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## Questions Concerning Technology and the Postmodern Condition: A Study of Philip K. Dick's Stories in Relation to Heidegger's Essence

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In the postmodern age, "Man" as a concept has moved beyond the definition of flesh-and-blood and become a philosophical entity. The human condition has become a suspect notion with the displacement of Comtean faith in human benevolence. The rise of the concentration camps in the twentieth century has led to the "delegitimization" of universal discourses of human emancipation or progression towards moral well-being. Even science has been displaced from its position as the grand arbiter of truth. Notions like language, truth, social and moral codes, meaning, humanity--- all have been removed from the centre to the suburbs of existence where multiple language games are in conflict with each other constantly denying any kind of punctual comprehension of the events. Tony Davies states that "for post-war generations, what has come to be known as the Shoah or Holocaust represents the vanishing point, the absolute zero of what is thinkable." This coincides with Maurice Blanchot's treatment of the Holocaust as the "absolute event of history" which created an acute tension between the enormous density of a historical event and its absolute void of meaning. The prime suspect behind this "absent referent," to use Derrida's phrase, has been identified as "Man" himself. Martin Heidegger's assertion at the end of the question "Who is Man?" that "it is not as harmless as it seems" has been proven right with the overlapping of "homo humanus" and "homo barbarus" which has ushered in, what Noam Chomsky calls, a "new military humanism," popularly known as the "War on Terror." The emphasis has shifted from man and not-man, from human to non-human world and has moved 'beyond good and evil' to recognize the emergence of 'transhuman.' The world weaved by Philip K. Dick in his short stories, essays, and science fiction is replete with a number of posthuman events, dystopian and futuristic motifs. His free-play of meanings, identities, and alternate realities in a post/transhumant world is independent of and does not attest to the tyrannical nature of definition. It is in this world of contradictions heightened by the use of technology that the aim of this paper rests. As Brian McHale states that both the postmodernist literature and science fiction are predominantly occupied with the "ontological dominant." (Widmer 3) The aim is to examine what constitutes the authentic human being.

My aim in this paper is to explore the essence of man amidst the apocalyptic gloom which surrounds Philip K. Dick's fiction. For this purpose, I will look at two of his short stories, *Minority Report* (1956) and *Adjustment Team* (1958) in the light of Heidegger's essay--"The Question Concerning Technology." Dick's fictional world is generally set in post-industrial society in which images and information are alternatively produced and consumed but the situation is complicated by the representation of objective world which is often viewed by the protagonists as fabricated or a fake entity. If there exists any semblance of truth, then it is not on the subject of metaphysical quests about the existence of God or a set of rules which govern meaning and thought. Instead the truth in Dick's stories implies the real understanding of power relations as and how they are produced and disowned, rather made to disown, by all those who are involved. The story unfolds in a technologically-driven world where nature and all its

associations are generally absent. A materialistic society heavily based on consumption and desire emerges but diffuses with an ironical twist, as the things consumed are devoid of value and is quickly replaced by something seemingly of more 'value.' In the process, the essence is never grasped and meaning is rendered superficial and almost non-existent. Dick's characters are generally found to be schizophrenic, autistic, psychotic or simply deranged in the world which they inhabit. (Palmer 38) In his short stories and fictional writings, Dick deliberately places his characters in hyper- technological world or a sterile war-wrecked earth where the protagonists are powerless and complacent with the reality given to them. This provides the perfect ground to apply Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology" because the protagonist's complacency produces the moment of "untruth" and his "inauthenticity" arises out of his concern for the banal everyday world. It is important to note here that there isn't any reason supplanted for this 'given situation' where the protagonist finds both himself out of tune to the world around him and a complacency to comply with it the way it is. Thus, there seems to be an illusion about a "bigger picture" to be found, a movement where the truth and actuality could be grasped by the protagonist. The fantastical world woven around the protagonist stops him from realizing the essence and he is permanently deluded by the appearances.

### [1]

In *Minority Report*, John A. Anderton is caught in a situation which is continuously altering itself. The story consists of three "precogs" psychics who are kept as prisoners because of their "special talent" to predict future with the help of the system "precrime" which has "cut down felonies by ninety-nine and decimal point eight percent. We seldom get actual murder or treason." (Dick 49) Anderton, who is the precrime police commissioner, is told about the prediction that he will commit a murder. However, this knowledge about his committing a murder in future enables him to change the course of his destiny. He alters his prediction made in the first minority report to kill Kaplan by actually deciding against it. This decision is reflected in the second minority report. Anderton is, therefore, caught in a web of multiple-futures which shows that the reality is ontologically incomplete and open to various transformations. Thomas Brockleman, however, argues in his book *Zizek and Heidegger: The Question Concerning Techno-Capitalism* (2008) that the prediction about Anderton's action is made possible only because the reality is ontologically complete at a given point of time. He states that "it is only in the context of techno-scientific 'objectification' of reality that nature can, in a second moment, emerge as indeterminate, etc." (Brockleman 36) According to Brockleman then, the prospect of facing total objectification correspondingly leads to total subjectivity in which we are able to articulate our 'real' self. Thus, "ontological openness" is the main reason behind his success to overcome his destiny as predicted by the precogs. Slavoj Zizek states that for Anderton in *Minority Report*, "the ontological 'fork,' the alternate path of future reality, is, rather, generated when the agent whose future acts are foretold gets to know about them; that is to say, its source is the self-referentiality of knowledge." (Brockleman 39) In other words, freedom to act can occur only with the knowledge about what is about to happen. Similarly, it can be deduced from the story that man can be free only when he realizes that freedom is not possible at all.

This leads to an interesting observation that technology is useful and in some sense has to be treated as 'true': "the revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of a setting-upon, in the sense of challenging forth." (Heidegger 16) The precondition of technology cannot just simply disappear from the view and be replaced by something else to bring-forth in

the sense of “poesis” i.e. something poetic. Howsoever challenging the revealing of modern technology be, it is a mode of revealing where “aletheia” (truth) happens. The usefulness of such technology is that it can make us aware of our total subjectivity but what happens when such an interaction takes place? Heidegger suggests ‘anxiety’ as the only plausible emotion in such an event. Zizek explains that anxiety arises out of the filling of the space by technology to such an extent that all connections to the transcendental reality are cut off. The situation gets reduced to ‘here and now’ without any place for hope or salvation possible. The real threat of technology is, as Zizek puts it, that it brings us face-to-face with our freedom:

On a first approach, anxiety emerges when we are totally determined, objectivized, forced to assume that there is no freedom, that we are just neuronal puppets, self-deluded zombies; at a more radical level, however, anxiety arises when we are compelled to confront our freedom. (It is the same in Kant: when we are able to identify a pathological cause of an act of ours, this cannot but be a relief from the anxiety of freedom; or, as Kierkegaard would have put it, the true horror is to discover that we are immortal, that we have a higher Duty and responsibility – how much easier would it be to be a mere natural mechanism . . .) Consequently, cognitivist self-objectivization causes anxiety because – although, in terms of its enunciated content, it “objectivizes” us – it has the opposite effect in terms of the implied position of enunciation: it confronts us with the abyss of our freedom, and, simultaneously, with the radical contingency of the emergence of consciousness. (Brockleman 41)

Technology confounds us to a “real appearance” making us aware of our own limitations. Such a world is not acceptable to common man and therefore he becomes complacent with the ‘given reality.’ The crisis at the level of appearance, of augmenting reality through technology marks the genuine threat to humanity. This ambivalent nature of technology which simultaneously provides and exhausts the recourse to salvation forms the crux of Dick’s *Minority Report* since it is only with the help of precrime, the technology used to punish would-be criminals, that Anderton is able to change the direction of his destiny.

Another important angle to view Anderton’s story is through the lens of power. Anderton was part of the same system against which implicated him later on. He exercised full control over the world-view or the projection of world (Dasein) of those who were identified by the precogs. Witwer states that “the Senate's pleased with your work. In fact, they're enthusiastic...as enthusiastic as very old men can be” (Dick 48) Although Anderton remains impassive to such a remark, he admits that he simply feels no need to retire and “stay on here as long as I want. It's purely my decision.” He calmly states to Witwer that “precrime” methodology is based on the fact that the individuals are apprehended before committing an act of violence. Thus, “the commission of the crime itself is absolute metaphysics. We claim they're culpable. They, on the other hand, eternally claim they're innocent. And, in a sense, they are innocent.” (Dick 48) Anderton feels nostalgic about inventing precrime and views it as having “tremendous social value.” His emotion changes into suspicion when he sees his name displayed on the card: “God, he was beginning to suspect everybody -- not only his wife and Witwer, but a dozen members of his staff.” (Dick 51) It is only when the system turns against him that he begins to doubt the noble intentions with which he built it: “It will end the check and balance system. Precrime will no longer be an independent agency. The Senate will control the police, and after that...they'll

absorb the Army too.” (Dick 52) His stronghold over the reality begins to falter as he feels confused about his own motive to kill a person whose he has never heard in his life: Leopold Kaplan. Soon he is proclaimed as a “dangerous marginal individual” and a “potential murderer.” It is only at the end of the story that he realizes “Each report was different... Each was unique. But two of them agreed on one point...If left free, I would kill Kaplan. That created the illusion of a majority report. Actually, that's all it was -- an illusion.” (Dick 68)

Michel Foucault’s application of power can be applied here to understand what went wrong with the precrime commissioner Anderton. In *Foucault and Heidegger: Critical Encounters* (2003), Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg argue that Foucault sees postmodern power as exerting great pressure towards inclusion rather as “an instrument of exclusion.” (Milchman and Rosenberg 42) They state that power produce “self-absorbed subjects” (Anderton in *Minority Report*) for the greater good of mankind or “general welfare of all.” With the mix of power and technology, anomalies are created and pretexts are given for further intervention to “normalize” them. This normalization is accepted by all who view it as necessary for “anomaly’s own good.” So, the postmodern power works “not by punishment but by control.” (Milchman and Rosenberg 43) This is precisely what happens in *Minority Report* in which “punishment was never much of a deterrent, and could scarcely have afforded comfort to a victim already dead.” At the end of the story, Anderton is dangerously normalized proving Heidegger’s statement to be correct that “in modernity, individuation and totalizing go hand in hand.” (Milchman and Rosenberg 43) Therefore, in the postmodern age, power and normalization are substituted for Being and total mobilization respectively.

## [2]

Philip K. Dick’s *Adjustment Team* has a Kafkaesque underpinning: “Something went wrong... and Ed Fletcher got mixed up in the biggest thing in his life.” (Dick 1) The domestic story begins by isolating Ed Fletcher at his house and then with a minute’s delay (the dog failed to summon him at sharp 8:15 am), the whole pattern of sequencing is disturbed. As a result, he gets late for the office but reaches there in time to see “a cascade of gray debris, spilling around his feet. And where he had touched the building, a jagged cavity yawned -- an ugly pit marring the concrete.” (Dick 3) Everything around him “wavered and sagged...torrents of ash raining down in heaps.” The Clerk who was responsible for the adjustment for section T137 is summoned by the ‘Old Man’ who decides that “he must be contacted and contained. He must be brought up here. There's no other solution.” (Dick 6) Fletcher narrates the whole incident to his wife, Ruth who sees him as suffering from a psychological fit. Soon he gets to meet or rather is summoned by the Old Man who explains to him the purpose of adjustment team and lets him go only on a condition that he will forget about the whole incident and believe in the “authenticity” of his mental aberration. At the end of the story, Fletcher returns as an inauthentic being, as complacent as ever about the world which he inhabits. In the story, the ‘Old Man’ can be seen as substituting for God who is present everywhere, at every point with the condition that the point is the only viewpoint available.

The story throws crucial insight on Heidegger’s notion of “Gelassenheit” which means “releasement toward things.” Heidegger states:



By the word “will” I mean, in fact, not a faculty of the soul, but rather— in accordance with the unanimous, though hardly yet thought-through doctrine of Western thinkers—that wherein the essence of the soul, spirit, reason, love, and life are grounded. (Davis 6)

For Heidegger, will is reaching out to something beyond, to the “essence of will.” He states, “Willing itself is mastery over [something], which reaches out beyond itself; will is intrinsically power. And power is willing that is constant in itself. Will is power; power is will.” (Davis 11) The phrase “will to power” is not redundant since power exists so far as there is “willing-to-be-more-power.” However, it is important to note here that will to power does not mean a quest for power. Heidegger views will as a faculty of the subject, that is to say, of a person who acts on the basis of his will and can be held responsible for his actions. The will to act is closely aligned with the idea of selfhood. This leads to the notion of “mineness” which is characteristic of every Dasein, of every human being. Mineness denotes the capacity to mean what it is to be. Mineness, then, serves to draw the distinction between being oneself authentically or inauthentically. To be authentic means to be aligned with what makes life distinctive whereas inauthentic existence implies the failure to identify one’s own distinction from others; a tendency to deceive oneself about oneself as well as about the world. According to Pierre Keller, “Heidegger does not explicitly endorse either a compatibilist or incompatibilist conception of human freedom.” He falls short of locating the true nature of freedom. Therefore, the responsibility lies on the person what he or she is to be.

Ed Fletcher’s delay in reaching his office in *Adjustment Team* revealed something: “I -- I got in on something. I saw through. I saw something I wasn't supposed to see.” (Dick 10) He breaks the pattern of his daily life and now finds himself endowed with such knowledge which was hitherto unavailable to any “element”, that is to say, person in the world. He now knows that “the natural process must be supplemented -- adjusted here and there. Corrections must be made. We are fully licensed to make such corrections. Our adjustment teams perform vital work.” (Dick 11) He, therefore, mediates between two worlds and when he is threatened by the Old Man, he accepts his condition to deceive himself into believing that “it was only a passing psychological fit-- retreat from reality.” (Dick 12) He fails to take a “resolute” decision which Heidegger calls “as the most original truth because the authentic truth of Dasein.” (Keller 232) It is important to note here that it is not the Being but man who alone errs. Michael Haar states that “Man errs, on the one hand, because he gives way to the forgetting of his forgetting and becomes imprisoned in it and, on the other hand, because he is ‘tempted,’ ‘seduced’ by the entities.” For Heidegger, the notion of Gelassenheit provides the greatest amount of freedom which can be recognized in man. Ed Fletcher couldn’t stop the two worlds from exclusively claiming him and which distorted his essence making him complacent with the world he inhabits. Freedom arising out of his knowledge about the adjustment team paradoxically circumvented him.

### [3]

I began my paper with the examination of postmodern condition in which “Man” itself as a concept has become a philosophical entity. The Holocaust delegitimized universal discourses and created a vacuum which was subsequently filled by the language games. This resulted in losing out on concepts such as truth, meaning, and Heideggerean essence and led to the emergence of post/transhuman. Dick’s stories, *Minority Report* and *Adjustment Team*, proved

beneficial in so far that they provided a good understanding of Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology," about the dual nature of technology and the authentic and inauthentic manner of being. I laid special attention to Foucault's notion of power and how it works by control rather than by punishment as is witnessed in the case of Anderton running away from precrime. *Adjustment Team* showed what it means to be free and willing to act and how it aligns with the notions of selfhood and mineness which determines Being's being.

Heidegger considers questioning to be the "piety of thought" but at the same time he is aware of the dilemma of what this excessive questioning entails. It makes the essence of technology even more mysterious than what it was before. (Heidegger 35) Heidegger is against any kind of blind submission to technology, to the lack of sensitivity towards the "epoch of technology, towards every attunement." (Haar 140) Although technology comes with the promise of revealing, Heidegger remains doubtful till the end about the man's desire to gain sufficient 'mastery' over it. However, he is also aware of the "culture of control" that technological advancements can lead to, as we see in *Minority Report*, by heightening the sense of subjectivity and fundamentally leading to a "narcissistic degeneration of humanity." (Feenberg 185) Dick's stories are a good example to see how Dasein and technology are found to be intricately linked to each other. Technology, when mixed with economics, creates hyperreal 'simulations' which perverts the basic reality. Man, as the consumer of knowledge, enters with amnesia into the already played out game of deceit. As a result, he can be regarded simply as the "myth" perpetuated by postmodernity. In the 'recession of reality', zapping or zero consciousness takes over which leads to not any movement but excessive acceleration all the same.

So, the postmodern condition consists of bearing witness to difference (Lyotard's differend) which arises out of the "conflicts of incommensurable language games." The fact is that these conflicts are unavoidable and irresolvable. And yet it is only in a state of their conflict that an opportunity for action arises. Differend produces a unique situation where a wrong cannot be expressed and a system of language exists which fails to see the wrong. So the act of witnessing makes us aware of the differences but without the required "political or philosophical system," one lacks the ability to "legislate or think through those differences." (Williams 117) This is the double bind that the postmodern condition has created for us. It constitutes the primary 'aporia' which continues to haunt the post-war generations.

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