**Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?**

Philip K. Dick’s novel is tricky. You don’t know what twist he will pull next.

Published in 1968, *Do Androids Dream?* follows Rick Deckard and John Isidore during a particularly trying day in each man's life. A bounty hunter, Rick is tasked with "retiring" six fugitive Nexus-6 androids. As he goes about tracking his prey, Rick begins to question the morality of his work, wondering whether these machines have evolved into something beyond wire and circuitry. Eventually Deckard is able to meet each android—some don’t know that they are androids and believe they are humans—and has to shut them down (kill them), as they escaped from the moon where they worked. The question is raised: what does it mean to be human? Can an android impersonate a human so well as to be equal with a human?

People in Dick’s book largely have a new religion. It’s called “Mercerism,” in which no one goes to a church to worship anymore; they hold on to a personal box and share the feelings of others in a communal act of empathy. The whole religion turns out to be a fraud later on in the book. Maybe Philip K. Dick was implying that all major world religions are frauds. Useful, but frauds.

Two other interesting things Dick does in his book: One is the introduction of the word, “kipple.” It is basically junk, and it is everywhere. After World War Terminus, the world has radioactive dust getting on everything, and what with people dying or leaving for the colonized planets, everyone’s stuff is just left to rot. It takes over, and everyone comments on how you can’t get away from the kipple. The other is the fact that all the animals are dead. Every human wants a live pet, but only the very rich can get them. So instead normal folks have to settle for a mechanical version. Robot versions of animals are common, but they are no substitute for the real.

Although nominated for a *Nebula* award, the novel didn't win any awards upon publication. In fact, the only major accolade it earned was placing fifty-first on the Locus Poll for All-Time Best Science Fiction Novel before 1990. And that honor was handed out in 1998, thirty years after the novel was published and more than a decade after Dick's death.

But the novel got a second act: it served as the inspiration for the cult classic movie *Blade Runner*. Directed by Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner* is a retelling of Dick's novel, remixing several elements and getting rid of others, such as “kipple” and “Mercerism,” altogether. (Although we think it mostly became popular because it starred Harrison Ford after he earned a lifetime's supply of fan love by playing Han Solo.)

The movie helped cement Dick as one seriously influential science fiction writer. His works inspired later famous sci-fi writers such as William Gibson, Ursula K. Le Guin, Roger Zelazny, and even Jonathan Lethem. Philosophers like Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson also got in on the act. And let's not forget the many other popular films based on Dick's imaginings*: Next, Total Recall, Minority Report, A Scanner Darkly,* and*Screamers*.

We can't say *Do Androids Dream?* is solely responsible for Dick's far-reaching impact. But if you're looking for a world where a van driver can merge with a god, where machines can rewire your morning mood, and the edges of reality are just squiffy [drunk] enough to see through, then this is the world for you.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

What does it mean to be human?

Okay, okay, we know that this sounds like a bunch of dorm-room philosophizing. But this question has a purpose beyond helping college undergrads seem deep. They force us to look at qualities of life and existence that we might otherwise overlook thanks to distractions such as keeping up on Facebook, playing video games, and choosing the right filter for our latest Instagram.

The obvious answer might be Homo sapiens—you know, two arms, two legs, and a brain that can do math, understand language, and work a tablet. But that answer doesn't hold up for very long, because fewer than 150 years ago, a vast majority of Europeans and Americans considered people of African descent to be less than human—two arms, two legs, and all.

Even today, plenty of us act as though people who live in different countries or under different circumstances are somehow less than human. (Think about sweatshops in the developing world; don't a lot of us act as though those workers aren't fully human?)

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* looks at these issues and hypothesizes that empathy, not language or the number of legs, is the key trait determining humanity. But how far does that humanity extend? Is Phil Resch still human despite his lack of empathy? Is Luba Luft a human in her ability to empathize through art despite being born factory-made chattel?

And, deep down, do we really believe that the people who make our $5 Old Navy t-shirts are fully human—and do we act as though they are? And if we don't, does that make us less than fully human?

**After you have read about this, describe in a paragraph or more: What you would do if you were creating Philip K. Dick’s story *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* into a movie? (How would you change the story and setting?)**