

Representation of  
social groups in do  
androids dream of  
electric sheep?



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How and why is a social group represented in a particular way? - Darcy Davitt

In Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, androids represent the zenith of technological creation; an artificially intelligent robot with humanoid appearances and behaviours. Dick's postulations of android AI are the grounds for him raising a variety of ontological questions including what defines humanity.

As numerous science fiction novelists have done, Dick uses androids to negotiate the man-machine nexus and speculate the potential ramifications of developing mechanical humanoids superior to their human constructors. Dick raises the question; are machines commodifiable objects or rather do they possess the independent agency of human beings? Heidegger, an influential twentieth-century German philosopher, believes society views technology as an instrument of human creation and that we have the unique capacity for producing and improving technology. Yet, he describes the dangers of these judgements - by seeing technology as an instrument of humanity, which he called 'enframing,' we will become increasingly consumed by the will to technological mastery. He also believes that the further technology slipped from our control, the more urgent our desire to control it would become. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, humans lose control of the androids who turn on their owners and establish technological agency. Yet, is artificial intelligence deemed as independent agency or is it purely a simulation of an individual existence? Throughout the novel, Dick explores the binary opposition of nature and automation and our cultural tendency to value human life over artificial life. *Do Androids Dream*

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*of Electric Sheep* looks to deconstruct the discrepancies between the real and the artificial: between humanity and technology.

The similarities suggested by Dick between humans and androids provides the grounds for the exploration of human existence. However, the novel does not challenge the dehumanising effects of technology; it shows the androids as a guide to return post-World War Terminus earth-dwellers to the humanity that was abandoned in place of solipsistic individualism. John Isidore lives out most of his lonely existence as the sole inhabitant of a San Francisco apartment. He endures the isolated life of an android (ironically considering he is acutely empathetic) and his individualism separates him from nature and the rest of humanity. Heidegger feared that 'modern technology [would] homogenise the lived world such that all things presence in only one way.' Humans in the novel such as Isidore seem to view their existences as hollow and lifeless – their worlds are 'de-worlded' and all inside it becomes a 'standing-reserve' or grounds for concern. Technology is 'enframed' as a purely human instrument; the subject is taken out of technology and they are seen to exist only as a potential asset to humanity. The representation of androids as humanising entities helps illustrate the conflict between humanity and nature just as with humans and technology. Androids are used as an *anti*-foil to humanity, to highlight the reciprocity between humans and androids, raising questions regarding human subjectivity and the nature of being.

A sophisticated artificial intelligence in a biological body provides the androids with the capacity to challenge humanity to reconsider their own conceptions of technology and themselves. As android AI is developed and <https://assignbuster.com/representation-of-social-groups-in-do-androids-dream-of-electric-sheep/>

refined over time (from the old T-14 to the Nexus-6 models) their behaviour resembles that of a human to greater degrees. The one feature they lack: empathy. Rick Deckard first contemplates the boundary between empathic and non-empathic beings and considers that 'ultimately, the empathic gift blurred the boundaries between hunter and victim, between the successful and the defeated.' This is the earliest point in which the definition of being is raised. Androids are said to have first been invented as 'Synthetic Freedom Fighters' or mechanical military replacements during World War Terminus, but later 'had been modified [to] ... become the mobile donkey engine of the colonisation program.' This reflects numerous historical cases where technological advances stem from military projects. Androids act as both domestic servants and companions, employed to relieve the people from their isolation and forlorn, existential loneliness. The purpose of androids is modified as the means to a new end. This seems excusable given the urgent need to pull together a declining society. Yet, Dick seems to ponder the point of human survival. The need to resort to androids to allow humanity to flourish provides a sad indictment on society, the modern technological project and the basis of the ends justifying the means. Androids represent modern technology and are the medium through which Dick explores the man-machine nexus.

The position of androids is quickly asserted through references to slavery and the racial superiority of humans. They are viewed as alien; in a literal sense they emigrated from Mars; they are foreign beings having fled their slave lives; they are also not human based on society's standards. Rather, they are regarded as human property designed to sustain the human system against

both their loneliness and the ‘ form-destroying process of entropy,’ which ironically, Dick suggests humans and androids are both a part of. John Isidore’s TV announces that androids ‘ duplicates the halcyon days of the pre-Civil War Southern states,’ alluding to the slaves of American history. Dick implies the androids are tools of capitalist commercialism, or ‘ the mobile donkey engine of the colonisation program.’ Androids work for ‘ the man’ – they are advertised on earth as ‘ custom-tailored humanoid robot[s] designed specifically for your unique needs, for you and you alone.’ The disassociation of androids from the product of their work ‘ dehumanises’ them. Dick draws correlations between the androids and Marxian concepts of alienation where people are viewed as a means of production rather than human. In fact, Heidegger’s ‘ de-worlding’ and Marx’s ‘ alienation’ overlap. Heidegger suggests that humans by means of production utilise the world’s resources to obtain its means to life and in Marx’s Communist Revolution where a common humanity is the means of production through ‘ productionism.’ Dick uses androids to represent the Proletariat, providing a critique of the dehumanising aspects of capitalism and analogize the sustained human objectification throughout modern Western society.

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