ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Examining and Critiquing the Role of Empathy in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

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August 2025

'Don't you participate in fusion? Don't you own an empathy box?' (Dick 53)

Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (DADOES?)* examines the accepted rule in society that '[e]mpathy is what makes us human' in a new context where human emotions have become superficial, first explored through the novel's title (Bloom qtd. in Fuschman, 2015). The title's question focuses on the spectrum of an android's humanity which simultaneously draws into question the artificiality of human emotion. Analysing the three central characters—Deckard, Resch, and Isidore— I shall explore how 'normal' humans in this text monopolise empathy, othering those who do not meet their criteria due to their prejudices against androids and 'specials'.

Empathy is monopolised by 'normal' humans, where those who do not meet the criteria of normalcy are othered. Hermann argues 'we are always in need of an Other in order to define our own [...] group identity [...] the in-group identity is strengthened by defining the out-group as a common menace to be collectively disdained or destroyed' (216). In *DADOES,* empathy is the criterion upon which the in-group is defined, and those failing to meet that criterion become defined as the out-group and othered. Despite empathy being defined as human, their demonstration becomes performative and manufactured. This is first explored through the social ritual 'fusion', known as the Mercer simulation, whereupon humans can connect and empathise with one another through collectively experiencing an old man's everlasting struggle up a mountain. Despite their belief they are truly connecting and empathising with one another, the synthetic nature of their connection suggests otherwise. Deckard's wife, Iran, further conveys this falsity when she discovers Deckard has purchased a real goat: '[i]t would be immoral not to fuse with Mercer [...] I want you to transmit the mood you're in now to everyone else; you owe it to them. It would be immoral to keep it for ourselves' (136). Iran's repetition of 'immoral' and her transactional diction with the verbs 'transmit' and 'owe' conveys that emotions are viewed as communal, not individual. Instead, it is a social obligation to show empathy; those who do not engage are othered. Furthermore,

the later revelation that Mercer is false and just an AI creation reinstates the performativity of human empathy for fear of social ostracism rather than demonstrating true empathy and creating community. This falsity of empathy is comparably demonstrated through the use of mood boxes, which stimulate emotions for humans. Deckard's shock that he felt irritable 'although he hadn't dialled for it' highlights the normalised preference to employ manufactured emotions over real and natural human emotions (1). Moreover, Iran's own description of her realisation when 'in a 382 mood' that it was unhealthy to sense 'the absence of life [...] and not reac[t]' reinforces this (3). The numbering of moods creates a clinical setting of regulation where, despite negative emotions being a natural aspect of humanity, they have become ruled and monitored by technology. Instead of embracing her emotions, her solution is to 'schedule [a feeling of hopelessness] for twice a month' (3). Such a solution emphasises the stark disconnect between real human emotions and manufactured emotions. Therefore, the monopolisation of empathy by 'normal' humans, granting them superiority over androids and 'specials', is called into question from the very onset of the novel due to the artificiality and performative methods.

Empathy is also symbolically defined in the novel through its tendency to commodify interactions with real animals. The scarcity of nature in the *DADOES* world results in animals becoming illustrative of a human's capacity for empathy; those who do not own an animal are failures and hence, will be othered. Deckard embodies this fear of othering due to his obsession to own a 'real sheep, to replace that fake electric sheep' (2). Deckard's neighbour, Barbour, reinforces these fears after finding out his sheep is fake- , stating 'they'll look down on you [...] they consider it immoral and anti-empathic [...] it's not a crime like it was [...] but the feeling's still there' (9). Viewing those who cannot afford real animals as immoral and criminal despite the natural decline of animals due to the growing hostile environment and rising expense to own a real animal unveils the extremity of othering.

These fears manifest for Deckard into ‘hatred [...] toward his electric sheep, which he had to tend, had to care about, as if it lived’ for fear of being found out and consequently othered (34). This highlights his performative empathy for animals; Deckard’s concern about his status and security from being ostracised is greater than his concern for nature. This hatred of the sheep android ultimately seeps into his emotions concerning human androids; he describes human androids as ‘it’, objectifying them just as he did his android sheep, thereby reinforcing the idea of the other. Deckard’s final act of finding ‘a toad [...]in the desert [...] Where everything had died’, believing he has found a real rare animal, serves to highlight the impossible standards of empathy for humans in this society (190-191). As toads are animals requiring a water source, Deckard’s limited likelihood of finding one in a dry landscape reinforces the impossibility of achieving ownership to prove his empathetic abilities. Instead, upon realising it is an android toad, Deckard is ‘[c]restfallen, [and] he gazed mutely at the false animal’ (191). Deckard’s disappointment and brief acclimation of disability while he ‘gazed mutely’ suggests his acceptance that to own a real animal is impossible, exposing the unrealistic standards and superficiality of empathy which individuals are held accountable to in *DADOES*.

Empathy monopolised as a human characteristic results in the androids being othered as for them, the human criteria is unattainable. The bounty-hunters’ ‘Voigt-Kampff’ test detects androids who are pretending to be human by testing their abilities of empathy. Novák argues that ‘the distinction between humans and androids [...] has to be maintained, [and] testing appears to be motivated by a desire to enforce difference’ (465). Throughout the test, social situations focusing on seemingly inoffensive animal cruelty, such as being ‘given a calf-skin wallet on your birthday’ and ‘lying face down on a large and beautiful bearskin rug’ indicate the superficiality of human’s empathy and how that is weaponised against androids to other them (38-39). The android failing the test because she ‘[failed] to detect [...] the dead

animal pelt' suggests a desensitisation towards human suffering due to the inflated value of animals, raising questions concerning the criteria of what human empathy looks like and how this is weaponised to other the androids (39). Android exclusion from the 'fusion' experience reinforces ideas of difference as it is through this exclusion that they are othered from humans. Isidore's repeated questioning of Pris 'Don't you participate in fusion? Don't you own an empathy box?' indicates the importance of 'fusion' as it acts to prove they have empathy (53). Therefore, the impossibility of androids being able to pass human's performative criteria results in their othering.

Furthermore, androids are portrayed as lacking empathy towards one another, focalised through Resch, an android who believes he is a human bounty-hunter. Resch demands that Deckard 'Retire it; kill it now' (107). Resch conjunctively uses the pronoun 'it' to describe the android, dehumanising them to aid his desire to kill and demonstrating his lack of empathy. Deckard's attitude undergoes a reversal: initially, he dehumanises the androids, but later becomes disturbed, commenting 'you don't kill the way I do; you don't try to- […] You like to kill' (109). Due to his increased empathy for the androids, Deckard's hesitation reveals his unease with Resch's dispassionate attitude. Deckard's participation in the 'Voigt-Kampff' test resulting in 'emphatically empathic response' concerning androids fortifies this difference between humans and androids (113). However, Novák argues that 'doubt is cast upon both humans' ability and androids' inability to feel empathy' (465). This idea is further explored through Resch's relationship to his real pet squirrel. Beliefs that androids can only keep cold-blooded animals such as 'reptiles and insects' alive because '[a]nimals require an environment of warmth to flourish' indicates views of them as unfeeling and detached (102). Contrastingly, Resch demonstrates his care for his squirrel: 'I love the squirrel [...] every goddamn morning I feed it and change its papers [...] I groom and comb him every other day' (102-104). Resch's dedication to his squirrel, even mundane

grooming tasks express his love for his pet, contrasting with Deckard's care for his android sheep. His insistence for Deckard to 'have my squirrel [...] just take it' in the event of his death indicates his empathetic nature towards his pet (109). Therefore, despite attempts to other the androids due to pre-conceived notions that they lack empathy, Resch's empathy towards animals raises questions concerning the validity of the 'normal' humans' notions of empathy.

Finally, Isidore's categorisation as 'sub-human' results in him being deemed unworthy to receive empathy from humans, resulting in him becoming othered by those humans. The label attached to Isidore, 'a special [...] a chickenhead' dehumanises him by grouping him as an undesirable; this is particularly evident through the attachment of the article 'a' (14). Furthermore, the term 'chickenhead' conveys both his ridicule and exclusion. This exclusion is further demonstrated when he is exiled and sent to live where there 'had been the suburbs' (11). However, the area is now abandoned, mirroring the isolation Isidore experiences from humans due to his differences. Dehumanisation of Isidore is conveyed through his interaction with his boss, Sloat, who punishes him for accidentally killing a cat when he mistakes it for an android. Sloat's callous attitude towards Isidore is due to his view of him as inferior and unintelligent due to this mistake. Sloat's reference to him as a chickenhead, which '[n]ever before had he used that term in front of Isidore' reinforces Isidore's dehumanisation (61). Sloat's order for Isidore to video-call the dead pet's owner causes panic as he claims he is unable '[b]ecause I'm hairy, ugly, dirty, stooped, snaggle-toothed, and gray' (62). Blaming his appearance implies Isidore's previous experiences of mistreatment and insult from others—despite the hypocrisy of the radiation changing others' appearances too—and reinforces Sloat's lack of empathy. Despite Milt's attempts to help, Sloat threatens that '[t]he chickenhead makes [the call] [...] or he's fired', emphasising his position of power over Isidore (63). Isidore is trapped within Sloat's

dehumanisation; he is unable to find a new job due to his othered social position as an outcast. The android Pris also dehumanises Isidore, conveyed through her rapid shift in behaviour towards him: 'the flicker of sudden aversion [...] her attitude towards chickenheads' (53). Ultimately, once she identifies he is part of the other, she views him as inferior. This is emphasised through Pris' intolerance towards him despite her own fugitive circumstances: 'I'm not going to live with a chickenhead. Her nostrils flared' (124). Her vehement reaction emphasises her dislike towards him, and her rejection to live with him mirrors his outcast status, confirming his rejection from society due to his 'special' label.

However, despite Isidore's experience of dehumanisation and othering, he exhibits the strongest ability of empathy in the text. His empathetic abilities align with the 'normal' human customs by partaking in 'fusion' and caring for animals. Despite Isidore's differences, his ability to join fusion where his conffession 'Mercer even lets people like me -' highlights his ability to connect to humans (53). This ability is again shown through his distress when Pris cuts the legs off a spider '[a] weird terror struck at J.R Isidore [...] Don't mutilate it' signifying his ability to feel empathy (53,162). This further instils that Isidore retains the required humanistic qualities of empathy despite his dehumanisation. Isidore's boundless empathy extends to androids, yet his self-deprecating tones reflect the imposed social views of 'specials'. When considering 'the synthetic sufferings of false animals didn't bother Milt Borogrove or their boss Hannibal Sloat' Isidore establishes a divide between him and the 'normal' humans he interacts with daily (58). Isidore uses destructive imagery to describe his 'deteriorat[ion] back down the ladder of evolution [...] [sunk] into the tomb world slough of being a special' (58). His negative perspective of his traits overshadows his high levels of empathy which surpass many 'normal' humans, demonstrated when Pris is in trouble and Isidore asks himself '[c]an I give her any help? [...] A special, a chickenhead' (55). Isidore's conditioning to view himself negatively due to his othering and dehumanisation contrasts his

initial reaction to help. His immediate acceptance of the androids 'what does it matter to me? I mean, I'm a special; they don't treat me very well either' highlights his empathy as he notices that the androids are treated akin, both experiencing othering by humans (129). Therefore, despite his othering and 'special' label, Isidore's empathetic abilities surpass other characters in the text, thereby examining and critiquing what it means to be human.

DADOES? interrogates the socially accepted rule that '[e]mpathy is what makes us human' in a new setting (Bloom qtd. in Fuschman, 2015). Here, 'normal' humans have monopolised empathy; their artificial and performative displays of empathy convey inherent flaws that impact their decision to 'other' those deemed unworthy due to not fitting their criterion. Rather, this ignores androids and 'specials' potential of empathy, invoking questions about our own societal values concerning empathy and otherness through the superficiality of 'normal' human empathy.

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