative, empathy is revealed to be an unreliable and also an unstable tool. And through the novel, the only thing that separates humans from androids is empathy. However, while putting people's feelings through the test, a machine is used. Through complex characters such as Rachael Rosen and Pris, the differences between humans and androids start to fade. The line between humans and androids is very thin and the only thing that separates the two, which is the concept of empathy slowly turns to be unreliable. Within these approaches, it can be said that empathy does not define humanity in the novel.

4. REFERENCES

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