

# Loss of absolute truth vs. nihilism: do androids dream of electric sheep essay sa...

[Environment](#), [Electricity](#)



The world of the dystopia is one type of science fiction story that often presents a world in chaos; these works are dark and gloomy, showing us what is in store if human society continues down its path of consumerism and control (Heuser, 2003). The cyberpunk genre is full of these stories - the works of Philip K. Dick often show polluted, grimy worlds where morality is fluid and people sell their identity and sense of selves to the highest bidder. However, Dick also finds ways to demonstrate hope and optimism despite the terrible settings their characters find themselves in, avoiding nihilism through their plots and themes. These science fiction and cyberpunk ideas of post modernism, nihilism and absolute truth will be examined through Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* This work eschews absolute truth and replaces it with existential crises, fights nihilism with the hope to overcome the circumstances of their respective worlds, and creates a familiar-yet-futuristic world to connect the audience with the familiar while still introducing them to something new.

In Philip K. Dick's futuristic world of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* androids - artificial and sentient humanoid lifeforms - exist and are an everyday part of the world. Though they are permitted on other planets, they are forbidden on Earth. Rick Deckard is a bounty hunter who is assigned to hunt them down, and is tasked with following one named Rachael, with whom he begins a complicated and dangerous relationship. All the while, he must struggle with his own identity while hunting down a group of rogue androids who have escaped to Earth. Both of these neo-noir science fiction worlds feature polluted, morally bankrupt futures, and hard-boiled protagonists seeking to find their way through.

Absolute truth is the notion that things are definitely something, that one can be 100% certain of the validity of an idea, statement or object. "

Absolutely knowing is the truth of every mode of consciousness because it is only in absolute knowing that the separation of the object from the certainty of itself is completely eliminated: truth is now equated with certainty and certainty with truth" (Hegel, p. 51). When someone accepts something as an absolute truth, objectivity can be claimed; there is no wiggle room for doubt or duality. For example, the idea that " I am human" is thought in many philosophies to be an absolute truth. Being is something that humans can do, and this leads to the eventual Knowing; " I think, therefore I am."

In *Electric Sheep*, the notion of absolute truth is deeply ingrained in the debate between humans and androids - whether or not there is truly a difference between them. The Voight-Kampff test demonstrates that Dick's interpretation of the meaning of life is the presence of empathy, and this is what makes someone 'human' (Galvan, 1997). The characters struggle with this throughout the book - Deckard uses the V-K test on Rachael, but she is at first assumed, when it fails, to be a human who simply does not have empathy. The 'electric sheep' that Deckard gets to replace his real sheep that died is resented by him, because he does not think that it loves him back. This very same attitude is the thing that allows him to hunt down androids just as easily; he does not view them as beings that deserve to live, since the test says that they have no empathy. We soon learn that this may not strictly be true, however, due to his experiences with Rachael. Deckard's own wrestling with these issues is an important exploration of absolute truth in *Electric Sheep*; eventually, he comes to suspect that he and the androids

are not so different after all. After he tries to retire an opera singer who turns out to be a replicant, he begins to doubt his own humanity and whether or not it is right to kill, even when the target is an android (Wheale, 2003).

The concept of nihilism as a philosophy involves removing or devaluing the meaningful aspects of life from one's worldview, leaving no hope for the future or optimism that things will get better. The status quo is often seen as the best possible world, which is still not acceptable or valuable, but is what is provided. Art or literature with a nihilistic worldview provides little notions or hints that things will get better; they simply state that nothing matters, even when we try to do good for the future. The will to power is removed, and there seems to be no point to anything (Nietzsche). Nihilism is very much a large part of the world of *Electric Sheep* most especially. The often-depressed Deckard thinks about life and existentialism in this nihilistic way in many instances throughout the book: " Thinking this he wondered if Mozart had had any intuition that the future did not exist, that he had already used up his little time. Maybe I have, too, Rick thought as he watched the rehearsal move along. This rehearsal will end, the performance will end, the singers will die, eventually the last score of the music will be destroyed in one way or another; finally the name " Mozart" will vanish, the dust will have won. If not on this planet then another" (Dick, Ch, 9).

One of the most nihilistic elements to the world of *Electric Sheep* is Mercerism, the primary religion of Earth. In this religion, many different users are plugged in at the same time to an Empathy Box, which offers a collectively conscious world (not unlike the Cyberspace of *Neuromancer*) where Wilbur Mercer walks up a mountain without end, receiving hits from

an endless series of stones being thrown at him. The users all experience this pain as Mercer continues his Sisyphean existence (Kerman, 1991). The parallel to Sisyphus is not accidental; these users simply want to experience this endless certain pain instead of the uncertain pain they will receive in the future (Kerman, 1991). This experience is calming and consistent to them, offering them a measure of peace. This exemplifies existential nihilism, where nothing is thought to be beyond this type of experience; no hope for a better world (Galvan, 1997).

One of the biggest indicators of the nihilistic world in which the characters of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* live is the book's emphasis on empathy as such a strong theme. The Voight-Kampff test is the ultimate barometer for whether someone is a human or android; it tests empathy, which is thought to be the ultimate difference between being a person and not (Wheale, 1991). The fact that this is a reasonable alternative to being an android cements the nihilistic worldview of the characters in the book; society has deteriorated to such a level where it is entirely reasonable for individuals to feel nothing for each other. At the same time, many characters cling to the idea of empathy as all that makes them human, and how they define and value their relationships with each other (Galvan, 1997). The character of Phil Resch in *Electric Sheep* is completely human, but we soon learn that he has no empathy since he likes to kill for its own sake - this helps to blur the line between human and android. Just as importantly, it does show the rampant lack of empathy people have for other beings, an example of the nihilism that is present throughout the world.

In conclusion, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is an immensely

important and influential work of science fiction. Issues of humanity, the line between man and machine, and hope in the face of a destitute and post-apocalyptic consumerist future are addressed. Absolute truth is thrown out the window in favor of endless possibility and doubt as to one's own identity/humanity. Nihilism is rampant in these worlds where optimism is traded for technology, but there is still possibility for change and renewal. These themes, philosophies and tactics are used to create socially relevant and entertaining works, of which *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* eminently qualifies.

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