Abstract
This essay explores the philosophical themes of Philip K. Dick’s science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and its film adaptation, Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. More specifically, this paper explores Philip K. Dick’s question of “What Constitutes the Authentic Human Being?” and how “the question of what it means to be human” is presented in both Dick’s novel and Scott’s film adaptation. Since Scott’s film is a loose adaptation that diverges significantly from its source novel, it raises the question of how both versions attempt to tackle this issue in their own manner. Despite pointing out similarities between the films, it should be stressed that the goal of the essay is not to directly compare the two versions and analyze how well the novel’s themes translate onto film, but to analyze the novel and film individually and discuss their distinct viewpoints on the issue of what it means to be human. The conclusion of this essay is that while the novel and film still share a similar theme in regards to their focus on the nature of being human, there appears to be a difference between the overall message of both novel and film. Furthermore, in regards to the novel, this paper reaches the conclusion that the novel does not convey a definite answer on the definition of humanity but rather hints at a constantly shifting definition of humanity where humanity itself is like an illusion. Conversely, the film seems to describe humanity as a definite trait that can be acquired, even by artificial humans. Both the novel and film use complex emotions such as empathy to blur the boundaries between human and machine, but the main difference is that in the novel, a human learns the meaning of being human, while in the film an android learns the meaning of humanity.
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In his 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* science fiction author Philip K. Dick draws a unique vision of a dystopian future. Most of mankind has migrated to off-world colonies following a nuclear war, which has rendered most of Earth a desolate wasteland where all species of animal are either endangered or extinct. However, mankind has mastered the technology to create synthetic life forms ranging from domestic pets to humanoid robots so realistic that they appear indistinguishable from human beings. In fact, it is virtually impossible to tell humans and androids apart without the aid of a special test kit, the Voigt Empathy Test, also known as the Voigt-Kampff Test, which measures the subject’s empathic ability, a trait which evidently is unique to humans. Alternatively, a bone marrow analysis can determine whether a subject is android or human, although the process is slow and painful (52). Nevertheless, these overwhelming similarities between androids and humans are a source of much confusion and paranoia in Dick’s novel, prompting the question: “What is human?”

The year 1982 saw the release of *Blade Runner*, a loose film adaptation of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* directed by Ridley Scott. In the following years, different versions of the film were released; for this paper we will be focusing on the 1992 director’s cut of Ridley Scott’s film. While *Blade Runner* diverges significantly from its source novel, one thing both the novel and film have in common is that they both focus extensively on the same issue. Both versions feature a protagonist who is charged with the task of identifying androids as distinct from human, which presents a moral dilemma. However, since Scott’s film adaptation differs significantly from Dick’s novel, it can be argued that both the film and novel essentially offer a different viewpoint on the subject. Because of this, an effort will be made to assess *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*.

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1 The previous versions of the film feature an alternate ending and a voice-over narrative by the main character of the film, Rick Deckard. However, Deckard’s voice-over narrative was removed in the director’s cut and the subsequent 2007 final cut version of the film, along with the inclusion of alternate scenes and ending.
Dream of Electric Sheep? and Ridley Scott’s film individually and determine what kind of message these two convey in regards to the nature of being human. To address this issue further we will be taking a look at the humanization/dehumanization of the humans and androids in both novel and film.

However, as we begin to touch upon this central issue in Dick’s novel, perhaps it would be best if we provide our own answer to the question: exactly how do we, as a species, define humanity today? What exactly do we consider to be the “human characteristics” that seemingly have evolved over a long period of time? According to the Smithsonian Institute, the human traits that help define our species today include our ability to walk upright and use tools, along with language, symbols and social life (“Human Characteristics”); these are all essentially what we would consider human characteristics, although they are not exclusive to the human species. Regardless, supposing that even if the androids of Dick’s novel and its film adaptation share these same characteristics with other humans, the question remains whether the distinction between human and machine in both novel and film provide a different, more philosophical insight into the meaning of humanity?
Chapter 1: The Philosophy of Philip K. Dick

As we begin to explore *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and the film inspired by it, *Blade Runner*, we will begin by delving into the philosophy of the author himself, Philip K. Dick, specifically his ideology in regards to the common themes of his works.

In “How to Build a Universe that Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later,” a speech later published as an essay, Dick himself stated that the questions of “What is Reality?” and “What Constitutes an Authentic Human being?” are the two topics that fascinate him the most. On the subject of the former, in his essay Dick wrote about an experience he had with a philosophy student who asked him to define reality, to which Dick responded, “reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.” Dick further states: “That's all I could come up with. That was back in 1972. Since then I haven't been able to define reality any more lucidly.” Dick also notes in his essay that “we live in a society in which spurious realities are manufactured by the media, by governments, by big corporations, by religious groups, political groups—and the electronic hardware exists by which to deliver these pseudo-worlds right into the heads of the reader, the viewer, the listener.” This also shows Dick’s fascination with the relationship between humans and technology, a theme rampant in works like *Ubik, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, Minority Report* and *A Scanner Darkly* for example.

Furthermore, Dick reveals that some of his intellectual framework is derived from Plato’s *Timaeus*. In *Timaeus* the universe was discovered rather than created by God, and the universe itself was in a state of chaos such that God had to put things back in order. This concept fascinated Dick, who states: “That idea appeals to me, and I have adapted it to fit my own intellectual needs: What if our universe started out as not quite real, a sort of illusion, as the Hindu religion teaches, and God, out of love and kindness for us, is slowly transmuting it, slowly and secretly, into something real?” (“How to Build a Universe”) Furthermore, in an interview, Tessa Dick (Dick’s former wife) revealed that Dick’s writing was also influenced by Plato's Allegory of the Cave, along with aspects of certain Native American cultures (Knight). Tessa Dick also affirmed
that the films “Blade Runner and Minority Report capture Phil's concern about what makes us human, as well as what makes us moral creatures.” (Knight)

Then there is the other topic which fascinates Dick, that of the authentic human being. Dick maintains that these two topics, the one concerning the nature of reality and the other about the nature of being human, really unite as one, as Dick elaborates in his essay that “fake realities will create fake humans. Or, fake humans will generate fake realities and then sell them to other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves. So we wind up with fake humans inventing fake realities and then peddling them to other fake humans.” (“How to Build a Universe”)

In addition, Dick also seems to have a fascination with topics concerning conspiracy and paranoia. In his article “Theory of Paranoia,” Carl Freedman addresses Dick’s paranoiac ideology. As Freedman notes, conspiracy and paranoia are common themes in Dick’s novels, at least as far the novels’ protagonists are concerned (Freedman, 18-19); so too is commodity fetishism, as in Dick’s novel Ubik for example, where household appliances have the ability to communicate with people (Freedman, 20). Freedman’s comments on the concept of commodity fetishism feel reminiscent of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, in which artificial beings such as ersatz pets and humanoid robot slaves are for sale. Likewise, the paranoiac aspect is also present in the novel, in which the main character is unaware of who is human and who is not; what is organic and what is not? Another article, “Entering the Posthuman Collective in Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” by Jill Galvan, eloquently describes the co-existence between humans and androids in Dick’s novel: “In effect, the narrative repudiates the idea of a confined human community and envisions a community of the posthuman, in which human and machine commiserate and comaterialize, vitally shaping one another's existence” (414). The relationship between humans and technology is also further explored by Christopher A. Sims. He points out that “companionship is a necessary component of psychological well-being,” regardless of whether it is with other humans or androids (73). Furthermore, Sims makes an observation on the moral implications of manufacturing android servants, particularly how Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? “uses the invention of a humanoid replica to critique and define the essence of
humanity; whatever qualities distinguish humans from androids become the essential aspects of humanity” (67).

Dick’s fascination with conspiracy and paranoia is also further explored during an interview with Paul Williams of *Rolling Stone* magazine, conducted several years after a break-in at Dick’s house in San Rafael, California, during which many of Dick’s valuables and documents were stolen. Apparently, the case of the break-in was never solved but Dick had several theories, including the possibility that the government itself was behind it. To clarify his point further, Dick recalls a meeting he had with a former Special Forces and CIA agent during which, after Dick explained to him that he wrote science fiction, the agent suggested that the government arranged the break-in after Dick wrote something in his novels that was true without his realizing it. Nevertheless, even though the case of the break-in at Dick’s house was never officially solved, it can be said that the incident helped shape, or reinforce, Dick’s fascination with the subject of conspiracy and paranoia; as Williams notes in his interview, “Things are seldom what they seem,” and as Dick himself states: “Paranoia is true perception” (45).

Also on the topic of “what is reality?”, one of the most interesting aspects of Dick’s writing is that Dick reportedly believed he had access to a reality of his own. In his *Rolling Stone* interview, he explained that his books “try to pierce the veil of what is only apparently real to find out what is really real” (45). It should be noted that Dick had a history of amphetamine abuse and many of his novels, at least up until *A Scanner Darkly*, had their ideas fueled by Dick’s drug abuse (Williams, 46). As Dick explained to Williams: “We don't realize the extent to which we're influenced by our environment. Everybody else was taking some form of drugs, and I wouldn't have known how to behave if I didn't have something to take” (47). Dick’s history of amphetamine abuse seems to manifest itself in his novel *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, in which consumers of a hallucinogenic drug called Can-D are brought into a shared, alternate reality; Can-D is later replaced by Chew-Z, a new legal drug which offers its users eternal reality. An article by David Golumbia on the relationship between Philip K. Dick and metaphysical realism cites this part of Dick’s *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, observing how Chew-Z provides users access to what Golumbia calls an “Absolute Reality” (93), and then cites the protagonist’s fusion with Palmer Eldritch, which grants him “a form of absolute awareness” (qtd. in Golumbia, 95). This situation
also seems to reflect Dick’s own experience with amphetamine abuse, as his amphetamine-fueled writings seemingly gave him access to another reality, Dick’s own reality.

Overall, it can be concluded that Dick’s ideology proposed a fictional world, much like those in his novels, whose artificial realities and/or persons are closer to reality than we are led on to believe. Dick’s statement about fake realities creating fake humans suggests that with its ever-increasing reliance on technology, humanity is perhaps becoming more and more artificial as a result. Likewise, Dick having access to his own reality may further reflect the subjective reality that we live in. In a way, one man’s reality can be considered another man’s illusion, and in the case of Palmer Eldritch’s “Absolute Reality,” it is left up to every individual to determine whether Eldritch’s reality is the ultimate reality, or the ultimate illusion. In the case of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, in accordance with Dick’s ideology, it can be speculated that the androids are nothing more than artificial humans, or more human than we realize, or even if the concept of humanity is the real illusion in Dick’s novel.
Chapter 2: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and its Definition of What it Means to Be Human

One of the major issues presented to us in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is the advancement of humanoid robots and how realistic they have become, to the point of being nearly indistinguishable from human beings. The androids were not only manufactured to resemble human beings on a biological level but also on an intellectual and, to a certain extent, psychological level, essentially resulting in a humanoid machine which looks, thinks, and behaves like an authentic human being.

However, Dick’s novel also establishes that androids apparently lack one important emotion, empathy, and this is what sets the boundaries between humans and androids. In Dick’s novel, androids have already been declared illegal on Earth and subject for termination, a task which is usually carried out by bounty hunters; the main character of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Rick Deckard, is one such bounty hunter. In the novel, Deckard is given the task of hunting down a renegade group of androids, the Nexus-6 series, the most advanced series of androids manufactured so far. Given that the androids are already incredibly human-like, it is quite difficult to track them down, as anyone can potentially be an android.

It would seem that according to the world and minds of people within the novel, the androids’ inability to feel empathy is what makes them inherently inhuman in spite of their biological and mental similarity to human beings. In other words, the novel starts off by proposing empathy as one of the defining factors of what it means to be human. Potentially, this is what makes the androids dangerous: they are quite capable of killing others due to their apparent lack of empathy. But is empathy a really important part of humanity? And it would it not simply be possible for the androids to simulate empathy given their advanced mental state? Indeed, empathy is a more complex emotion compared to other basic emotions such as fear or aggression. Empathy as an emotion can be considered one of the defining features of humanity, although it is not necessarily exclusive to humans: studies have shown that certain animals such as dogs, monkeys, elephants and whales, are capable of displaying signs of empathy (Moodley, Worrall, Goshe).
The androids in Dick’s novel are known to display an instinct for self-preservation. They do try to keep themselves hidden from the bounty hunters seeking them, fully showing they are capable of basic emotions such as fear, although whether or not they can really experience more complex emotions such as empathy remains ambiguous. According to Deckard, the androids’ ability to develop empathy actually does “exist biologically, potentially” (46). However, it is also revealed that androids are incapable of cell replacement and only have a lifespan of around four years (197), which suggests that even though the androids may be biologically capable of developing empathy, their short life spans may prevent them from achieving it fully.

Nevertheless, the lack of empathic ability in androids continues to be used against them when determining who is human and who is an android. To this end, android bounty hunters make use of the Voigt Empathy Test. For the test itself, an adhesive disk is placed on the subject which measures dilation in the facial area; the subject is then asked a series of hypothetical questions, mostly involving animals, which measures the subject’s empathic response; depending on the subject’s response to the questions, they are determined to be either human or an android. It is important to note that how the subject answers the questions is irrelevant; as the android Rachael Rosen responds to Deckard while he administers the test on her: “And of course, my verbal responses won’t count. It’s solely the eye-muscle and capillary reaction that you’ll use as indices” (48). This seems to make the test more foolproof since, even if the androids were to simulate an empathic response to the best of their abilities, they are incapable of displaying the same kind of natural reaction to those questions as humans do.

Regardless, it seems that empathy remains the dividing factor between those who are human and those who are only artificially human.

However, while the novel constantly touches upon the importance of empathy, at least to the human characters themselves, it also brings up a contrasting viewpoint as to whether empathy is really essential to distinguishing human from android, or defining humanity in a more general sense. As previously established, the function of the Voight Empathy Test is that it gauges the empathic response of the participant when he or she is asked a series of questions and if the appropriate response is even a second late, the subject is concluded to be non-human. Consequently, this poses a significant risk when it comes to testing individuals who may have an underdeveloped empathic ability or
“flattening of affect” (37), as it is called in the novel. During a conversation between Deckard and his superior, Harry Bryant, Deckard explains that this problem has existed since the introduction of the Voigt Empathy Test and if certain individuals were to be tested in the course of police work, they would be assessed as androids and, as Bryant points out, Rick “would be wrong, but by then they would be dead” (38).

Bryant’s conversation with Rick indeed suggests that the results of the Voigt Empathy Test are taken literally: if the test results show that you do not have the empathic ability of a human, then conclusively you are not human and therefore subject to termination. Lack of empathy equals lack of humanity. And in the case that an android ever successfully develops an empathic ability on par with that of other humans, then what is there left to distinguish androids from humans? This issue is also further highlighted by Jill Galvan, who notes that “by extension, the accepted notion of empathy, the purported marker of humanity, falls under the same suspicion as does the device that has presumably enabled it” (418).

This leads to another potential issue with the distinction between humans and androids in the novel. Before the Voigt Empathy Test was introduced, androids were detected using intelligence tests, but as androids became more advanced, those tests became obsolete and had to be replaced by a new scale; as Deckard notes, “it has already happened three times before” (56). This would indicate that if a test-taker failed to pass, whether due to low brain functions or anything else, they would, according to the scale, be considered an android. All in all, this poses the same potential for false positives as the Voigt Empathy Test. Furthermore, it shows that before the Voigt Empathy Test was introduced, intelligence was considered essential to what makes one human, and now it is empathy that is considered the key trait. This may suggest that as the tests used for detecting androids become obsolete, so does the key factor in defining what makes us human—whether it is our intelligence, our empathy, or whatever else civilization perceives it to be. The shift from measuring intelligence to measuring empathy as a way to determine humanity suggests a constantly changing definition of humanity.

Regardless, it would appear that even though the intelligence tests have become obsolete as a means of detecting androids, there is still a certain stigma attached to those of significantly lower intelligence, to the point that they are considered less than human,
or perhaps even barely human at all. For example, aside from Rick Deckard, the novel also focuses on the point-of-view of John Isidore, a lone tenant in an abandoned apartment complex who has been labelled a “special,” also known as a “chickenhead,” a term applied to those whose intelligence has been severely affected by the radioactive dust following the nuclear war that devastated the world. Isidore notes that once someone has been pegged as a special, they are essentially no longer part of mankind (16), and also comments that he “was accepted as being human” by people such as his boss (19), indicating an existing social hierarchy that considers further groups of people than just the androids inferior (and non-human). Furthermore, Isidore’s status as a “special,” and his acceptance as human by some people suggests a more subjective view towards humanity exists in Dick’s novel beyond the standards set by the Voigt Empathy Test.

One of the most significant aspects of human civilization in Dick’s novel seems to be a state religion called Mercerism. Mercerism centers around one figure, Wilbur Mercer, and the collective belief that all of mankind must get closer to Mercer by using a device called an empathy box. When used, these devices allow people to experience a virtual simulation where they see Mercer climbing up a steep hill and getting struck by rocks being thrown by unknown assailants, known as “The Killers” (31). The people who are connected with Mercer through the empathy box experience the same physical torment as Mercer, which effectively makes them empathize with Mercer as they feel whatever he feels, and also remain connected with Mercer along with anyone else currently using an empathy box. Whenever Mercer reaches the top of the hill, he descends back into the tomb world where he must rise up again and resume climbing the hill. It would appear that according to the principles of Mercerism, mankind must empathize with Mercer’s suffering in order to become a part of the human collective, for all those who are connected with Mercer using the empathy box not only feel Mercer’s pain but each other’s pain as well. In this regard, it would appear that the more one empathizes with Mercer’s suffering, the more they become one with Mercer as they ascend (and descend) along with him. However, what is interesting about Mercerism is that there seems to be a lack of final salvation for Mercer himself, or even the followers of Mercerism. Mercer is destined to ascend the hill and then descend down to the tomb world whenever he reaches the top, but there seems to be no indication that Mercer will ever reach some kind of salvation at the top. In fact, at one point while Deckard is
connected to the empathy box, Mercer himself bluntly tells Deckard that “there is no salvation,” and essentially tells him that Mercerism is just to show him that he is not alone (178). In other words, as with the Voigt Empathy Test, empathy is considered an important part of being part of the human collective.

As a religion, Mercerism itself seems to bear a strong resemblance to Christianity. Mercer’s rise from the tomb world is reminiscent of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the story of how Wilbur Mercer was discovered mirrors that of baby Moses’s discovery in the Nile River. Also, Mercer walking up the hill and being inflicted by pain from the rocks hurled at him seems reminiscent of Jesus Christ’s suffering in Stations of the Cross. Alternatively, Mercer reaching the top of the hill only to descend into the tomb world where he resumes walking up the hill again resembles Sisyphus from Greek mythology who continually rolls a boulder up a hill only to have the boulder roll down again once he reaches the top. These parallels between religion and the fictional belief of Mercerism suggest that Mercerism is an amalgamation of religions, and potentially a strong influence on why the androids in Dick’s novel are stigmatized for their lack of empathy—as beings lacking empathy, they violate the core principle of Mercerism and perhaps symbolically, their lack of humanity stems from their inability to join the herd mentality of Mercerism.

Another facet of Mercerism is the importance of owning and maintaining an animal. In Dick’s novel, every citizen is required to have an animal, whether authentic or artificial, and show proper care for that animal as a sign of their ability to show empathy, and by extension bring them closer to Mercer. In other words, to quote Jill Galvan, the animals in Dick’s novel are “fetishized as the repositories of human empathy” (415). Though empathy towards animals is not necessarily enforced by Mercerism, it is strongly encouraged among everyone both on Earth and off-world; to not own an animal and show empathy towards it would be alienating oneself from the human race. It appears that owning and maintaining a pet is something the androids in Dick’s novel are simply incapable of doing due to their own lack of empathy, which is stressed further when a fellow bounty hunter, Phil Resch, whose humanity is doubted by Deckard, exclaims that he must be human because he already owns a squirrel, a real one (128). The androids’ inherent lack of empathy towards animals is also showcased when Pris, one of the androids, comes across a spider in her apartment. Out of morbid
fascination, she starts to cut off the spider’s legs one by one in order to see if it can continue crawling, which is then followed by Roy Baty, the leader of the androids, using fire to prompt the spider to move, all of which repulses Isidore, the only human among the group, and shows the difference of empathy between him and the androids (206-210). However, the androids’ behavior here may not necessarily indicate that they are inhuman. In our world, literally speaking, a man does not cease to be human when he kills or even tortures a spider, even though some may find it morally reprehensible, and in the context of Dick’s novel the androids’ behavior is a violation of the principles of Mercerism.

As for Deckard himself, at the beginning of the novel he is depicted as being devoid of empathy towards artificial beings because of their own lack of empathy, which is initially shown in his feelings towards his pet, an electric sheep. He feels contempt for his electric sheep; while he is required to care for it, he seemingly detests its existence as he describes owning a fake animal as “gradually demoralizing” and yet, something that “has to be done from a social standpoint” (9). It is also revealed that Deckard did own a real sheep at one point, which he eventually had to replace with an artificial sheep when the original sheep died. Even though the ersatz sheep is supposed to resemble his original sheep in every way, Deckard remarks that it is “not the same” (11-12). It is also because of his profession as a bounty hunter that he is essentially required not to feel empathy for the androids he retires, something his wife criticizes as she exhibits empathy for the androids, referring to them as “those poor andys” (4). Deckard, on the other hand, feels contempt for the androids for much the same reason he dislikes his electric sheep: because of their lack of ability to feel empathy. Like the androids, the electric sheep “had no ability to appreciate the existence of another” (42). Likewise, it is also stated at one point that an android “doesn’t care what happens to another android” (101)—although it is possible this only applies to androids as a whole and not specifically androids who are closely associated with another, such as Pris and the remaining androids in the Nexus-6 unit.

Nevertheless, empathy continues to be depicted as an integral part of what it means to be human in the novel, for example how it manifests in Rick Deckard himself. As previously discussed, Deckard has little to no empathy for androids due to the androids’ own lack of empathy, but as the novel progresses, Deckard starts to gain more
and more empathy for the androids; in other words, Deckard begins to humanize them, because the empathy which he previously reserved for living beings that felt for others around them, he now feels for the androids as well. In another way, Deckard himself becomes more human, in the context of the novel, and realizes what may be the true meaning of Mercerism, or rather, the true meaning of humanity.

However, as previously addressed in Christopher A. Sims’s article, it can be claimed that the novel also argues that not only is empathy an emotion essential to our own humanity, but that in order for us to feel empathy we must also have companionship, and someone who can empathize with us as well. For example, Deckard is married, but due to his wife’s depression, she feels distant from him; Deckard muses that his wife has nothing to give him and that even androids “feel more vitality than his wife” (94). On the other hand, when we focus on J.R. Isidore and his relationship with his android companions, it can be concluded the reason he feels empathetic towards the androids is because he has been labelled a special and does not fit in human society. Also, due to Isidore’s profession as a false animal vet, he is constantly around electric animals, which seems to have helped him develop a sense of empathy towards them. For example, while he is transporting a dying cat, which he believes to be an electric animal (even though it turns out eventually the cat is real), Isidore states that even though he realizes the animals are fake, the apparent pain and dying sounds of a malfunctioning ersatz animal is still something that “ties [his] stomach in knots” (72). It may be because of this that Isidore is capable of feeling empathy towards the androids when they move into the apartment complex he lives in, because he can already empathize with their alienation from humanity, and the androids can empathize with him in return. This may indicate that one of the reasons for the androids’ lack of empathy, besides their incredibly short lifespan, is because, given the fact that they were originally designed as servants on off-world colonies for other humans, they do not regularly get a chance to associate with each other and thus, are not given the chance to develop empathy towards one another. This may explain why androids feel no apparent empathy towards humans or animals; however, the androids in the Nexus-6 unit may already have begun developing feelings of empathy towards each other due to their similarities. At least one example of the Nexus-6 androids showing empathy towards one another occurs when Deckard kills Irmgard Baty and
Roy cries out in anguish over the death of his partner. It is Roy’s cry of anguish that gives away his location to Deckard, allowing the latter to shoot him (223), and while Roy’s reaction to Irmgard’s death is not logical, in the sense that it makes him vulnerable to Deckard, it is possible that his cry of anguish is a purely natural reaction to the death of his spouse—a natural empathetic reaction that may demonstrate the truth of Deckard’s comments about androids being potentially biologically capable of showing empathy.

Consequently, Deckard himself becomes more empathetic towards the androids later in the novel, starting when he and a fellow bounty hunter named Phil Resch retire a female android called Luba Luft. Deckard’s increasing empathy towards the androids baffles him, as he questions himself how he can feel empathy towards “[s]omething that only pretends to be alive? But Luba Luft had seemed genuinely alive; it had not worn the aspect of a simulation” (141). For Deckard, this event highlights the potential problem with the empathic boundary between humans and androids, the illusion that empathy “blurred the boundaries between hunter and victim” (31). It marks the beginning of Deckard’s empathic conflict towards the androids, at least the female ones, as he begins to doubt whether retiring the androids is morally right. Deckard also begins to note that his disdain towards Resch’s merciless killings of the androids is the opposite of what he should feel, or as he remarks, “is required to feel” (143). In other words, Deckard feeling less empathetic towards his fellow humans such as Phil Resch and more empathetic towards androids such as Luba Luft is the reverse of what society intended, but more importantly, Deckard’s remark about what he is “required to feel” leads to another dilemma: If an individual only displays empathy because they feel they are required to do so, would not that merely be false, or in other words, artificial empathy? And what distinction is there then between the empathy displayed by humans because they are “required” to do so and the artificial emotions exhibited by the androids, such as empathy?

But most importantly, near the end of the novel Deckard learns what ultimately may be the novel’s final message about the nature of being human, or rather the curse of being human: our tendency to do wrong. When Deckard feels hesitation about killing the remaining androids, he decides to turn to Mercer for help by using his empathy box. Mercer explains to him that he “will be required to do wrong no matter where you go. It

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is the basic condition of life, to be required to violate your own identity” (179). In other words, while empathy may play an important part in our human morality, it is also in our nature to go against our own morals which makes us, and human nature in general, hypocritical. As Mercer elegantly puts it, “[i]t is the ultimate shadow; the defeat of creation” (179). With this advice from Mercer, Deckard is convinced to continue hunting down the androids even though it may be empathetically wrong from his own point of view.

Interestingly, Deckard’s development seems to further add to the contrasting viewpoint on empathy as a defining human emotion in the novel. Deckard, who increasingly becomes more empathetic towards the androids later in the novel and thus becomes more humanized, is now “required to violate [his] own identity” by killing the remaining androids as Mercer advised him to do, since we, as humans, are “required to do wrong no matter where [we] go.” After killing the remaining androids, Deckard upon violating his own identity starts to feel self-loathing and comments that he’s “become an unnatural self” (230). And yet, according to Mercer, this would appear to be where Deckard is at his most human, as Deckard himself finally exclaims: “I’m Wilbur Mercer. I’ve permanently fused with him” (233). Even though it might just be raving madness on Deckard’s part, Deckard’s revelation here implies he has finally come to terms with his human feelings, that he now understands that being human means being in conflict with oneself, in spite of any feelings of empathy. As Mercer said, “it’s the curse on us” (242). Most importantly, it is revealed that Mercer himself is actually fake and the artificial world depicted using the empathy box is just a fake backdrop; the public becomes aware that Mercerism is a “swindle” (207-209). However, Deckard becoming permanently fused with Mercer signifies that he has finally learned more about the reality of being human than most of civilization. As Deckard exclaims, “Mercer isn’t fake. Unless reality is fake” (234). Interestingly enough, Deckard’s fusion with Mercer seems to mirror the climax of The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch in which, as previously discussed in Golumbia’s article, the protagonist’s fusion with Palmer Eldritch leads to “a form of absolute awareness.” In a similar way, Deckard’s fusion with Mercer has now given him complete clarity, at least within his own self.

Finally, it can be argued that one of the ways in which Dick’s novel attempts to define what it means to be human is through humanity’s relationship with nature as
opposed to technology. While we have already discussed the issue with the Voigt Empathy Test in regards to the potential risk of labelling humans with underdeveloped empathic abilities as androids, the fact remains that the test itself is capable of discerning an android by their facial reaction, which means that even if an android can learn to simulate an empathic response, their natural reaction time simply cannot match that of a human being, even in the case of highly advanced android units such as Rachael Rosen (59). Interestingly, this may further showcase that even though the term “humanity” is something we use to distinguish ourselves from the rest of the animal kingdom, the fact remains that as human beings we are still derived from nature; by contrast, mankind’s attempt to creature an artificial construct of itself in Dick’s novel resulted in androids lacking that certain aspect of humanity that we ourselves developed naturally. Indeed, it can be said that in Dick’s novel mankind’s technology allowed us to recreate the most superficial aspects of ourselves, right down to our appearance, physiology, and psychology—but no matter how advanced the androids are, they will always lack certain natural roots. This aspect of the relationship between human and nature is further addressed by J.P. Telotte, whose article “Human Artifice and the Science Fiction Film” focuses on the doubling motif in the sci-fi film genre, i.e., the creation of artificial humans, and consequently, the reversal of human nature. Telotte’s description of the androids of Blade Runner also applies to those of Dick’s novel: they demonstrate “the creation and programming of perfect replicas of man, gifted with unusual beauty, strength, or intelligence, and made to serve their human creators. As a result of this original step in ‘becoming natural,’ however, apparently something has also been lost” (47). In this case, whatever was lost in the creation of the androids includes the capacity for empathy, along perhaps with other complex emotions and parts that make up our human nature.

In conclusion, while Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? seems to start off by using empathy as a defining factor in what inherently makes us human, the novel goes on to challenge its own definition of humanity by showing the conflict that takes place within the characters themselves. For Rick Deckard, the boundaries between humans and androids become blurred as he begins to question the morality of killing the androids. Yet, as Mercer teaches him at the end of the novel, it is something he has to do even if it is wrong, as mankind is cursed to do wrong. The novel also showcases the
problematic nature of distinguishing the androids from humans based on their lack of emotions such as empathy, as there are examples of androids showing complex emotions: Rachael Rosen decides to kill Deckard’s organic goat out of jealousy (207); Roy Baty appears to display actual empathy following his spouse’s death, indicating that the androids’ fake humanity is more real than we were led to believe. The implication is that humanity is a largely subjective concept, perhaps even nothing but an illusion. Overall, the novel does not try to convey a certain definition of humanity, but rather shows us that mankind’s own definition of humanity is constantly changing or even hypocritical at times.
As previously discussed, Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner diverges significantly from its source novel but the basic premise remains similar: The film follows Rick Deckard (played by Harrison Ford), a bounty hunter who must track down a group of Nexus-6 androids, referred to as “Replicants” in the film. Likewise, the subtle difference between humans and androids leads to what is essentially a blur between the boundaries of what we define as “human.”

As a work made in a visual medium, Blade Runner gives us various clues that hint at the androids’ bizarre and relatively inhuman behavior, perhaps giving us more insight into how the androids—some of them at least—fail to blend into society. For example, the beginning of Blade Runner introduces us to the workings of the Voight Empathy Test (spelled “Voight” instead of “Voigt” in the film) as one of the Replicants, Leon Kowalski, fails after only two questions. Leon is classified as having a Mental Level C, compared to the leader of the androids, Roy Batty (played by Rutger Hauer), who has a Mental Level A. These classifications show that the androids were not all created with an equal amount of intelligence, which may also affect their propensity for experiencing empathy, as the film shows later on. Leon and Roy Batty were programmed as “combat models” while the android Pris (played by Daryl Hannah) was programmed as a “pleasure model,” so in this regard, certain androids, depending on their programming, may be more susceptible than others to human emotions such as empathy. Interestingly enough, the androids’ programmed capabilities do not appear all that different from how we would compare different human individuals and their different mental capabilities—including their capacity for empathy. In spite of this, the film continues to show us that the androids seem to be at conflict with their own memories: for example, when Leon undergoes the Voight Empathy Test, and is asked a question concerning his relationship with his mother, he essentially breaks down and becomes violent, attacking the tester with his laser tube weapon. It can be inferred that the reason why Leon breaks down is because he simply lacks any memories of his parents. The film establishes later on that some androids are indeed implanted with false memories, something which Leon and the other members of his Nexus-6 unit lack.
Essentially, the scenes with Leon support the hypothesis that without implanted memories, the Replicants lack a certain part of themselves to remain stable—and human.

One thing that sets the film apart from the novel is that this time around there is considerable emphasis on Roy Batty, and his own apparent empathic development. Because androids were designed with only a four-year lifespan, the rogue androids in the film try to come up with a way to extend their lifespan, which suggests the androids have already developed an emotion shared by all organic beings: fear of death. Because of their newfound goal, six androids from the Nexus-6 series hijack an off-world shuttle and arrive on Earth, where they attempt to invade the Tyrell Corporation, the company where they were manufactured. Two of the androids end up getting destroyed and Deckard is tasked with hunting down the remaining four, thus setting in motion an empathic conflict within the androids themselves, particularly Roy Batty.

As previously discussed, one of the key scenes from Dick’s novel occurs when Deckard begins to doubt his own humanity and decides to use the Voigt Empathy Test on himself in order to determine whether he really is human (which, according to the test results, turns out to be the case). Regardless, Deckard’s uncertainty over whether or not he really is human reflects the novel’s own uncertainty over what the definition of being human means. This aspect of Deckard’s character is further stressed in the film, in which Deckard’s humanity remains ambiguous throughout. In one scene, Rachael (played by Sean Young) asks Deckard whether he has ever used the test on himself, to which Deckard gives no response. The film also provides a visual clue: the eyes of the androids are sometimes shown glowing, and in one scene, Deckard’s eyes are shown glowing alongside Rachael’s. In another scene at the end of the film, Deckard finds a paper unicorn left by his fellow bounty hunter, Gaff, which implies that Deckard’s earlier dream about a unicorn is an implanted memory of which Gaff is aware. So overall, while Dick’s novel may have established that Deckard was definitely a human, Scott’s film seems to imply strongly that Deckard may in fact be a Replicant. In fact, in an early draft of Hampton Fancher’s screenplay, the film was to end with Deckard clenching up in a manner similar to Roy Batty’s death in the film; Fancher has explained that the idea of the ending was to have the audience take its own empathy
According to what is shown in the film, it can take at least several questions on the Voight Empathy Test before a potential Replicant is exposed, or even over a hundred. The Tyrell Corporation, the company that appears to be the leading manufacturer of Replicants in the film, has in their possession a Replicant unique within the Nexus-6 series, who up to a certain point was not even aware that she was an android. The Replicant, Rachael, was designed with false memories in order to make her unaware that she is an android; initially, Rachael is actually convinced she is human until Deckard informs her otherwise. Interestingly, this aspect of the film adds another layer of humanization to the androids: the fact that they have been implanted with memories which seems to keep them under control, and unaware of their real identity, suggests to us that our own memories make us who we are. However, since these are only implanted memories and inherently false, it arguably renders the androids’ own “human” experience false.

However, similarly to how the character appears in the source novel, Rachael is perhaps the empathetically most significant android in the film, as she essentially comes the closest to being human, given her implanted memories. Her design serves as an example that false memories in androids helps them maintain a human consciousness, therefore making the androids a more perfect replica of a human being on both a biological and psychological level.

Another thing that adds a potential layer to the humanity of the androids in Blade Runner is the four-year life span. As explained by Deckard’s boss, Chief Bryant, the reason why androids were created with a four-year lifespan is because “the designers reckoned that after a few years they might develop their own emotional responses. You know, hate, love, fear, anger envy. So they built in a fail-safe device.” Bryant’s explanation here introduces a certain dilemma: If the androids were eventually to fully develop their own set of human emotions, would they technically become human? And would killing them technically not be considered murder at that point? Regardless, Bryant’s exposition hints that androids are at least potentially capable of developing human emotions, and possibly, if given enough time, can become just as emotionally mature as any other individual. Nevertheless, in the course of their four-
year lifespan, the androids’ emotional development can only match that of a small child’s. Indeed, this is shown in some scenes in the film where the androids display somewhat childlike behavior. For example, when Pris meets J.F. Sebastian, a genetic designer working for the Tyrell Corporation, in front of the apartment building of which Sebastian is the sole tenant, she rapidly switches between emotions such as fear, surprise and joy, almost like a young child; when Leon and Roy Batty visit an artificial eye designer name Chew, Leon starts playing around with the artificial eyes in Chew’s laboratory. Regardless, in the context of the film, ethically it does make sense to design the androids with only a four-year lifespan in order to prevent them from developing emotions, given the fact that the androids were created as off-world slave labor, as the opening text crawl of the film explains. Arguably, the film’s opening exposition already humanizes the androids by referring to them as “slave labor.” This reminds us of the moral dilemma raised by forcing androids to work as slave labor when their emotions, when developed enough, allow them to become self-conscious enough to understand the fact they are slaves.

However, among the androids, the most interesting emotional development seems to come from the leader, Roy Batty. Like in the novel, Roy is regarded as the most intelligent, and ostensibly the most dangerous of the six. While originally designed to be a combat model, Roy seems to become more and more conflicted throughout the film. Like the other androids, Roy is reaching the end of his four-year lifespan and seeks to extend his own life, the key to which can apparently only be gained from his creator, Eldon Tyrell. It is interesting to note here that the one android with the most apparent evidence of human maturity is the android that seems to be the oldest in the group—that is, Roy Batty—which indicates that the older the androids are, the more emotionally developed they become. In other words, if we are to define the androids’ humanity by the complexity of their emotions, then it can be argued the longer they live, the more human they become. Regardless, Roy Batty’s conflict arguably makes him the most compelling of the androids because his efforts to process his own emotions is what really sets the boundaries between human and android in the film. His empathic conflict is already very human in its nature as it reflects Mercer’s ultimate lesson in Dick’s novel, that we are meant to do wrong. For example, according to Deckard’s briefing on
the androids, Roy, along with the other androids, was designed as a combat model so killing is in Roy’s nature.

Finally, Roy Batty’s ascent towards humanity culminates during the final conflict between him and Rick Deckard. Reaching the end of his lifespan, Roy reverts to a more animalistic behavior, emitting a howling sound as he stalks Deckard through an apartment building. While Roy’s behavior appears very bizarre and inhuman, it has been explained by actor Rutger Hauer that it stems from his celebrating the last amounts of energy he has left before his imminent death (Sammon, 186). Roy also continues to taunt Deckard over Deckard’s having killed the other androids, and questions his morality by asking him questions such as “Aren’t you the ‘good’ man?”, possibly pointing out the irony that Deckard, the assumed “hero” in the situation, is gunning down defenseless androids, and Deckard’s occupation as a killer of androids arguably makes him appear less human than the very androids he retires.

In closing, while both Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? and Blade Runner seem to deliver a similar message relating to certain aspects of humanity, a message indicating a shifting definition of what it means to be human and the empathic conflict within oneself, Blade Runner seems to conclude by saying that even an android like Roy Batty can learn the value of humanity, to the point that even he can become “more human than human” (in the words of the Tyrell Corporation’s slogan). In other words, Dick’s novel can in one way be summarized as Deckard’s journey to learning that being human is essentially being in steady conflict within oneself, even violating one’s own principles; whereas Blade Runner can be understood in the way Roy’s own conflict is resolved towards the end of the film when he decides to go against his own instinct as a combat model and save Deckard from falling to his death—all the while relaying his own memories to Deckard and keeping his legacy alive, and in a way extending his own lifespan, while also being finally capable of showing empathy himself. In other words, the film seems to offer a parallel view to the novel: instead of a human character like Deckard realizing what it means to be human, the film has the android Roy Batty discovering what it means to be human. Furthermore, Batty’s resolution at the end of the film seems to put more emphasis on empathy being a defining factor in what makes one human, as evidenced by the dying Roy saving Deckard’s life. Conversely, Deckard’s ultimate fusion with Mercer in the novel seems to suggest that part of being
human is not just feeling empathy, but doing wrong in spite of it. Overall, both the novel and film use empathy to blur the boundaries between human and android but still continue to address the issue of what it means to be human—even when we know who is human and who is an android, are the androids really that inhuman, after all? And in the case of Roy Batty’s resolution at the end of *Blade Runner*, an android can in fact become fully developed empathetically and perhaps become fully human—perhaps even more human than human.
Conclusion

To summarize, while both *Do Android Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Blade Runner* use the ambiguous boundary between human and machine to highlight the issue of what it means to be human, there seems to be some divergence between how the issue is addressed in novel and film. In Dick’s novel, empathy is initially viewed as the most integral part of being human—but as that philosophy is more scrutinized, and ultimately shattered as the central empathic figure Mercer is publically revealed to be fake, so does the definition of humanity within the minds of people in Dick’s novel shatter also. Ultimately, Dick seems to confirm through Deckard’s fusion with Mercer that the key trait of being human includes doing wrong in spite of what our empathy tells us, perhaps emphasizing the ultimate hypocrisy of being human. However, this still leaves us uncertain of what really constitutes the authentic human being, as we may still ask ourselves whether or not Mercerism is false. On the other hand, Deckard’s ultimate fusion with Mercer signifies the more subjective reality of Mercerism—the subjective reality of what it means to be human—so that, in conjunction with Dick’s ideology, we all have access to an “Absolute Reality” of our own.

*Blade Runner*, on the other hand, provides us with a different viewpoint. With the complete lack of Mercerism in the film and an added emphasis on the androids, particularly the empathic development of Roy Batty, there is considerably less focus on the subjective nature of being human, and more focus on humanity as a trait that is not restricted to human beings, but can be acquired by androids as well, as evidenced by Roy’s ascension to humanity. However, the film still leaves it ambiguous as to whether Deckard himself is actually human or android, thus also hinting at the uncertainty of who or what really is human. Regardless, it can be argued that *Blade Runner* makes an attempt to define humanity, along with emotions such as empathy, as something significantly less complex than we perceive, something that can be developed artificially just as well as humans are created naturally. Nevertheless, both novel and film emphasize the importance of learning what it means to be human, whether a human like Deckard learns the meaning of being human, or an android like Roy Batty.
Works Cited


