Disentangling Human Nature from Moral Status:

Lessons For and From Philip K. Dick

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Abstract

A common interpretation of Philip K. Dick's texts *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *We Can Build You* is that they attempt to answer the question "What does it mean to be human?" Unfortunately, these interpretations fail to deal with the fact that the term "human" has both metaphysical and moral connotations. Metaphysical meanings associated with theories of human nature and moral meanings associated with theories of moral status are thus blurred in the novels and in the literature that discusses them. This is problematic on many levels. The conclusion argued for in this paper is that we should carefully disentangle these meanings. Doing so has many benefits, both for literary criticism and moral philosophy. For literary criticism, disentanglement helps solve some puzzling elements of the texts that are unlikely to be solved if the entanglements are not undone. Furthermore, disentangling the moral and the metaphysical meanings of "human" provides an opportunity to showcase how theories of moral status can be used as an interpretive lens. For moral philosophy, exploring the entanglements of the novels can suggest new ideas about which non-humans—animals, robots, artificial intelligence—are part of the moral community. Finally, disentangling these meanings highlights problems that arise when one assumes that answers to metaphysical questions entail clear moral answers to questions about moral status.

Keywords: Androids, Human Nature, Moral Status, Moral Considerability, Moral Relevance, Moral Significance, Agent, Patient, Ontology, Ontogeny

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An interesting aspect of reading the works of Philip K. Dick and the scholarship on his opus is their richness. In terms of scholarship, there are formalist readings,[1] post-humanism readings,[2] Marxist readings,[3] as well as animal studies readings[4] and attempts at comprehensive readings of his novels.[5] These readings have looked at metaphysical issues,[6] socio-economic and political issues,[7] and issues in narrative elements,[8] just to name few. Philip K. Dick is the gift that keeps giving, almost always with some new unexpected twist just around the corner both in the narrative and in the scholarship.

Those twists can create confusions, sometimes intentional, sometimes not. One of those confusions occurs in the novels *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (hereafter, *Androids*) and *We Can Build You* (hereafter, *Build*) as well as the scholarship on them. A common, but not universal, interpretation of these novels is that a core question raised by the narratives is "what does it mean to be human?" The problem is that the term "human" is ambiguous.[9] It has both metaphysical and moral connotations.[10] The following argument supports the claim that the metaphysical and moral meanings connected to the concept "human" should be disentangled. The point is to gain clarity about each part, before they are rewoven into a greater understanding of their relation in these two novels, in other works of literature, and in philosophical inquiry.

A key move in this disentanglement of the metaphysical and the moral is to rely on general observations that arise from the philosophical exploration into moral status. As Mary Anne Warren puts it, "[t]o have moral status is to be morally considerable, or to have moral standing. It is to be an entity towards which moral agents have, or can have, moral obligations" (Warren 2000, 3). These obligations can be understood in terms of when and how something must be taken into consideration during our moral deliberations.

Focused research into moral status has been around for some time and continues to evolve.[11] By looking at the work done in this area, some benefits for literary studies can emerge. First, in terms of interpretation of Dick's writings, this can provide insight into some puzzling aspects of the narratives in *Androids* and *Build*. Second, this can open up research into different readings of his work, as well as other literary works involving non-humans, using different theories of moral status.[12] Third, disentangling issues of moral status and human nature in the concept "human" allows for a clearer discussion of their connections.

There are also benefits to philosophy from looking at how the metaphysical and moral meanings of "human" have become entangled in the novels. First, the novels involve entanglements that are found in our everyday use of the term "human." Undoing these entanglements in the novel can help clarify the uses of the term "human" in philosophy and elsewhere. Second by looking at these novels and the puzzles generated by entangling "human" with "moral status," the novels point out that questions and answers about human nature and moral status are not co-extensive. Specifically, examining these novels illuminate that answering metaphysical questions about human nature does not automatically generate answers about moral conflicts. Next, once we see the connections between philosophical theories and literary criticism surrounding science fiction and Dick's work, philosophers can see that literary criticism is developing theories of moral status distinct from the usual philosophical suspects of consequentialists and deontologists. Finally, consistent with the theme of this issue, the novels explore the moral contours of how we should treat future non-humans as well as contemporary neuro-divergent humans. In other words, it gives all of us, philosophers and non-philosophers, ideas about how to guide our behavior towards others.

The Novels and Critical Commentary

In case someone is not familiar with these novels, especially *Build*, a brief overview of them should be helpful.

We Can Build You is set in a future USA in which one quarter of the population suffers from mental disorders including a flattening-of-affect form of schizophrenia. In this environment the main character, Louis Rosen, owns a company that makes mechanical androids, called simulacra, of Abraham Lincoln and Edwin Stanton. Rosen proposes selling the concept to the entrepreneur Sam Barrows. A key point in the novel is that the simulacra seem to have a greater ability to empathize than either the human Pris Frauenzimmer (the designer of the simulacra) or Rosen himself.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? is set in a future post-apocalyptic California in which most, if not all, animal life has been destroyed by a worldwide nuclear conflict. By the beginning of the novel, most of humanity has emigrated off-planet. To help with the difficulties of emigration, Rosen Industries makes increasingly sophisticated biological androids. A key difference between humans and androids is that the former supposedly can experience empathy and the latter cannot. Without empathy, androids are considered dangerous and are to be terminated if they come to Earth. The narrative follows Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter, in his quest to identify and eliminate several androids including Roy and Imgard Baty, Luba Luft, Rachel Rosen, and Pris Stratton. One of the issues the novel raises is whether Deckard and other bounty hunters can do their job if they empathize with the androids. In other words, in order to do their job, the bounty hunters must avoid developing empathy, cease to be "human." In short, they need to become that which they are trying to destroy.

It should be clarified that I am only going to focus on the content of the novel *Androids* and not interpolate any information from its cinematic adaptation *Blade Runner* nor any of the various expansions of that world in either cinema, television, or comics. While there are clear thematic similarities between *Androids* and all of the various media that have been inspired by it, the narrative differences are too profound to even consider intermixing an analysis of the novel with the other texts. However, if my arguments are correct, theories of moral status could be used to provide new interpretations of those creative works.[13]

A key thematic element of both novels involves the importance of empathy as a defining characteristic of a psychologically healthy human being. This is perhaps why it is often stated that both *Androids* and *Build* are in part concerned with human nature. David Dresser states that "throughout [*Androids*], the question of what it means to be human, is raised on a variety of levels" (Dresser, 194). The first line of Sheryl Vint's essay also sanctions this view: "Central to Philip K. Dick's fiction is the question of what it means to be human, a question generally explored through the opposition between 'authentic' human beings and various artificial beings made to imitate humans" (Vint, 111).

As already noted, however, the concept "human" has both metaphysical and moral components to its meaning. The above authors highlight this by noting moral implications

often associated with the term "human." Dresser states that Dick is engaged in "ethical/ metaphysical musings" (Dresser, 196). Vint points out that the distinction between human and android in *Androids* is parallel to the distinction made between humans and animals. The purpose of these distinctions is ethical in that it is "the line drawn between human and nonhuman that justifies the use of violence without ethical consequence" (Vint, 115). Both of these authors slide back and forth between metaphysical issues and issues about the moral treatment of androids.[14]

Even someone like Kim Stanley Robinson, who reads *Build* as an expression of difficulties Dick had in his personal life and *Androids* as about the falling apart of category schemes, does not follow through with his own thesis and fully pull apart metaphysical and moral issues. Robinson writes that "Dick has given us two oppositions, Human/Android and Human/Inhuman. As the novel begins we are to assume that the two oppositions are identical, but the action of the narrative first forces the two apart, and then leads us to conclude that the first one is inessential, the second vitally important" (Robinson, 92). This leads to a partition of characters in *Androids* as follows: Humane Humans—John Isidore, Rick Deckard; Cruel Humans—Phil Resch; Humane Androids—Luba Luft; and Cruel Androids—the Batys (Robinson, 92). Note that Robinson's scheme uses a normative term for the first half of each category and a descriptive term for the second half. In doing so he highlights the moral/metaphysical divide but entangles them in analysis. Umberto Rossi does something similar. Rossi, in his unified reading of Dick's novels in terms of ontological uncertainty, assumes these two novels are more closely linked than Robinson. He highlights the entanglement of metaphysical and moral issues when he notes that in *Build* "Ontogeny, however, does not guarantee that all those born of man and woman are human(e), neither it ensures that the simulacra in the novel are no more than machines" (Rossi, 148). The use of the linguistic gimmick in writing "human(e)" is an attempt to highlight and yet entangle the metaphysical and the moral connotations of the term "human."

But should one slide so easily between these moral and non-moral understandings in Dick's works? At least two commentators are suspicious of such moves. John Reider, in discussing *The Man in the High Castle*, argues that the conclusion of this novel "may not lead so easily from metaphysical to political and ethical implications" (Reider, 215). Frederic Jameson also seems skeptical, especially in Dick's works which include androids. Jameson's positing of the Android Cogito, which I take to be the point that mere cognition is not enough to let you know that you are human, supports the claim "that Dick's focus is far more Cartesian than it is ethical or pop psychological" where "Cartesian" refers to isolated metaphysical and epistemological problems (Jameson, 374).

First Entanglement—Metaphysical and Moral Threads

So, there is dispute in literary criticism about how metaphysical and moral issues are linked, if they are at all. Furthermore, the above comments do not fully recognize a complication in linking them, namely, that there are *three* distinct issues in the android narratives related to *three* different areas of inquiry: ontology, ontogeny, and morality. Both ontology and ontogeny are areas of study under the broader category of metaphysics.

Ontogeny is the study of the development of an individual object. In part it is concerned with the *origins* of an individual object by asking a question like "how did object *X* come into existence?" For example, one of the differences between an automobile and a human is that an automobile is created by mechanical processes whereas a human is created by biological processes. In *Androids* and *Build* this question is answered by whether or not the object was made through sexual intercourse and then a biological process (humans) or whether the object was assembled (Lincoln and Stanton in *Build*) or made through a process that was biological but did not involve sexual intercourse (the Batys, etc. in *Androids*). Ontology, on the other hand, is the study of existence. One area of ontology tries to describe the features and relations between particular objects.[15] This involves, occasionally, inquiry into what characteristics a thing must exhibit to be considered a member of a class. This asks a question such as "is object *X* human or non-human in nature?" One way to answer this question involves identifying a list of individually necessary and jointly sufficient criteria for class membership. Membership is then determined by whether or not the object in question meets these criteria. If one is uncomfortable with such a bald form of essentialism in their metaphysics, then some version of Wittgenstein's view of family resemblance could be adopted, where objects are grouped together due to similarities that are neither individually necessary nor jointly sufficient for the grouping.

But neither metaphysical issue is a moral issue. Benjamin Hale nicely points out this distinction between metaphysical issues and moral issues in his own discussion of moral status. The key is to separate the metaphysical question about what properties or qualities an object has from questions of whether those properties or qualities entail any normative conclusions. Thus, he distinguishes metaphysical theories of relevance from the two moral issues of considerability and significance. Hale views each of these types of theories by the question the theory tries to answer. Theories of relevance ask the metaphysical question, "what is it about an object that determines whether it is relevant to our inquiry?" (Hale, 43). This has been the key question of a great deal of writing on moral status. Consequentialists, like Peter Singer, answer that it is the ability to feel pain or pleasure, to experience desire satisfaction, or some other affective psychological property connected to welfare. Deontologists, like Tom Regan, still focus on psychological properties, but include non-affective states such as memory, sense of identity, etc. Kantians focus on psychological properties such as agency or rationality. Within the Dick novels considered here, the properties in question are whether the object is mechanical (Dick 1994, 12-13) or biological (Dick 1996, 16 and 198) and whether the biological process is started by intercourse or in a lab. There are other views as well that Mary Anne Warren describes in her works.[16]

But answering this metaphysical question about what properties are important does not answer two different moral questions. Theories of moral considerability identify which objects are to be included in our moral deliberations (Hale, 43). They do this by explaining why the properties identified as relevant make possessors of those properties part of the moral realm. Again, consider typical views from consequentialists and deontologists. If pleasure and pain determine relevance, then the hedonistic consequentialist must say that any being that can experience pleasure or pain is part of the moral community, and thereby

include all craniate chordates such as fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. Tibor Machan eloquently gives one deontological reason for why all the non-humans included by the hedonistic consequentialist are outside the community. By focusing on autonomy as the morally relevant characteristic, he points out that humans are in the moral community but all other animals are out of the community. Why? Because humans need "'moral space,' that is, a definite sphere of moral jurisdiction where their authority to act is respected and protected so it is they, and not intruders, who govern themselves" (Machan, 164). Questions of moral considerability thus go beyond metaphysical questions by connecting descriptive claims—object X has property P—to a normative claim—because X has property P, X is morally considerable.

A third point to note is that questions of moral significance address a different set of moral claims. Theories of moral significance answer the question, "how much weight must we give to X in our moral decisions when it possesses property P?" (Hale, 43). Here, consequentialists focus on treating the individual experiences of pleasure and pain equally in the sense that no experience of pleasure or pain is modified due to who experiences it. So, a cat that experiences three hedons of pleasure from their dinner and humans who each receive three hedons of pleasure from their dinner all have their experience enter the moral deliberations in the same way. The cat experience does not get modified by a discount function and the human experiences do not get modified by a multiplier. A deontologist may also focus on significance as equality by focusing on the whole individual. Again, for someone like Machan, once you are in the community, you are a full person and each person must, morally, be seen and treated as equal possessors of rights. Despite this tendency toward equality, however, it is possible to come up with systems that allow for gradations of significance, and thus a theory of moral significance can be useful when making comparisons of importance between two objects that are morally considerable, as in medical triage. So, Hale provides us with a set of distinctions to help "circumvent many of the problems that have plagued earlier theories" of moral status (Hale, 45). These problems are all generated by entangling metaphysical and moral questions to such a degree that one thinks answering the metaphysical question automatically answers all the moral questions.

Second Entanglement—Human Nature and Moral Status Threads

Normally, making claims about what the author of a text was thinking would constitute a straightforward instance of the intentional fallacy. In literary criticism, this fallacy occurs when a critic ascribes intentions to an author based on the text. In the case of Dick, however, we have resources that blunt some of this concern, and at the very least, allow us to use Dick as *one* possible critical interpreter of his novels. Dick, in his non-fiction writing and speeches, seems to be aware of the fact that words like "human" involve the entanglement of all these meanings sketched above. He was fond of entangling distinct issues. In "How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later" Dick points out that the two topics he is interested in are "What is reality?" and "What constitutes the authentic human being?" (Dick 1995b, 260). He thinks these two topics are so entangled as to be one topic (Dick 1995b, 263). His willingness to entangle distinct issues suggests that

he would be willing to play with the entanglement of metaphysical and moral meanings involved in the term "human." Consider his comments in "Man, Android and Machine." Dick begins the second paragraph by noting that androids "are among us, although morphologically they do not differ from us; we must not posit a difference in essence, but a difference in behavior" (Dick 1995c, 211). In other words, he wants to focus on the nature of behavior in order to determine whether or not something is human. The behavior that he is interested in, however, is clearly behavior motivated by moral attitudes such as empathy toward others. That second paragraph of "Man, Android, and Machine" ends as follows:

> A human being without the proper empathy or feeling is the same as an android built so as to lack it, either by design or mistake. We mean, basically, someone who does not care about the fate that his fellow living creatures fall victim to; he stands detached, a spectator, acting out by his indifference John Donne's theorem that 'No man is an island,' but giving the theorem a twist: That which is a mental and moral island *is not a man*. (Dick 1995c, 211-2)

In other words, to be a human, to be a member of the class human, involves moral elements. First, a being must recognize itself as capable of moral behavior. Second, that being must recognize another as morally considerable. Third, that being must choose to behave toward the other in a moral manner. Dick thus highlights the moral content of the concept of "human being." His ontological marker for human-ness (human nature), is a moral attitude (empathy) and behavior of including others in one's own moral deliberation.

A natural question to ask is why disentangle these meanings? In everyday use it seems as if the ambiguities will remain. Furthermore, the above indicates that Dick, both in his fiction and non-fiction, was interested in exploring the entanglement. Two distinct reasons can be given for pulling apart the metaphysical and moral threads. The first should appeal to philosophers: despite similarities between issues of human nature and moral status, there are too many substantive differences between the questions, answers, and implications for human nature and moral status to be treated as identical in analysis. The second should appeal to literary critics of Dick's work: by distinguishing these issues some otherwise puzzling implications of his writings can be given explanations.

Consider the philosophically oriented reason. The first thing to note is that the questions themselves are different. Both metaphysical questions are naturally stated in a descriptive way: the ontogeny question asks a "how" question and the ontology question asks a "what" question. Neither question has any necessary moral content. Questions of moral considerability and moral significance, however, are doubly moral. They are moral in the sense that they ask specific questions about who should be valued as inside the moral community and how much they should be valued. Second, the questions are not merely about a moral issue, but the questions are naturally framed in a moral way by asking a "should" question. For example, the first question to be asked in any discussion of moral status is "*should* object *X* be seen as being morally considerable?" So, one reason for separating the meanings of human nature and moral status in analysis is that each deals with different questions.

Additional reasons for separating the meanings in analysis can be found in the range of answers that can be given for the different questions. Within the novels, each question has different sets of answers. The metaphysical questions have answer sets that are dyadic: in terms of ontogeny, are you created through sex (Deckard, Resch and Isidore in *Androids*; Pris and Louis in *Build*) or by manufacturing (Roy and Irmgard Baty, Rachael, Pris, etc. in *Androids*; Lincoln and Stanton in *Build*)? In terms of ontology, do you have the capacity for empathy (Isidore in *Androids*; Lincoln and Stanton in *Build*) or do you not (Resch and the Batys in *Androids*; Pris and Louis in *Build*)? But strictly speaking, the moral status answer set is triadic. There are three possible answers to the question "should Roy Baty be seen as having moral status?" The first answer determines whether Baty has moral status or not. In other words, the answer identifies Roy as either a moral subject or a non-moral object If Roy Baty turns out to be a moral subject, then another question arises: should Roy Baty be seen as being a moral *agent* or a moral *patient*?

The distinction between moral agent, moral patient and non-moral object is drawn by providing answers to the following questions: (a) whose actions are capable of being morally appraised? and (b) what can be morally harmed? While David J. Gunkel thoroughly explores issues of agency and patiency in relation to artificial life in *The Machine Question*, what follows is an overview for current purposes.

A moral agent is something that can act morally. To act morally means that one has responsibilities because one is able to modify her or his actions. In Kantian ethics, a moral agent is one that acts in accordance with the rules that have passed tests to ensure their universal nature. In Aristotelian ethics, a moral agent is one who acts on a desire, but is aware that one is acting on the desire and has adopted that desire through rational inquiry. In either case, a moral agent can be praised for engaging in morally appropriate behavior and be blamed for engaging in morally questionable behavior. If Roy Baty is a moral agent, then he is morally blameworthy for all of the individuals he kills.

Generally, moral agents are also considered to be moral patients, but not all moral patients are moral agents. Mere moral patients do not have moral responsibility, and thus cannot be praised or blamed for their behavior, but they are part of the moral community and can be morally wronged or harmed. For example, defenders of animal rights use the notion of mere patiency to explain why animals are in the moral community even though they are not moral agents (Pluhar). In these novels, if androids like Roy Baty are moral patients, then they can be morally wronged by others. One way to express the nature of these moral violations is in terms of having one's rights or interests violated. Negative rights are behavioral proscriptions such as "do not murder." They impose limitations on others. So, if Roy has rights or interests, then others must refrain from performing actions that would violate Roy's right to life or interest not to be harmed, unless sufficient justification is available.

A reason for allowing the category of moral patients that are not moral agents is that there can be one set of criteria for behaving morally and another set of criteria for being a member of the moral community that could be morally harmed by others. The above Kantian and Aristotelian examples of moral responsibility require high cognitive ability to be able to follow a rule or identify the rationally acceptable desires to act upon. It is

assumed that animals and humans with diminished cognitive abilities are unable to act according to rational rules or identify the right desires to act upon. Thus, they cannot be held morally blameworthy and are not moral agents.[17] Nevertheless, if the criterion for being morally harmed is not cognitive ability but the ability to feel pain and suffer, then animals and the cognitively impaired can be considered capable of being morally harmed. This means that we should see them as moral patients even if we do not appraise their behavior morally. But on this hedonistic criterion trees, ecosystems, zygotes, and embryos *would not* count, and at some stage a human fetus *would* count as a moral patient. Other criteria might bring all or some of these living objects into the moral community as patients. In terms of Dick's novels, if Roy Baty in *Androids* is merely a moral patient, Roy cannot be held responsible for those people he kills. Nevertheless, it would be impermissible to kill Roy without morally sufficient reasons. If Roy is both an agent and a patient, then he should be treated as a normal adult human in terms of morality and perhaps the legal system.

Finally, there can be objects without moral status that can neither act morally nor be acted upon in a moral way. For example, concrete lacks moral status. If a piece of concrete breaks off a building and hits a pedestrian, the concrete has done nothing wrong and is not morally blameworthy; if it stands unbroken for a thousand years it is not praiseworthy. Furthermore, if one wishes to break concrete with a sledgehammer, nothing immoral has been done to the concrete. We can take the pieces of concrete and throw them off buildings or skip them across water without harming the concrete in any moral way, though, admittedly, if the concrete hits something with moral status we have harmed *that* thing. If Roy Baty, as an android, is the moral equivalent of concrete—an artifact outside the moral sphere—then moral agents can do whatever they wish to do to Roy.[18]

There are further reasons to keep the metaphysical issues about human nature and the normative issues about moral status distinct. The first reason has already been hinted at, namely, that members of the class "human being," understood in a strictly biological sense in terms of origin and nature, and the members of the classes "moral agent" and "moral patient" are not guaranteed to be identical. Assume that one provides the following (very problematic) individually necessary and jointly sufficient criteria for membership in the class "human being":

(S1) 46 chromosomes;

(S2) the genetic material was blended through intercourse.

Furthermore, suppose we define the difference between moral agent and moral patient as follows:

(S3) that to be a moral agent involves the ability to regulate one's own behavior by adherence to rationally acceptable rules;

(S4) that to be a moral patient involves only the ability to experience pain.

Problems quickly arise in that a normal, healthy newborn human child that was the result of intercourse is a member of the class "human being" (meets S1 and S2) and yet is not a member of the class "moral agent" (does not meet S3) because as a newborn it is unable to

regulate its own behavior by adherence to rationally acceptable rules. The newborn, assuming the child has the ability to feel pain and pleasure, is a member of the class "moral patient" (meets S4). But, on a purely hedonistic criterion, membership in the class "moral patient" (S4 above) likely includes all normal non-human vertebrates. Furthermore, consider what would happen if one's view of hedonism left out psychological suffering in favor of purely physical suffering as a criterion of being a moral patient. In this case, an otherwise normal adult human with extreme idiopathic neuropathy of the sensory system—i.e., the individual cannot feel any physical pain—would be someone who is a moral agent (meets S1, S2 and S3) but possibly fails to meet S4 and so is not a moral patient! Another problem would be that "test tube" babies might be moral patients and develop into moral agents, but would never be classified as human beings because they were not the product of intercourse in violation of S2. Just in case the objectionable nature of these ideas in combination is not clear, note that when combined they entail that someone with Downs' syndrome would also not be human because they have more than 46 chromosomes (violation of S1), would be considered a moral patient, but depending on the degree of cognitive impairment, may fail to be a moral agent (not meet S3). The point being expressed by these reflections is that despite the assumed co-extensiveness of answers to the metaphysical and moral questions surrounding a human, such co-extensiveness, when it occurs, is an accident. In addition, seemingly innocuous statements, intermixing metaphysical and moral ideas, can lead to unintended and morally odious conclusions. Thus, the metaphysical and moral questions, the questions about human nature and moral status, should be treated separately.

Some Benefits—Solving Puzzles in the Novels

The texts seem to play with these vagaries and ambiguities. Dick, understood as a literary critic of his own work, calls attention to these difficulties. In "Man Android and Machine" he states that he uses Rachael Rosen in *Androids* and Pris in *Build* to illustrate how some of these categories come apart. At this point, Dick defines an android as non-human:

> In my science fiction I write about [androids] constantly. Sometimes they themselves do not know they are androids. Like Rachel Rosen, they can be pretty but somehow lack something; or, like Pris, in *We Can Build You*, they can be absolutely born of a human womb and even design androids—the Abraham Lincoln one in that book—and themselves be without warmth; they can fall within the clinical entity "schizoid," which means lacking proper feeling. I am sure we mean the same thing here, with the emphasis on the word "thing." (Dick 1995c, 211)

In other words, both Rachael in *Androids* and Pris in *Build* are androids, they are things, and therefore they are not properly human. But, since both can experience pain, a point made about both characters in the novels, both are moral patients. So, Rachel in *Androids* is a non-human android and a moral patient. Pris in *Build* is a human that should be seen as an android (due to her lack of empathy) and yet is a moral patient. If we assume that the categories of "human being" and "moral patient" have different criteria, we can make sense of the fact that these two characters, different in origin, are nevertheless both androids and moral patients. It also helps us understand why Deckard in *Androids* and Rosen in *Build*

struggle with emotional confusion when interacting with these other characters: the connections between the categories of human/moral and non-human/non-moral are fraying in different ways in the novels.

This leads us to other reasons to separate the human nature and moral status elements of "human." An explanation can be given for puzzling events in the novels if the different meanings of "human" are spelled out. As just indicated, in *Androids* the ambiguity about who is in the class "human being" and "moral patient" seems to be important. Dick never indicates that non-human animals are to be considered part of the class "human being." However, the Voight-Kampf empathy test, which is used to determine whether an entity is human or not, can only work if one considers that animals have moral status as moral patients. Almost every question of the test involves the killing of an animal and the idea is that if the test subject does not show appropriate empathy—i.e., does not emotionally recognize the animal as a moral patient—then the subject is an android (Dick 1996, 48-51). In other words, the entire construction of the test makes sense only if the criteria for membership in the classes "human" and "morally considerable" are not the same. As John Isidore points out in *Androids*, Pris is wrong to claim that only humans matter morally because "Even animals—even eels and gophers and snakes and spiders— are sacred," where sacredness can be understood as a stand-in for moral considerability in *Androids* (Dick 1996, 161). If one conflates metaphysical questions about "being human" and moral questions about "being morally considerable", then one would have to claim that either the Voight-Kampf test is illegitimate since non-human animals are not morally considerable/sacred or that non-human animals are human beings which is nonsense. By recognizing the different metaphysical and moral meanings of the term "human" and keeping them separate, at least initially, one can pass between the horns of this dilemma.

Do the classes "human being" and "moral agent" also come apart in these novels? Arguably they do. John Isidore is perhaps the most interesting character in *Androids*. He is a "special" because his genes are distorted, and also a "chickenhead" in that the radiation from the fallout of the prior nuclear conflict has had a deleterious effect on his intelligence (Dick 1996, 16-19). It would be hard to deny that Isidore has moral status on the criterion of having empathy. His very name "Is-adore" evokes this ability and his empathy towards all creatures—animal, human, and android alike—is mentioned throughout the text (Dick 1996, especially 164-6). But Isidore is not a full moral agent. As in our world, people who are morally considerable but lack full agency are both morally and legally restricted in their behavior. For example, moral and legal rights of engaging in sexual behavior, procreation, and freedom of movement are often restricted in non-agents. Similarly, in the novels, it is suggested that John Isidore's status as a special makes him unsuitable for breeding and he is not granted permission to procreate (Dick 1996, 16). Second, specials are neither morally nor legally allowed to emigrate like regulars (Dick 1996, 19). Third, and most importantly, Isidore seems unable to properly make judgments about who to consider part of the moral community and has an emotional connection to the androids (Dick 1996, 164). A basic moral rule of the narrative world is that one does not form emotional attachments to and treat beings that lack empathy as having moral status. As Phil Resch points out to Deckard, if humans did that, then human beings would become vulnerable and likely

exterminated by the androids (Dick, 1996, 141). Isidore's inclusion of androids in his sphere of empathy suggests that his chickenhead status makes him unsuitable to live in an unsupervised way with the moral freedom to have sex, procreate, and travel. By deciding not to turn in the androids he is putting all other humans in danger. A regular would, supposedly, not do that because a regular would cognitively see a failure to turn in an android as too much of a risk to itself and others (Dick 1996, 163-5). So, John Isidore is a human being because of his ability to empathize, but he is not a full moral agent. But such an observation can make sense only if we distinguish metaphysical issues about human nature from the moral issues about moral status.

There are also interpretive reasons to distinguish the metaphysical and the moral issues when reading these two novels. By focusing on *Androids* and the first part of *Build*, a case can be made that the texts raise issues of moral status. First, consider *Androids*. One of the implications of recognizing some being as either a moral agent or moral patient is a restriction on killing that being. The very first scene of *Androids* involves Deckard arguing with his wife, Iran, whether or not he is a murderer (Dick 1996, 4). This is, in other words, a *moral* argument about murder versus justified killing, not an ontological argument, although there is evidence of entanglement in the text—Rick claims he has never killed a human (Dick 1996, 4). Later in the novel, Deckard notes that he used to think of an android as an "it" because his *conscience* used to bother him about bounty hunting, and thinking of androids as non-moral objects, i.e., not moral agents or patients, made it possible for him to do his job (Dick 1996, 125). One's conscience is involved in *moral* questions, not metaphysical. These considerations show that moral questions are raised by the novel which suggests that the novels can be interpreted as moral arguments.

There is evidence of issues of moral status in *Build* as well, this time concerning the ability to buy and sell simulacra. A key character in *Build* is the simulacrum Abraham Lincoln. Having a Lincoln simulacrum with all of Lincoln's knowledge and personality allows for an interesting exchange between Lincoln and the entrepreneur Sam Barrows. Lincoln engages Barrows in a debate as to whether or not Lincoln can be bought (Dick 1994, 106ff). Since being bought and sold as a slave is morally forbidden if the object under consideration is a moral patient, then the existence of such a scene provides evidence that the work is putting forth a moral argument, not merely an ontological one. In this scene the Lincoln simulacrum recalls the arguments the real Lincoln made in the Lincoln-Douglas debates:

> There is a physical difference between the two, which, in my judgment, will probably forbid their living together on the footing of perfect equality. But I hold the Negro as much entitled to the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as any white man. He is not my equal in many respects, certainly not in color—perhaps not in intellectual and moral endowments. But in the right to eat bread which his own hand earns, without leave of anybody else, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every other man (Dick, 1994, 106).

If one were to change the references from "Negro" to "android," and "white man" with "ontogenetic human," this speech becomes a disquisition concerning the fact that simulacra should be granted moral considerability.

Given the above, it should be questioned whether it is appropriate to say that a central issue in both *Androids* and *Build* can be summed up by the question "What does it mean to be human?" The ambiguities built into the term "human" can get in the way of an analysis of the novels. The above gives the reader three reasons to take the novels as asking key *questions,* some concerning metaphysics of human nature and other concerning moral issues related to being in the moral community. First, it is possible to disentangle the meanings of "human." Second, there is a list of advantages to disentangling these meanings. Third, the text itself includes evidence that there are both metaphysical and moral issues surrounding the concept "human." Thus the suggestion is that, when approaching these works, we should not say that the central issue is "What does it mean to be human?" Instead, the texts should be approached as exploring two interrelated issues, namely the metaphysical question "what is human nature?" and the moral question "what has moral status?"

Treating these issues of human nature and moral status separately, however, does not mean that the texts do not explore their relationship, nor that they should be permanently separated. Treating them separately helps a reader understand the way these issues are connected. For example, if one treats the metaphysical and the moral issues as identical, then there are several parts in both of the novels that are puzzling. By separating the issues, however, these novels can be seen as exploring the multiple ways in which being human is connected to multiple categories of moral status.

Additional Benefits of Disentanglement

There are other benefits to disentangling the metaphysical and normative issues. I believe that support for current interpretations of Dick's works can be enhanced through such disentanglement. Here I will only sketch two possibilities that someone else might develop more fully. First, the ideas contained here seem to support Umberto Rossi's thesis that ontological uncertainty unifies an interpretation of Dick's novels. Ontological uncertainty is the "condition in which the characters (and readers) do not know what is real and what is not *in the text*, and must frantically search for the fictional reality behind the fictional simulation" (Rossi 2011, 11; emphasis in original). Rossi points out that this uncertainty is achieved through many devices such as androids, amnesia, alternate realities, drugs, etc. If the above is correct, another device used in conjunction with those mentioned is linguistic ambiguity. Our ability to understand and access reality is limited by our language use, and if we cannot rely on language to give us a univocal picture of reality we can access, then ontological uncertainty arises again. In *Androids*, Decker's and Isidore's parallel crises seem to revolve around their inability to maintain pre-existing binary linguistic categories with their ambiguities intact—human/android and having moral status/not having moral status – thereby getting them to question, as characters, the narrative reality. In *Build*, Barrows' interaction with the Lincoln simulacrum shows that he is unable to see a simulacrum as anything other than a thing and Pris as anything other than human. This is despite the fact

that a reader can see, through Louis Rosen's deteriorating psyche, that maybe the Lincoln is "human" and Pris is the android, and yet both of them would be morally considerable. One could then read the second half of *Build* as Louis' psychological breakdown being triggered by the linguistic category breakdown. Thus, linguistic ambiguity about the term "human" can be seen as unifying both halves of the broken-back *Build* with each other, *Androids*, and Dick's other texts in terms of ontological uncertainty.

A second enrichment of literary criticism is connected to animal studies research. It has been hinted at throughout this article that theories of moral status are related to an area of literary criticism known as animal studies. But examining problems related to moral status includes much more than just animals. This means that there is a much more vast set of theoretical resources available to those engaged in animal studies. Consider Sheryl Vint's (2007) use of Marx's notion of "species being" as the foundation for interpretations of science fiction in her excellent article on *Androids*. Vint argues that the role of animals in the novel has been ignored and that an animal studies approach that uses Marx's notion of "species being" can help us understand why it is problematic to deny that animals have subjectivity. She points out that denying the existence of animal subjectivity, clearly related to moral considerability, supports the morally problematic notion that beings without subjectivity are just things, just commodities. If I am right, then what Vint is doing is making arguments about moral status of animals through Marx. But that means that literary critics are interested in issues of moral status. This in turn means that whole new avenues of literary criticism could be created that incorporate the ever-growing philosophical literature on moral status. For example, what interesting insights could the discussions about moral status bring to those critics reading *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro or Marth Wells' *Murderbot Diaries*?

Finally, another lesson to take from these texts and the analysis here is that everyone is going to be well-served by disentangling the metaphysical and moral issues surrounding human nature and moral status. Just because some entity has, metaphysically, a relevant property—empathy, rationality, a heartbeat, or any number of others that have been proposed—the possession of that property does not, alone, determine anything morally. We need additional information about the entity, as well as a complicated set of normative claims linking this information to make moral judgments. Just as Rick Deckard and John Isidore in *Androids* as well as Louis Rosen in *Build* struggle to make sense of all of this and behave accordingly, so we too must continue to struggle. Articulating clear and correct answers to our moral questions about who is in the moral community is not going to be easy given the growing complexity of the world and the objects within it.

Conclusion

Historical connections between fabulist writings and moral, social and political philosophy go back to Aesop's fables and Plato's use of Atlantis in his dialogues *Timeaus* and *Critias*. Yet only some strands of philosophy, literature, and analysis interact. This paper suggests that we reweave some currently separated strands of thought and research in these disciplines to discover new and interesting twists and entanglements in our thinking, understanding, and lives.

By exploring the ways that two android-centered novels written by Philip K. Dick entangle the concepts of human nature and moral status, this paper suggests, through example, that topics in philosophical ethics can be used fruitfully in literary interpretation. But the paper also shows that the moral content of literature, especially science fiction literature, can help push the development of ethical theory. In order to make sense of the novels, moral concepts and metaphysical concepts need to be disentangled. But this involves diving into both philosophical writings on ethical theory and literary criticism in order to make sense of the texts.

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Notes:

[1] See Frederic Jameson's "History and Salvation in Philip K. Dick" for an example of a formalist reading.

[2] See Jill Galvan's "Entering the Posthuman Collective in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?"* for an example of a post-humanism reading.

[3] See John Rieder's "The Metafictive World of *the Man in the High Castle*: Hermeneutics, Ethics, and Political Ideology" for an example of a Marxist reading.

[4] See Sheryl Vint's "Speciesism and Species Being in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?"* for an example of an animal studies reading.

[5] See Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Novels of Philip K. Dick* and Umberto Rossi's *The Twisted Worlds of Philip K. Dick: A Reading of Twenty Ontologically Uncertain Novels* for examples of comprehensive readings of the novels.

[6] Metaphysical issues with the work of Philip K. Dick are discussed in Jameson, Robinson, Rieder and Rossi.

[7] Socio-economic and political issues are discussed by Galvan and Rieder as well as Eric S. Rabkin in "Irrational Expectations; or How Economics and the Post-Industrial World Failed Philip K. Dick."

[8] Narrative issues are explored in Darko Suvin's "P. K. Dick's Opus: Artifice as Refuge and World View (Introductory Reflections)."

[9] There is another closely related term that could be used here, namely "person." The philosophical literature that I reference throughout the paper often uses the term "person" in the discussion. I have elected to avoid its use here for several reasons. First, Dick uses the term "human" in his writings and speeches. Second is a consideration of space: there is not enough space to get into the similarities and differences in the terms "human" and "person" and their attendant ambiguities. My third reason is more controversial. I believe the literature on moral status has been marred by reference to the concept "person." Discussions of moral status are better when they avoid using that term or when they build up the meaning of the term with analysis of concepts like "moral considerability," "moral relevance," "moral significance," "moral agent" and "moral patient." By using thinner concepts such as considerability, significance, and relevance, more clarity can be gained in the analysis of moral status, personhood, etc.

[10] Throughout this article I use the terms "moral" and "ethical" and their cognates as synonymous. There is a tradition, found in the social sciences and profession-related writings, of distinguishing these terms where one refers to an internal or subjective set of values and rules and the other to an external or objective set of values and rules. However, from the point of view of many philosophers such a distinction is superfluous. Whether you are morally a consequentialist in a world that demands that you be ethically a deontologist is irrelevant to someone interested in the nature of consequentialism versus deontology in the abstract and what each type of theory has to say about the basis of moral status. Since the internal/external distinction is not relevant to this discussion, I will follow the philosophical tradition of not distinguishing the concepts.

[11] Research into moral status involves at least four areas of practical ethics. The first has to do with the moral status of animals. The research here is extensive, but good starting places include Tom Regan's and Peter Singer's *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* and Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*. For more recent work see Cass R. Sunstein's and Martha C. Nussbaum's *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions* as well as Tom L. Beauchamp's and R. G. Frey's *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*, especially the chapters in Parts II and III.

A second area in which moral status plays an important role is the abortion debate. Some articles that are relevant to the moral status of a fetus include Jane English's "Abortion and the Concept of a Person," Patrick Lee's and Robert George's "The Wrong Abortion," Judith Jarvis Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion" where she dismisses the relevance of moral status, and Joel Feinberg "Abortion."

Third, environmental philosophy has been concerned with the moral status of ecosystems and not just animals. Important works here include Christopher D. Stone's *Should Trees Have Standing?: Law, Morality and the Environment*; J. Baird Callicott's *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*; and Harley Cahen's "Against the Moral Considerability of Ecosystems."

Finally, in business ethics there is a discussion of the moral status of corporations. See Peter French's "The Corporation as a Moral Person," Manuel G. Velasquez's "Why Corporations Are Not Morally Responsible for Anything They Do" and Denis Arnold's "Corporate Moral Agency."

[12] Vint has done excellent work in demonstrating how one part of moral status research, animal studies, can be the source for new interpretations.

[13] For an example of how theories of moral status can be used to interpret the movies *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049*, see Okapal's "Who Am I to You." For other works related to these cinematic texts see various chapters in Bunce and McCrossin *Blade Runner 2049: This Breaks the World*, especially in Section 1 "What Makes Us Human" and Ruddow's "Replicant Birth, Moral Miscarriage." For discussions of moral status in relation to other science fiction literature see Okapal's "Of Battle Droids and Zillo Beasts: Moral Status in the Star Wars Galaxy," "'All Other Priorities Are Rescinded': The Moral Status of Employees in the *Alien* Franchise," and "Moral Agency and Moral Status in Science Fiction."

[14] For additional examples of critics who shift back and forth between the descriptive and the moral meanings, see Angus Taylor's "Electric Sheep and the New Argument from Nature" and Marilyn Gwaltney's "Androids as a Device for Reflection on Personhood."

[15] See Thomas Hofweber's "Logic and Ontology" section 3.1.

[16] See both Warren's article "Moral Status" and her book *Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things.*

[17] For a discussion of the extent to which animals can act as moral agents, see the articles in Part IV of Beauchamp and Frey.

[18] The theme of whether or not an android is a non-moral object or a morally considerable subject appears in many non-Dickian narratives. Two examples include the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "The Measure of a Man" and the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* episode "Flesh and Bone." In the former example, Data's status as either mere property or a free subject is determined through trial. In the latter example, Kara "Starbuck" Thrace is interrogating the Cylon Leoben Conoy and part of the interrogation is to constantly remind Leoben that he is a machine, a toaster, an object and not human. The interrogation includes beatings and water torture. At one point President Roslin comes in demanding to know what is going on and Starbuck, thinking that she is in trouble for torturing Leoben responds by saying "It's a machine, sir. There's no limit to the tactics I can use." Rosalin apparently agrees with Starbuck, but does not let it be known until she has Leoben thrown out of an airlock at the end of the episode.