What is Real? Brainwashing, Gaslighting, and Ontological Crisis

& How the Age of Artificial Intelligence is Anticipated in the Works of Philip K. Dick – Ethan Hale

Abstract

In “Man, Android, and Machine” (1976), Philip K. Dick explains how “a veil lies between us and reality.” Drawings upon Plato’s Parmenides and “Allegory of the Cave,” Dick provides countless examples of ontological crises faced by himself and his major characters. However, these same situations are exacerbated by additional veils set upon characters by other individuals through intentional manipulation in the form of gaslighting or brainwashing.

In these narratives, Dick creates psychologically complex characters and has them react, cope with, and sometimes overcome the gaslighting, brainwashing, and ontological crises that they face. By applying their methods of assessing reality to our own struggles with information overload from AI algorithms intended to increase our consumption of select pieces of information, Dick’s lifelong search for truth through his novels and through his novels may actually offer some insight into the cyber-dystopias and political machinations of the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Philip K. Dick’s literature may all be condensed into the question, “What is Real?” posed by Dick in his 1978 essay, “How to Build a Universe That Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later.” In that essay, he admonishes us not to become complacent with the realities to which we have become accustomed:

“Unless we can psychologically accommodate change, we ourselves will begin to die, inwardly. What I am saying is that objects, customs, habits, and ways of life must perish so that the authentic human being can live. And it is the authentic human being who matters most, the viable, elastic organism that can bounce back, absorb, and deal with the new” (Shifting Realities 262-263).

The barrage of digital media and use of algorithms to manipulate how we think (fake news, internet trolls, targeted advertising, etc.) often evokes within us a sense of fear or anxiety; perhaps even paranoia, a feeling Dick himself often fell victim to. However, within his novels and through his characters, Dick provides helpful insights that speak to these modern issues plaguing our minds.

Literature Analysis

Brainwashing

• Definition: “The application of a concentrated means of persuasion, such as an advertising campaign or repeated suggestion, in order to develop a specific belief or motivation” (The American Heritage Medical Dictionary)
• The Man in the High Castle TV series sees a global Nazi empire use propaganda, information control, and torture to brainwash its citizens.
• We found that (consistent with modern psychology) younger characters were more easily brainwashed than adults.

Gaslighting

• “The Gaslight Effect results from a relationship between two people: a gaslighter, who needs to be right in order to preserve his own sense of self and his sense of having power in the world; and a gaslightee, who allows the gaslighter to determine her sense of reality because she idealizes him and seeks his approval” (Stern)
• In A Scanner Darkly, Bob Arctor is gaslit by many external agents, and even an alternate personality of his own making, resulting in a confused and dissociated sense of self-identity.
• He overcomes this manipulation by “counter-surveillance,” using logic and observation to deduce his true reality.

Ontological Crisis

• An ontological crisis occurs when a person or character recognizes that their overall conception of reality is false and is then supplanted with a new understanding of reality.
• After Ubik’s characters are mortally injured in an explosion, their minds are (unbeknownst to them) suspended in a “half-life.” Here, they experience their death as a backwards progression through time, all the while attempting to make sense of their situation.
• To unpack or overcome the ontological crises, one must rediscover their physical connection with reality through a higher understanding of it.

Modern A.I. Parallels

Fake Realities Create Fake Humans
• Today, society relies heavily on artificial intelligence to distinguish between the authentic and the false, e.g., internet trolls, the political appropriation of the term “fake news,” identity theft, etc.
• As the number of privacy invasions, proven fake news sources proliferated by foreign governments, and social media scandals rises, effective policing of A.I. has declined, with pronounced psychological consequences.
• Social media users are, themselves, used by outside agents through online “fake realities,” platforms and internet environments tailored specifically to manipulate users (i.e. Facebook’s Cambridge-Analytica scandal).
• This creates what Philip K. Dick would call “fake humans,” individuals who react to these fake realities to form ideas, opinions, and paradigms from false, altered, or incomplete information.
• Fake humans become commodities, a good to be bought and traded by the manipulating parties.

Online Echo Chambers
• The strategic, targeted placement information online creates an echo chamber for consumers of digital media that heightens existing biases and often gives validation to others who reflect conspiracies and paranoia.
• “The powerful tools for discovering, filtering, and distributing information developed by companies like Google ensure that we are forever inundated by information of immediate interest to us – and in quantities well beyond what our brains can handle” (Carr 170).
• As the human brain is “inundated by information,” it begins to use shortcuts in reasoning and logic called heuristics in order to keep up the flow of critical thought.
• While often useful, heuristics often lower internet users’ resistance to false information.
• As the brain develops heuristics to draw conclusions quickly and with little data, it can – and does – mistake repetitive information as true, even if the information is somewhat ridiculous.
• This peculiar phenomenon is known as the Illusory Truth Effect and has taken a firm hold of many internet forums and social media outlets (Fazio).

References