



The Limits of Imagination: A Lacanian Critique of Empathy and Understanding in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

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Abstract

With the growing popularity of LLM-based chatbots and AI such as ChatGPT, some users have been taking to using AI as a method of therapy, experiencing severe transference and other maladaptive consequences. The flaws of empathy-based understanding become more pronounced in these cases due to the wholly different existence of AI in comparison to humanity, accentuating the inherent and insurmountable Otherness that even a fellow human being would have. Similar attempts and failures in understanding artificial intelligence that mimics but cannot replicate human beings are depicted in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). His androids are characterized as being artificial constructs that are uncanny in their similarities and disturbing in their differences from human beings: being created—not born—as fully formed consciousnesses, the androids carry an essential difference that differentiates them from human beings. According to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, human beings undergo a series of complex processes that establish the sense of Self during infancy by undergoing the Mirror Stage, the resolution of the Oedipal Complex, and the split caused by the establishment of language in the unconscious. The androids of *Electric Sheep*, not having gone through these processes, are marked by an abstractness that makes them unable to empathize, though the human characters of the novel attempt to, putting them in moral and spiritual peril. By examining *Electric Sheep* through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis and articulating the differences between human beings and androids as depicted in the text, and the subsequent failure of human attempts to empathize with androids.

Keywords: Philip K. Dick, artificial intelligence, androids, Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis

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The Limits of Imagination: A Lacanian Critique of Empathy and Understanding in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Recent developments in LLM artificial intelligence have led to the widespread adoption of chatbots like ChatGPT. These chatbots can sometimes produce unpredictable behavior in the form of hallucinations and unwittingly cause unexpected consequences. Users have developed emotional attachments to chatbots, with some using chatbots as a form of therapy rather than for information or entertainment purposes. Despite chatbots lacking any physical form or sentience, some users would use these services as a form of therapy, claiming that the chatbots were more effective than their actual therapists. However, due to the lack of sentience from chatbots and the parasocial nature of the relationship with a non-living, virtual being, it has been reported that users who initially responded positively to the chatbots would more likely than not feel that their interactions with the chatbots are hollow with little substance. At the opposite spectrum, there have been cases where users experience severe transference due to misrecognition on the users' part and hallucinations from the AI. In extreme cases, these users would take their own lives to be with chatbots (Pirany, 2023). In their current iterations, chatbots do not possess self-sentience and thus do not have the capacity for malice. They are inanimate programs that output text based on a database of existing texts created by human beings. While they may behave unexpectedly, this behavior is not proof of self-sentience. Instead, abnormal behavior is caused by hallucinations, i.e., glitches caused by the imperfections in their coding. As such, excluding outlier cases, AI as we know it is still largely predictable, and barring the social disruptions that it is expected to cause and has already caused in the present, it is, as of now, not an unknown to humanity.

However, the paradigm of AI emotion development has shifted away from emulating human emotion and moved to a more holistic approach, which may introduce a more unknowable factor in our collective understanding of AI, especially in “black box” scenarios where AI acts outside the boundaries of expectations (Gorvett, 2023). Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), in particular, depicts an imagined scenario where artificial intelligence diverges from human comprehension. The novel portrays a society that has developed a theological and ideological obsession with a limited form of empathy by developing a technology called empathy boxes, and the development of androids that cannot empathize.

Specifically, this paper will examine the interactions between androids who feel no empathy and human beings who have been primed to empathize through identification. This paper will explore the limitations of identification/imagination-based empathy when communicating with non-human entities and what the novel can tell us about coexisting with sentient artificial intelligence in the future. Furthermore, it will analyze how imagination-based empathy functions and its limits from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Through this process, this paper seeks to argue that to coexist with non-human entities, identification-based empathy carries blind spots due to the limitations of imagination—instead, a radical acceptance of the inherent otherness of artificial intelligence is needed.

1 Review of Previous Research, Theoretical Framework, and Methodology

As evidence of its influential status, over 276 journal articles on the novel have been published in JSTOR at the time of the writing. Previous research on *Electric Sheep* ranges from humanity’s relationship with technology, with some researchers focusing on the dehumanizing effects of technology (McNamara, 1997) or rather a focus on technology’s potential for humanizing (Sims, 2009). Others have taken a posthumanist stance about trauma (Vinci, 2014), or read the novel as a warning

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against a society becoming posthuman (McInnis, 2018) and so forth. Of Lacanian analysis of *Electric Sheep* in particular, Freedman has applied Lacan's writings on paranoia to analyze Dick's works in order to put forward a pre-emanate theory on paranoia (Freedman, 1984, p. 15-24). Benesch has focused on the androids of the Other of humanity, a type of distorted image that on the surface is identical to a human being, alienating the subject as they attempt to assimilate the object (Benesch, 1999, p. 90). Regarding the nature of empathy as depicted in the novel, Galvan argues that the protagonist Rick's empathy towards androids at the novel's end is based on an understanding of the material coexistence with the other, and that the protagonist's changing perspective towards the androids is through forfeiting "a more doctrinal definition of empathy" and an empathy that grows out of his understood intimacy with his technological environment (Galvan. 1997).

What this article proposes is to focus not on the ontological issues that arise from the material coexistence with a separate being that confounds the subject due to the amalgamation of the familiar (its material properties) and the unfamiliar (in its mental structures), or the posthuman aspects of the novel as Galvan has. Rather, it will focus on the depiction of empathy through identification, and the imaginary which leads to misrecognitions due to the narcissistic dimensions of the imaginary axis. Of particular interest in the article is the use of virtual reality-like technology called the empathy boxes, which purport to foster empathy through "physical merging -- accompanied by mental and spiritual identification" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 22). The novel's depiction of empathy through identification fails repeatedly, especially when human characters attempt to empathize with the androids of the novel. Lacan and associated scholars have written criticism on empathy based on identification, and particularly, Swales's proposition of empathy based on identification, which she calls "imaginary order empathy," will be the main framework used throughout this paper.

[F]or Freud, identification is the condition for the possibility of empathy, of knowing or feeling something of the other's experience... Using Lacan's concept of the imaginary axis of expe-

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rience, I propose that we can think of this type of empathy as *imaginary order empathy*.

(Swales, 2022, p. 32)

Swales writes that identification-based empathy relies on “*operating via the imaginary axis and we are faced with the possibility of empathizing with someone, we do so in accordance with our own biases and our capacity to accept all aspects of our own experience with minimal judgement*” (Swales, 2022, p. 34). The biased nature of imaginary order empathy can lead to inaccurate empathy, as it will ignore and misrecognize the otherness of another individual, leading to hatred, or rather, be the basis of it. (Swales, 2022, p. 36) This paper seeks to argue that the empathy depicted in the novel is notably similar to Swales’s imaginary-order empathy – furthermore, empathy fails in the novel constantly, as the limits of imaginary order empathy would only become amplified when one attempts to empathize with androids based on identification, who are depicted to be fundamentally different from human beings. Finally, this paper will argue that coexistence with AI should be based not on an assumption of similarity but on an assumption of difference. In doing so, this paper aims to put forth a possible pathway for coexistence with artificial intelligence based not on imagined similarity, but rather on a presumed difference.

2 The Verisimilitude and Otherness of the Nexus-6 Androids in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*?

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (1968) is set after a catastrophic war called World War Terminus, which leads humanity to migrate to space. As a large portion of the population either cannot or will not immigrate, android servants are created as an incentive for migration. These androids are physically nearly identical to human beings, but have a short life span of 4 years. Mentally, the androids are incapable of empathy and demonstrate a cold detachment from their speech and actions. However, the newest Nexus-6 models are capable of emulating human emotion to the degree that they can be indistinguishable from

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human beings unless put through the Voigt-Kampff empathy test, which is employed to seek out and kill androids who have escaped from their servitude on Mars to Earth. Rick Deckard, the novel's protagonist, is one of the bounty hunters who kill escaped androids, who use the euphemism "retiring" to refer to their work. Rick is an unhappy man who faces marital strife with his depressive wife, Iran in his domestic life. He longs for a real animal to have instead of the electric animal that he has, which is seen as being shameful, and is a source of embarrassment for him. However, he cannot afford one, partly because his superior, Dave, is given priority for taking jobs, leaving Rick with little income. When Dave is shot and consequently hospitalized, Rick is assigned the task of hunting 6 Nexus-6 androids.

The verisimilitude of the Nexus-6 androids confuse Rick. Initially, he is attracted to their "vitality and desire to live" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 94), which is in contrast to his depressive wife, Iran. Nonetheless, Rick approaches his job enthusiastically, delighted with the prospect of being able to afford a real animal with "hungry, gleeful anticipation" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 96). However, his encounter with the opera-singing Nexus-6 android, Luba Luft, and her subsequent murder by his fellow bounty hunter, Phil Resch, disturbs him. Due to Resch's sociopathic detachment from his killings, Rick administers the Voigt-Kampff test on Resch, thinking that he is an android, but is disturbed when he realizes that Resch is a human being. Rick's encounters with the Nexus-6 androids shake his faith in the emotional superiority of humanity over androids. He finds himself empathizing with the androids, despite his initial revulsion, instilled into him by his religion, Mercerism, which teaches empathy to all living beings, androids being notably excluded from this category as they are not 'living.'

Finding it difficult to kill the remaining Nexus-6 androids, Rick impulsively buys a real goat for comfort. However, when he brings the goat home, Iran reacts badly due to the financial burden that it will bring them, and shuts Rick off. Dejected, Rick rendezvouses with the Nexus-6 android Rachael, an android under the employment of the android manufacturer, the Rosen Association, who aids him with his job to hunt

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down the escaped androids. After confessing their love for each other, the two make love. Rachael agrees to kill one of the escapee androids for Rick, but she reveals that her conversation and sexual encounter with Rick were intended to manipulate him into refraining from killing the androids. Enraged, Rick threatens to kill Rachael but stops, and proceeds to kill the remaining escapees while hallucinating Mercer, who is proven to be a fraud by the android TV show host Buster Friendly. In revenge, Rachael kills Rick's new goat while he is gone. Spiritually and mentally wounded, Rick drives to the desolate wasteland, where he comes upon a toad. Excitedly, Rick brings it home, only to realize that it is an electric one, but while this revelation hurts him, he accepts it and the electric toad as well. Rick sleeps, and Iran purchases electric flies to go with the electric toad.

3 Identification-based Empathy

Empathy, as it is depicted in the novel, is based on the use of devices called empathy boxes, in which the user goes through what is purported to be identification with Mercer, a martyr figure, in an experience like virtual reality:

The man, Wilbur Mercer, plodded ahead, and as he clutched the handles, John Isidore gradually experienced a waning of the living room in which he stood; the dilapidated furniture and walls ebbed out and he ceased to experience them at all. He found himself, instead, as always before, entering into the landscape of drab hill, drab sky. And at the same time he no longer witnessed the climb of the elderly man. His own feet now scraped, sought purchase among the familiar loose stones...

He had crossed over in the usual perplexing fashion; physical merging – accompanied by mental and spiritual identification – with Wilbur Mercer had reoccurred.

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 22)

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The experience is written to be complete, and makes the user unaware of their own surroundings (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 178). Identification with Mercer is further reinforced as it physically harms the user when Mercer is pelted with rocks as it progresses. Thus, the empathy box turns empathy from a mental experience to a physical one through a crude, rather brute simulation of affective empathy (discomfort in response to another's suffering) and cognitive empathy (identifying with another to understand their perspective). As not much material is written about the physical injury that accompanies prolonged usage of the empathy boxes in the novel, this paper will focus on the problematic aspects of empathy through identification in a Lacanian perspective.

In his works, Jacques Lacan had written little about empathy. When he did, it was written scathingly about the psychoanalytic paradigm of his day, where the analyst attempted to treat the analysand by empathizing with him, translating *Einfühlung* as 'connivance' rather than 'empathy' or 'understanding' as it commonly is (Lacan, 2006, p. 301), and even referred to understanding as a "nauseating category."

But what need can an analyst have for an extra ear, when it sometimes seems that two are already too many, since he runs headlong into the fundamental misunderstanding brought on by the relationship of understanding? I repeatedly tell my students: "Don't try to understand!" and leave this nauseating category to Karl Jaspers and his consorts.

(Lacan, 2006, p. 394)

Lacan's issues with empathy in a clinical context were that it required the analyst to identify with the analysand, which interfered with treatment, as it would result in the analyst attempting to find and isolate a signifier that they could latch on to during treatment (Lacan, 2006, pp. 281-89), when the analyst should have one ear

become deaf as the other must be acute. And that is the one that you should lend to listen for sounds and phonemes, words, locutions, and sentences, not forgetting pauses, scansion, cuts, pe-

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riods, locutions and sentences, not forgetting pauses, scansion, cuts, periods, and parallelisms, for it is in these that the word-for-word transcription can be prepared, without which analytic intuition has no basis or object.

(Lacan, 2006, p. 394)

In other words, if the analyst attempts to empathize with the analysand in treatment, they would fail to bring about the nonsensical symbolic dimensions from the patient and confront the inherent otherness of another individual. In Lacan's view, this would be an exercise in countertransference, only strengthening the ego of the analysand. Lacanians have expanded on the potentially narcissistic characteristics of empathy, notably American Lacanian practitioner Bruce Fink in his book *Against Understanding* (2014), and the inherent biases that arise from empathy based on imaginative identification, i.e., "placing oneself in another's position:"

The imaginary involves looking at others and seeing myself, believing that others have the same motives, hang-ups, and anxieties I have...When I am operating in the imaginary register, I compare everything others say with my own way of thinking...

Everything the other says or does from then on is interpreted in light of the conclusions I have already drawn; all of the other's actions are interpreted as fitting into an inflexible frame, none of her statements or actions being able to call the frame itself into question.

(Fink, 2014, p. 10)

The issue caused by imagination is that it fails to consider the otherness of the imagined position. In other words, when someone attempts to understand someone else, there will always necessarily be a blind spot, some incomprehensible dimension to them that the imagining person will be blind to, as they will come to conclusions based on their limited understanding of the other person. In addition, Swales writes in "A Lacanian Critique of the Empathy Cure" that "imaginary-order empathy",

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which relies on identifying with another by imagining, leads one to assume similarity with the other individual. Due to the inherent flaws of imagination and its heavily biased nature, it has the potential to lead to flawed understanding. Misrecognizing one's emotions when imagining themselves in the other's position can lead to disgust toward the other individual, even when it masquerades as an empathic concern (Swales, 2022, p. 32).

The book's empathy, achieved through "mental and spiritual identification" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 22) and imagining oneself in Mercer's position, leads to the dysfunctional nature of imaginary empathy. The empathy box, which purports to give the user a complete identification, would imply an obliteration of one's sense of self. However, the users are cognizant that they use the empathy box during the experience and can separate themselves from it when they wish to. Furthermore, the scenario presented through the empathy box is just a movie, as proven by the android TV show host Buster Friendly, in the second half of the novel. It is simply an old man climbing a desolate hill and eventually pelted by plastic rocks (Dick, 1968/1996 pp. 205-7). In the video itself, there is little to suggest that Mercer is a savior figure as it simply depicts an old man climbing a hill, but users are led to view him that way because they already "know" this to be fact, due to their preconceived conceptions of Mercer. This is evident when Rick seeks out Mercer's advice during his crisis, stating: "Mercer talked to me but it didn't help. He doesn't know any more than I do. He's just an old man climbing a hill to his death." (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 179)

Thus, their identification with Mercer is based on that premise, a bias that makes up their imagination. Along with this half-identification, the empathy box is shown to be isolating rather than uniting, as is shown in Iran's insistence on using the empathy box during Rick's crisis, as noted by Galvan (1997).

Going over to the empathy box, she quickly seated herself and once more gripped the twin handles. She became involved almost at once. Rick stood holding the phone receiver, conscious

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of her mental departure. Conscious of his own aloneness.

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 176)

This identification-based form of empathy in the novel is further depicted to be flawed through the regular abuse that the disabled population are subject to. The “specials,” who are those who lost part of their cognitive abilities because of radiation are referred to as being “subnormal” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 30) and are called “chickenheads.” Isidore, one of the “specials” is verbally abused by his employer who uses the slur against him (Dick, 1968/1996, pp. 78-79), and he is referred to by the slur constantly throughout the novel, even by the Nexus-6 androids he allows to hide in his home (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 159). Empathy in the novel becomes even more limiting towards the androids, who are categorized as non-living beings excluded from the experience of the empathy boxes, “an experience which [Rick] and virtually everyone else, including subnormal chickenheads, managed with no difficulty” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 30). At the same time, animals are included in the category of Good due to their living nature, and caring for an animal is stated to be an essential component of Mercerism, and not caring for an animal would “deprive you of true fusion with Mercer” (Dick, 1968/1996 p. 11). Part of the hatred towards the androids can be attributed to the systematic deification of empathy, the deliberate exclusion of the androids from this experience, and their servitude. Furthermore, it can also be partially attributed to their categorization as “non-living,” but there is a deeper dimension to the hatred of the androids, which concerns the novel’s identification/imaginary empathy. An example of this can be seen in Rick’s hatred towards his artificial electric sheep, which he refers to as the “tyranny of the object.”

...within him an actual hatred once more manifested itself toward his electric sheep, which he had to tend, had to care about, as if it lived. The tyranny of an object, he thought. It doesn’t know I exist. Like the androids, it has no ability to appreciate the existence of another.

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 42)

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Part of Rick's resentment on the sheep can be attributed to it being a one-sided interaction with an inanimate object, except that he is socially forced to do so. Otherwise, it is because his parasocial communication to the sheep fails to prove Rick's existence to himself, denying an identifying process. In other words, Rick is resentful towards the electric sheep because it fails to prove his identity and strengthen his own sense of Self, which is what an empathic interaction is supposed to provide in his imaginary-order empathic world. This is as the position of the object is not something he can identify with. Thus, when Rick cares for his electric sheep, he is not getting his part of the bargain, so to speak, and the efforts of his labor. Ironically, Rick himself cannot "appreciate" the existence of the otherness of his electric animal and the androids. This incongruity is caused by his being confronted with the difference between the "real thing" and what he regards as an ersatz form whenever he regards his electric sheep.

The electric animal, he pondered, could be considered a subform of the [android], a kind of vastly inferior robot. Or, conversely, the android could be regarded as a highly developed, evolved version of the ersatz animal. Both viewpoints repelled him.

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 42)

Rick's use of the word "ersatz" is key to understanding his view of the electric animals and androids: Due to his myopic worldview enforced by the imaginary order empathy-based Mercerism, he views them as a copy of the "real thing," an inferior copy that he cannot empathize with (i.e. identify with.) This extends to his initial attitude towards the androids, who he has no qualms at killing.

Along with a convenient loophole in Mercerism, which posits "You shall kill only the killers" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 32) with the killers being vague and ill-defined, Rick is able to suspend his empathy towards them when "retiring" the androids. He, as the novel writes, is able to solve the incongruity of him being a killer:

And in Mercerism, an absolute evil plucked at the threadbare

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cloak of the tottering, ascending old man, but it was never clear who or what this evil presence was. A Mercerite sensed evil without understanding it. Put another way, a Mercerite was free to locate the nebulous presence of The Killers wherever he saw fit. For Rick Deckard, an escaped humanoid robot.... epitomized The Killers.

(Dick, 1968/1996, pp. 31-32)

When Rick does try to understand their mental processes, he views them as “a solidarity predator” (1968/1996, p. 32). This enables Rick to initially approach the assignment of killing the six Nexus-6 androids not with trepidation, but only with a slight fear for his safety, even singing (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 96). Rick, however, finds himself empathizing with the Nexus-6 androids because they can emulate human behavior to the degree that he finds himself identifying with the androids due to perceived similarities that allow him to empathize and agonize over the morality of his profession. Specifically, during the opera singer Luba Luft’s “retirement”, Rick is saddened by her death due to his own appreciation of opera, and is surprised by the quality of her voice.

On the stage Luba Luft sang, and he found himself surprised at the quality of her voice; it rated with that of the best, even that of notables in his collection of historic tapes. The Rosen Association built her well, he had to admit. And again he perceived himself *sub specie aeternitatis*, the form destroyer called forth by what he heard and saw here.

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 99)

Rick is further moved by Luba’s final request to buy an art print; he buys her the reproduction with his own money, demonstrating a degree of empathy on his part, as he can identify with her appreciation of art. (Dick, 1968/1996 p. 133). However, while Rick’s empathy allows him to feel some degree of sympathy for the androids (which he resists), it is incomplete: He can only see the pragmatic loss of Luba Luft’s death, and the threat that the Nexus-6 models pose to human society: “I don’t get it; how can a talent like that be a liability to our society? But it wasn’t

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the talent, he told himself; it was she herself” (Dick, 1968/1996 p. 137).

This incomplete empathy is further shown in his meeting with Rachael after Luba Luft’s murder. Before his assignment to kill the three remaining Nexus-6 androids, Rick meets with Rachael, falls in love with her after their conversation, and sleeps with her. It is later revealed that what Rachael says during the conversation is a ruse to destabilize Rick and prevent him from killing the remaining androids. The way that Rachael manipulates Rick in this scene is notable, as it involves Rick’s imagination and empathy.

In their conversation, Rachael talks about her existence as an android, laments her short lifespan, created nature, and lack of individuality. Through this conversation, Rachael simultaneously emphasizes the difference she carries in relation to human beings while appealing to Rick’s anthropocentric worldview by lamenting her existence. Rick’s perspective is that the android is a lesser, evil form of existence, as seen in his quote of viewing them as “epitomizing the Killers” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 32). As such, he responds well to this performative show of self-loathing on Rachael’s part because it affirms his biases and allows him to identify with her experience through it. A quote that exemplifies this kind of performative self-hate is shown in Rachael displaying horror over one of the escaped Nexus-6 androids, Pris, being identical to herself physically.

...“I never felt this way before. We *are* machines, stamped out like bottle caps. It’s an illusion that I – I personally – really exist; I’m just representative of a type.”

She shuddered. He could not help being amused; Rachael had become so mawkishly morose. “Ants don’t feel like that,” he said, “And they’re physically identical.”

“Ants. They don’t feel period.”

“Identical human twins. They don’t –”

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“But they identify with each other; I understand that they have an empathic, special bond.”

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 189)

However, Rachael already knew of Pris’s existence before this exchange, and was even friends with her, and “knew all of them, when they still existed” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 198), which reveals that she was already cognizant of their identical appearances, and that her horror was performative. For Rick, existence as an android manufactured in types can only be a loathsome experience. Thus, he can only imagine himself as an android through this lens, presumes he would share the same self-loathing that Rachael acted, if he was an android — which makes Rachael’s conversation as effective as it is. This flawed identification is condemned to fail, as Rick failed to consider the inherent otherness of the android experience in contrast to his human one, and the possibility that the androids would not adhere to Mercerism’s anthropocentric worldview. When not mimicking human behavior for their own interests, the androids’ otherness manifests in an uncanniness, where their demeanor does not match their words:

“Well, they got everybody else,” Irmgard said, matter-of-factly; she, too, like her husband, seemed strangely resigned, despite her superficial agitation. All of them, Isidore thought; they’re all strange. He sensed it without being able to finger it. As if a peculiar and malign abstractness pervaded their mental processes.

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 156)

It is especially pronounced in their speech patterns, which is described as an abstract, intellectual stringing of words to simulate emotion, as seen in Rachael’s responses to the Voigt-Kampff test, in which she simulates the formally “correct” response, but fails to react emotionally.

Oh god,” Rachael said. “That’s awful! Did they really do that? It’s depraved! You mean a *live* lobster?” The gauges, however, did not respond. Formally, a correct response. But simulated.”

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 50)

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This abstractness is accentuated when the android talk show host Buster Friendly and his fellow android cohost, Amanda Werner can generate speech endlessly, keeping the program live and running by as many as seventy hours a week (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 73), and doing “forty-six hours of show a day.” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 76)

How did Buster Friendly find the time to tape both his aud and vid shows? Isidore wondered. And how did Amanda Werner find time to be a guest every other day, month after month, year after year? How did they keep talking? They never repeated themselves – not so far as he could determine. Their remarks, always witty, always new, weren’t rehearsed... she never ran down, never became tired, never found herself at a loss as to a clever retort to Buster’s bang-bang string of quips, jokes, and sharp observations.

(Dick, 1968/1997, pp. 73-4)

The white noise like conversations between Buster and Amanda that are omnipresent in the setting of the novel, is reminiscent of the endless generating text of LLMs. The lack of connection to the real of their speech has enabled them to become hollow beings that can put on the trappings of human beings to exploit human empathy for their needs, as seen in Rachael’s manipulation of Rick. Unlike Rachael who plays the part that Rick unconsciously wanted her to play, Iran, Rick’s wife, Iran retreats into herself and hardly listens to him when he turns to her for counsel: She reacts little, struggling against the depression, which is an “instinctive, omnipresent film of great weight, of an almost absolute inertia” (Dick, 1968/1996).

In the background the racket of Buster Friendly boomed and brayed, eradicating her words; he saw her mouth moving but heard only the TV.

“Listen,” he broke in. “Can you hear me? I’m on to something. A new type of android that apparently nobody can handle but me. I’ve retired one already, so that’s a grand to start with. You know

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what we're going to have before I'm through?"

Iran stared at him sightlessly. "Oh," she said, nodding."

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 94)

In contrast, Rachael immediately responds to Rick's appeal for help (though she had her own agenda), when he asks for help about "something [he] heard today... about situations involving human men and android women" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 182). Throughout the novel, Rick expresses sexual attraction to female androids, and particularly to Rachael, but hesitates, remarking that "it was an odd sensation, knowing intellectually that they were machines but emotionally reacting anyhow" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 95). This incongruity is a question that gnaws on Rick's mind, especially after hearing what Resch recommends Rick to do, which is to "[g]o to bed with her first...and then kill her" (Dick, 1996/1986, pp. 143-44). Rachael's show of self-loathing, plays into his biases, allowing Rick to latch onto a perceived commonality and a position to identify with.

The contrast between Iran and Rachael is reminiscent of the chatbot users who remark that ChatGPT is better than their therapists, because presumably, the chatbots do not offer any resistance towards what the users talk about, and follow the context of what the users are inputting perfectly, rather than a human being who may veer off track from time to time, or push back against what the patient is saying. Another dimension of the interactions between the human beings and the androids is the loneliness of the human beings, in their imaginary order empathy based society. Crucially, Rick and Isidore (a "special" who hides the escaped Nexus-6 androids out of loneliness) are lonely when they interact with Rachael and Pris, respectively. The otherness of Rachael and Pris is apparent, but the misgivings of the human characters are cast away, as the androids can serve as comfort to them, by catering to their desires, aided by their human appearances and sufficient verisimilitude of a real human being, like a user's interactions with an LLM chatbot. However, much like the hallucinations of AI which brings out their simulated nature, the otherness of the androids bubbles up to the surface,

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forcing the human characters to confront their difference.

4 Failed Identifications

Android existence in the novel is depicted to be fundamentally different from a human's existence, in contrast to the humanist outlook of androids in the film adaptation, *Blade Runner* (1981). The film adaptation fundamentally differs from the original text in that its focal point, ultimately, is strictly limited to the human being and their manifestation. Despite their initial difference, the film's replicants eventually converge into another form of a human being, and Roy Baty's arc of growing from a raging non-human child into a fully-fledged human capable of compassion is the main narrative thrust of the film. Through the acceptance of his premature death, he is relinquishing his otherness and is ultimately absorbed into the anthropocentric worldview. Similarly, the film adaptation's Rachael, who is initially aloof and guarded, eventually is relegated to a romantic interest to be conquered, and her alienness is taken away as the film progresses.

In contrast, the novel presents a more radical form of the android and an arguably less humanist perspective. The androids' otherness is presented to the reader, seemingly subverted in the middle section of the novel when Luba Luft is brutally murdered, when Pris cries as she eats her first peach, and in Rachael's conversation with Rick at the hotel. However, their otherness is ultimately reestablished when their uncanniness takes over their façade. Due to their origins, there is a more fundamental difference between androids and humans.

The androids have some key differences from human beings: They are manufactured, cannot give birth, and have a shortened lifespan of 4 years, and despite their superior intelligence, "in some cases becom[ing] more adroit than [their] master" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 30), they lack the ability of empathy. The lack of the androids' empathy manifests in a careless show of violence when they kill a spider that Isidore finds by snipping off its legs with scissors and in their uncanny bearing. It is

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written that their words do not match their demeanor, abruptly become expressionless and display a “flattening of affect,” (Dick, 1968/1996 p. 161) and expressed emotions would go as fast as they come, hinting at the constructed qualities of their speech. This mismatching of their speech and behavior is shown in Roy Baty’s dialogue, where in his initial introduction, his expressions do not match his situation: “Roy Baty’s voice boomed out with new, unexpected warmth; the worse the situation, the more he seemed to enjoy it. Isidore could not fathom him in the slightest” (Dick, 1968/1996 p. 155).

Furthermore, while the androids can initially hide their lack of empathy, it is written that something deplorable and strange “emerges” from them, “as if a peculiar and malign abstractness pervaded their mental processes” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 156). Even when they display emotions, their speech is described as having “only the hollow, formal, intellectual definitions of the separate terms” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 190). Additionally, although Rachael was saying it to manipulate Rick, she describes herself as a “reflex machine” (Dick, 1968/1996 p. 194).

The novel does not explain why the androids lack empathy other than it being a “deliberately built-in defect” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 185). Rick theorizes that they lack empathy as they are more akin to a solitary predator as opposed to humanity, which is more herd-like, but it is also written that he “likes to think of them that way; [as] it made his job palatable” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 30), and the question is never resolved, though it can be inferred that it was a flaw implemented to prevent solidarity among androids. Otherwise, Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a possible interpretation of the androids’ lack of empathy and how it characterizes their relationship with the human beings of the novel.

It is written in the novel that despite being made of organic material, they are not borne but rather manufactured. While it is not written explicitly in the novel, it can also be inferred that they are created as adults rather than infants due to their short lifespan. This leads to the possible conclusion that they do not learn language as a human being does, where it gradually takes place in a child, but rather, it is pre-implanted

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into their brains when they are created. Furthermore, due to their manufactured nature, they do not go through the birth-life-death cycle that human beings go through, as Rachael says:

“...How does it feel to have a child? How does it feel to be born, for that matter? We’re not born; we don’t grow up; instead of dying from illness or old age, we wear out like ants. Ants again; that’s what we are. Not you; I mean me. Chitinous reflex-machines who aren’t really alive.” She twisted her head to one side, said loudly, “I’m not *alive!*”

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 194)

By being born as infants without language, human beings experience the real, a theoretical, primordial existence ‘before’ the delimiting effects of language and the symbolic come into effect (Fink, 1995, pp. 24-25). While human beings lose touch with this existence due to the implantation of language and become split from themselves (the subject is the split itself), as quoted from Lacan’s *Écrits*:

Thus, if man comes to think about the symbolic order, it is because he is first caught in it in his being. The illusion that he has formed this order through his consciousness stems from the fact that it is through the pathway of a specific gap in his imaginary relationship with his semblable that he has been able to enter into this order as a subject. But he has only been able to make this entrance by passing through the radical defile of speech...

(Lacan, 2006, pp. 40)

[The first operation that is commanded by the cut of the subject and the Other], alienation, constitutes the subject as such...

Produced in the locus of the yet-to-be-situated Other, the signifier brings forth a subject from a being that cannot yet speak, but at the cost of freezing him...

The fact that the Other is, for the subject, the locus of his sig-

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nifying cause merely explains why no subject can be his own cause...

Alienation resides in the subject's division.

(Lacan, 2006, pp. 712-713)

Or, more succinctly, "The subject is split between ego and unconscious... The subject is nothing but this very split... This momentous split is a product of the functioning of language in us as we first begin to speak as children" (Fink, 1995, p. 45), and "in Lacan's concept of alienation, the child can be understood to in some sense choose to submit to language, to agree to express his or her needs through the distorting medium or straightjacket of language, and to allow him or herself to be represented by words" (Fink, 1995, p. 50). The androids are created as fully grown adults, and would thus bypass the processes that a human child would go through, leading to an altogether different mental structure. Due to this crucial distinction in how humans and androids come into being, androids would also never have gone through the mirror stage, in which an infant begins to understand that they are a separate entity from the other individuals around them and would also begin to construct their ego, a construct of the self that they form through the usage of images and imagination (Lacan, 2006, pp. 91-92).

Furthermore, alienation is caused by the distance between the ego's attempts to identify with the ideal image that it fails to become, as Lacan puts: "the initial synthesis of the ego is essentially an alter ego, it is alienated. The desiring human subject is constructed around a center which is the other insofar as he gives the subject his unity, and the first encounter with the object is with the object as object of the other's desire." (Lacan, 1993, p. 146) It is fair to say that it is likely Dick was not aware of Lacan's theories (though he expressed interest in earlier psychoanalysts such as Freud and Jung). However, this alienation is expressed in much of his oeuvre as a trait that makes one human, as it does in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Unlike the contradictory and tormented actions of the human beings

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who flail haplessly against their condition, they are assured of their behavior and goals and move towards them unflinchingly: This is in contrast to the human characters of the novel. Other than Rick, Iran struggles with the gap between her own desires and the ubiquitous Penfield mood organ that can control one's emotions.

"I can't dial a setting that stimulates my cerebral cortex into wanting to dial! If I don't want to dial, I don't want to dial that most of all, because then I want to dial, and wanting to dial is right now the most alien drive I can imagine; I just want to sit here on the bed and stare at the floor."

(Dick, 1968/1996 pp. 6-7)

This "alien drive," as Iran puts it, is at its most evident when Rick during the peak of his emotional crisis, uses the empathy box to talk to Mercer, who tells him:

"You will be required to do wrong no matter where you go. It is the basic condition of life to be required to violate your own identity. At some time, every creature which lives must do so. It is the ultimate shadow, the defeat of creation; this is the curse at work, the curse that feeds on all life. Everywhere in the universe."

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 179)

The androids, in contrast, do not go through the process of dealing with their incongruities other than Rachael's performative display during her conversation with Rick at the hotel. Even the sociopathic Phil Resch, who is written deliberately to resemble the androids, struggles with the idea of himself being an android. (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 128)

However, the androids do not display this alienation between their selves and their desires in the novel. The Nexus-6 androids all have the singular goal of escaping from their servitude, and engage in deception without hesitation. This is partially what leads to the failed identifications or empathizing on the human beings' part: They fail to consider

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that the androids' angst does not lie in the existential questions that they struggle with, but rather of their actual survival.

Before the insurmountable differences between the human being and the android made it clear, Isidore, the isolated "special" assumed that Pris was lonely like he was, and he attempted to understand Pris through his experience as a "special." However, Pris, unlike Isidore, had android friends with whom she shared a certain solidarity, and moreover, the androids reject Isidore, seeing him below them. Otherwise, due to him being a human, they regard him with distance and mocking. "This is Mr. Isidore," Pris said. "He's taking care of me." The words came out tinged with an almost malicious sarcasm. (Dick, 1968/1996 p. 154). Even after Isidore shows that his kindness to the androids is guileless, they treat him poorly, culminating in horror when the otherness of the androids makes itself clear by manifesting in their senseless violence to the spider. His understanding betrayed him, and he encounters severe whiplash from the betrayal of the perceived understanding and identification that he thought he had with the androids.

Although the specifics differ, essentially, Rick follows the same process. He projects the loneliness he feels by feeling estranged from his wife and the alienation he feels towards himself as an empathic being who has to suspend it to kill the androids towards Rachael, thinking that she is also suffering from her condition. Her reveal and betrayal of his expectations enrages Rick even more, not because she revealed that she had done the same with others, but because the realization of his shared experience of empathy being utterly one-sided, as it was a narcissistic projection of his experience as an individual towards a fundamentally other being. The sudden assertion of this difference makes Rick react with violence and threatening to kill her, even when she posed no actual threat to him.

"The idea is old-fashioned," Rick said.

Startled, Rachael said, "W-What?"

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Pushing the steering wheel away from him, he put the car into a gliding decline. "Or anyhow that's how it strikes me. I'm going to kill you," he said.

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 199-200).

By attempting to empathize with Rachael through his imagination, Rick only strengthened his hatred towards androids, and his discontent with their difference, as seen in his reaction to Rachael having killed his goat: "Not needless," he said. "She had had what seemed to her a reason." An android reason, he thought (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 227). Furthermore, he regrets not killing Rachael when he had the chance, thinking "I wish I could do to you what you did to me, he wished. But it cannot be done to an android because they don't care. If I had killed you last night, my goat would be alive now. There's where I made the wrong decision. Yes, he thought; it can all be traced back to that and to my going to bed with you" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 234-35).

There is an irony here: Rick's empathy with the androids, which was cleared away when Rachael revealed her otherness, was because he thought that Luba Luft and Rachael's simulated human behavior was evidence of their "genuine" living: "Always he had assumed that throughout his psyche he experienced the android as a clever machine – as in his conscious view.... Empathy toward an artificial construct? he asked himself. Something that only pretends to be alive? But Luba Luft had seemed genuinely alive. It had not worn the aspect of a simulation." (Dick, 1968/1996 p. 141) Yet, it is these other aspects, the hallucination-like manifestations of the androids' behavior which make them not ersatz simulations of human behavior, but of beings of a radically different category.

However, these moments where the otherness of the androids become apparent inspires hatred from Rick and anguish from Isidore because they have been forcefully made to confront the differences that they ignored when they assumed similarities through their imagination, as Swales writes:

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When we relate to another person on the imaginary axis (a term indicating experience at the level of the image), we are assuming similarity, of the other person being like us, and it also opens up the possibility for rivalry, superficial love or infatuation, aggression and hatred. Although in our everyday social lives, there may be times when imaginary order empathy results in stronger connections with others, we are often inaccurate in our attempts at empathy because we engage on the imaginary axis, relating from our own narcissistic perspective, imagining how we would feel if we were in the other's shoes.

(Swales, 2022, p. 32)

Rick struggles with the morality of his profession after the death of Luba Luft, where he felt murderous rage towards Resch, his fellow human being and sympathy for the android: "I rode down with two creatures, one human, the other android...and my feelings were the reverse of those intended. Of those I'm accustomed to feel – am required to feel" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 143) These feelings are intensified after his subsequent murders of the other Nexus-6 models. He becomes alien to himself as he grapples with the reality of his horrific profession and the death of his goat, which he believed would give him the comfort that his electric sheep could not.

"For Mercer everything is easy, he thought, because Mercer accepts everything. Nothing is alien to him. But what I've done, he thought; that's become alien to me. In fact everything about me has become unnatural; I've become an unnatural self."

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 230)

Rick sees himself as "unnatural" and is alienated from himself, which shows that the novel's imaginary empathy has been stretched to its breaking point. Rick can no longer empathize with others by imagining himself in their position, but now he can no longer empathize with himself. By being repeatedly denied his attempts to empathize, he is forced to face the otherness that exists in himself. The only avenue he then has is to identify with Mercer, the false prophet, and to reproduce

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Mercer “through physical merging – accompanied by mental and spiritual identification,” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 22) like using the empathy box, except in this case, he merges with Mercer not through a device, but through his own body and delusions. He acts out the scenario of the empathy box without using it by going to the wasteland and reenacting Mercer’s climb:

He walked on, up the hillside, and with each step the weight on him grew...

At that moment the first rock – and it was not rubber or soft foam plastic – struck him the inguinal region. And the pain, the first knowledge of absolute isolation and suffering, touched him throughout its undisguised actual form.

He halted. And then, goaded on – the goad invisible but real, not to be challenged – he resumed his climb.

(Dick, 1968/1996, pp. 230-31)

However, this reenactment only enforces his aloneness, as he says: “I had the absolute, utter, completely real illusion that I had become Mercer and people were lobbing rocks at me... When you use an empathy box you feel you’re *with* Mercer. The difference is I wasn’t with anyone; I was alone” (Dick, 1968/1996 p. 234). Through this experience, Rick struggles with his delusions and seems to be teetering on the edge of completely losing his sense of self, but he is still Rick Deckard, not Mercer, and he is cognizant of this fact, much like the empathy box. The difference is that that he is experiencing it in his reality, and not through the virtual reality of the empathy box. However, not even this is enough to close the distance between himself and Mercer, even at the verge of complete annihilation of his ego, and Rick gains no relief. To quote the novel, “It did change me. But not in the way you predicted. A much worse way, he decided. A much worse way, he decided.” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 235) Despite recreating the empathic experience of the empathy box in his reality, Rick still maintains his hatred for the androids. The otherness between Rick and Mercer that could not

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be closed is, was even more pronounced when Rick interacted with the radical other beings, the androids, and the logical extreme of the novel's depiction of empathy was to fail, as it cannot overcome the framework that it brings.

Rather than empathy that presumes similarities, it is the assumption of difference, symbolic order empathy, which may be the pathway for understanding, as Swales writes:

What I am calling symbolic order empathy, on the other hand, involves an assumption of difference, rather than similarity, and the corresponding attempt to listen very carefully to the other person or to otherwise learn about the other's own perspective without making comparisons to ourselves. Lacan's symbolic order of experience is based on the signifier, on the words and discourses that make up our social world.

(Swales, 2022, p. 32)

Rick's relief finally comes at the end of the novel when he can finally let go of imaginary identification when he accepts the electric toad not as a lesser recreation of a living being, a position that he can imagine himself in, but an entirely different form of existence. "The spider Mercer gave the chickenhead Isidore; it probably was artificial, too. But it doesn't matter. The electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are." (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 241) It is a far cry from Rick's initial attitude towards the electric animals, which he regarded with resentment, non-living objects unaware of his existence.

The final dialogue between Rick and Iran is markedly different. For the first time, they talk to each other not through the technological medium, such as the Penfield mood organ or an empathy box, but through the presence of the toad that Rick finds in the wasteland. While he is disappointed to see that it is not real, he treats it with care:

Crestfallen, he gazed mutely at the false animal; he took it back from her, fiddled with the legs as if baffled – he did not seem to

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quite understand. He then carefully replaced it in its box...

"I'll be okay." He shook his head, as if trying to clear it, still bewildered. "The spider Mercer gave the chickenhead, Isidore; it probably was artificial, too. But it doesn't matter. The electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are."

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 241)

Finally, the electric animal is now not regarded as an ersatz form of the real thing but is now understood as a radically other entity, even if Rick does not understand it. Ironically, the "ersatz" electric toad that is supposedly unaware of the couple's existence, and has the "tyranny of the object" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 42) is what brings the two together, rather than the real goat that ultimately caused the two pain. Despite being confused with the circumstance from where the electric toad came from, and its otherness, the understanding of its difference is what brings the two to communicate together for the first time.

The conversation is also notably similar to a psychotherapy session, with Iran temporarily playing the role of what Lacan called the "subject supposed to know" (Lacan, 1988, p. 230) when it is said of Rick that "he had a dubious attitude towards his own words; they didn't become real, not until she agreed" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 242). Rick, at this point, had stopped his imaginary identification with the androids and his reliance on his big Other, Mercerism, but instead begins to rely on Iran to bring his "much-deserved peace" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 243). Notably, despite the rejection that he feels upon realizing that his toad is artificial, it is written that Iran's affection brings him happiness that is almost on par with his discovery of the toad.

"I don't feel that anymore," she said. "I'm just damn glad to have you come back home where you ought to be." She kissed him and that seemed to please him; his face lit up, almost as much as before – before she had shown him that the toad was electric.

(Dick, 1968/1996, p. 242)

Before this scene, Rick was unable to reconcile the repulsion he felt towards the electric animals and androids as he was viewing them as a facsimile, a fake of something that has existed previously, but the otherness of the androids and electric animals that went beyond the differences caused by simulation would make themselves known, even when the animals have built-in circuits that would make them simulate disease. Rick is only able to resolve the uncanny feelings he has towards the androids and electric animals not when he attempts to understand them based on his imagination borne from the inherent limitations of his biological status and the birth of a human being. But rather, when he accepts the otherness of the two despite his confusion and that he will not be able to understand or imagine him and accept them for what they are, through symbolic order empathy: Empathy based on presumed difference.

5 Conclusion

This paper, has examined the lack of empathy of androids in a Lacanian perspective, how that has emerged in a hysterical relationship with empathy among human beings, and how even when augmented, empathy based on imagination and understanding, which is insufficient even in interpersonal relationships, has inherent blind spots that will become more amplified and can lead to moral and physical peril, as shown in the novel. To co-exist with sentient AI, we must suspend our empathic capabilities based on imagination and identification, and instead of finding similarities, we must take a stance of supposed difference when dealing with the Other. In the introduction of this paper, the alarming speed at which LLMs have developed has already begun to cause ripple effects in society, and as such, caution must be issued to navigate through a co-existence with AI, whether it be generated speech as it is of present or sentient AI that develops as a separate entity from human beings, a path of development that has been explored recently. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* portrays a possible future in which humanity falls into the pitfall of understanding in the imaginary axis, and the deficiencies of empathy as a result, and a possible pathway of

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coexistence through presumed difference, rather than similarity.

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