

James Burton

The Philosophy of Science Fiction: Henri Bergson and the Fabulations of Philip K. Dick

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015

Pulse: A History, Sociology
& Philosophy of Science
Journal, 2016, Issue 4

©The Author(s) 2016

[https://sciencestudies.ceu.edu/
node/44253](https://sciencestudies.ceu.edu/node/44253)



Fani Cettl

Central European University, Budapest

Judging from the title, it might seem this is a study about how to read Philip K. Dick's novels with the help of Henri Bergson's philosophical ideas, but Burton refreshingly offers much more than this. He sets up his framework by arguing for a fundamental instability between science and fiction, and relatedly, between science and religion. Pointing out how conventionally, philosophical as well as modern scientific discourses have frequently defined themselves precisely in opposition to the fictional, he is interested in exploring what he sees as an intricate entanglement between the two, and proposes to do this by putting side by side philosopher Bergson and sci-fi writer Dick. The link between the two authors is not directly historical, but rather intellectual: both refused to choose sides between materialism and spiritualism, immanence and transcendence, and worked "at the edge of the known".

In this framework, Burton identifies the key mutual premise in Bergson and Dick's work as one of "immanent soteriology": a quest for immanent (rather than transcendent or otherworldly) salvation, through fabulation from pernicious mechanization in the modern age. Though not sharing the same historical context, Bergson and Dick wrote and raised ethical concerns in response to the similar outcomes of modern mechanization and industrialization. Bergson did so both prior to and in the context of WWI, whereas Dick did so after WWII. Burton intriguingly guides the reader in illuminating Bergson through Dick and vice versa. Bergson grounds his views in evolutionary biology and theorizes that human war-instinct in modernity gets completely out of hand through the operations of intelligence, namely the construction of machinery and the mechanization of humans. Mechanization in this context, as Burton explains, means "the reduction of the living to mechanical or non-living status" (32), which is in some ways an intricate aspect of life itself, but which escalates in modernity. Crucially for Bergson, what counteracts intelligence (and helps to keep the war-instinct under control) is that which he calls the fabulation function, as a biological propensity to open up all closed social forms. This is how he understands the origin of religion, quickly adding that religious fabulations commonly end up in closed morality, but also that fabulation always keeps working towards opening it up. Burton builds on

Bergson's undertheorized idea of open fabulation to argue that Dick's novels perform precisely this ethical work of opening up any closed social structure in the narrative to its excluded others. This is done by fabulating alternative worlds and destabilizing the boundaries between real and fictional worlds for the characters, but crucially also for the reader. In this way, the novels enact little moments of immanent salvation (or we could argue, critical insights) for both the reader and the protagonist, and Burton offers analyses of numerous examples to support this argument. Arguably the most famous one is *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) and its film adaptation *Blade Runner* (1982), in which the reality of the android-hunter Rick Deckard, in which humans possess empathy and slave androids do not, and therefore can be killed, unmistakably crumbles and turns into fiction. He is left navigating the new, unstable world (in which even his own identity as human is no longer certain), whilst the reader/viewer also starts questioning the human-android boundary.

Another important part of Burton's argument about Bergson and Dick's immanent soteriologies is that, although the moments of salvation are experienced in the immanent reality, they are triggered through transcendent media. The figure of the mystic, and more particularly St. Paul, is for Bergson and Dick exemplary of the relationship of a transforming human to an exterior force or intelligence that triggers insight. Through a somewhat extended detour through Badiou and Agamben's contemporary views on the figure of St. Paul, Burton concludes that such a relationship to the transcendent that is embodied by the mystic is to be understood as performative. That is, it is not a relationship of one exceptional individual to one true God (and thus exclusionary), but rather potentially anyone's opening up through fictionalizing towards an exterior, quasi-transcendent agency, be it understood as god or chance, alien or android. For Bergson and Dick, it is necessarily a nonhuman element that opens up the human reality towards the possibility of salvation, as well as a non-mechanistic element, which "reveals the human as always-already in part nonhuman, technological, objectified" (133).

While Burton, through a lucid exposition of Bergson and a careful analysis of Dick's novels, convincingly argues for their compatible views of salvation from modern mechanization through fictionalizing, at times it seems that "modern mechanization" is used in an overgeneralizing sweep, as if modern life in itself is simply mechanized for the worse, which puts the mechanical and the living at odds. As I wrote above, Burton discusses mechanization in the sense of the reduction of the living to the mechanical or the non-living, and this is certainly applicable to the themes of modern mechanized warfare, or the exploitative effects of industrialized work (epitomized by the slave robot). However, other modern and contemporary developments commonly understood as mechanization could be brought to the discussion, such as biotechnologies, digital technologies, sophisticated communication and transport machines. These have become so integrated with modern life that it becomes difficult to speak of the boundary between the mechanical and the living. Are all these developments to be subsumed under some totalizing notion of negative mechanization, or should this notion be unpacked more carefully and noted also for its possibly positive aspects? If we go back

to *Do Androids Dream*, and put for a moment aside that the androids are slave workers, we can note that the construction of artificial intelligence, which completely destabilizes the boundary between the mechanical android and the living human, is enabled precisely through biotechnology. It would be desirable to have some discussion by Burton on how Bergson and Dick might think of these other various aspects of mechanization, and whether they might see them not only as negative. Nevertheless, Burton's study is innovative, elegantly written, and not only will it be of interest for scholars of cultural studies and philosophy, but also for science studies scholars.