Book Reviews

The Philosophy of Science Fiction:

Henri Bergson and the Fabulations of Philip K. Dick

JAMES BURTON, Bloomsbury, 2017 (1st ed.), 233 p., $37.95.

ISBN: 978-1-350-02827-2.

Philosophy and Science Fiction often cover the same ground. John Locke (1632-1704), when considering in what personal identity consisted, engaged in very sci-fi like ruminations on consciousness, memory, body-swapping, and multiple identities sharing the same body. Before him, René Descartes (1596-1650) postulated that our senses or minds might be manipulated by an evil demon—later philosophers using similar examples of the mad scientist. So, it is natural to think about the philosophical implications of science fiction works. James Burton's *The Philosophy of Science Fiction: Henri Bergson and the Fabulations of Philip K. Dick* is a welcome addition to this area of study.

Some philosophers, like David Hume (1711-1776), are unpopular during their lifetime, but gain influence later. Others, such as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), are considered important right from the beginning and continue to be read. Yet others are highly regarded during their lifetimes but fall out of favor. Henri Bergson (1859-1941) falls into this last category. His early works were very well regarded, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927. But although of late, there has been a bit of a Bergson revival, he is not as widely studied. Philip K. Dick (1928-1982), on the other hand, like Kant, has never gone out of style. His influence on other sci-fi authors and philosophers continues to grow. Film adaptations of his novels and short stories are numerous, the most famous being *Blade Runner*, based on his 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*?

Burton's book is narrowly focused on themes of salvation in Dick's works analyzed through the lens of Bergson's general rejection of mechanization throughout his works, and the concept of *fabulation* in particular, as introduced in his last major work, 1932's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, as well as the distinctions between static and dynamic religion and open and closed societies in *Two Sources*. Another interpretive tool Burton uses is analysis of the notions of salvation in the Pauline tradition. Burton's book thereby picks up a strand of Dick that does not get as much attention as his work on androids, shifting realities, authentic versus fake, identity and the like. In doing so, Burton focuses on following this thread in some of Dick's more mature works like *The Man in the High Castle*, *Galactic Pot-Healer*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and *VALIS*.

In his introduction, Burton emphasizes the importance of fictionalizing or story-telling for history, philosophy, and science fiction, especially regarding "imagining the impossible" (2). It is also here that he tells us that the book is not a philosophy of science fiction, but rather "the basic ground of the fabulative activity" that is "the heart of the soteriological enterprises of both Bergson and Dick" (3). This is his basic argument: that fictionalizing (or fabulation) is at the core of how salvation is possible for both authors, namely that both seek a way out "from violence, war, and mechanization of life" (3). After this, there is a discussion of the difficulties of defining science fiction (and philosophy), with an eye to the history of philosophy, science, and science fiction and the role of fictionalizing in all three. Pointing out the turn to religion in later works by both Bergson and Dick, Burton argues that both should be viewed "as engaged in the work of immanent soteriology" (17). Though Burton does not define "soteriology" in the introduction (it also does not appear in the index), it is the word used for the (typically) academic study of salvation in religion. The meaning of the term "immanent" in the text is opposed to "transcendent." Thus, an immanent salvation would be here-and-now, rather than one that is in some sense revealed or beyond (or possibly outside) experience. An important Dickian concept noted here is "balking." Dick uses it to describe a time when someone refuses to become mechanical or participate in a mechanical system. In his posthumously published non-fiction work, *Exegesis*, Dick defines "balking," as quoted by Burton, as

> a refusal to cooperate with a harmful world, which, once one has balked against it, reveals its ersatz quality. […] it is probably of extraordinary significance that repudiation of the mundane reality and acknowledgement of the transmundane is a single event or act, rather than two. The two realities cannot both exist, evidently. They are counter-realities (20).

Burton uses this in chapters 1, 3, and 4. The last important concept explained in Burton's introduction is "fabulation." Burton notes that Bergson uses it to refer "to any act of fictionalizing, in virtually any register—mythological, literary, dramatic, spoken, gestural, hallucinatory" (26), but also more specifically in salvific circumstances, and that one need not be aware that they are fabulating. Burton contends that much of Dick's fabulations are in the service of salvation-related themes.

Chapter 1, "Fabulation: Counteracting Reality," formally explains Bergson's use of fabulation in *Two Sources* and "the role fabulation may play in the task of humanity's (self-)salvation from mechanization in the modern era" (29). It's important to note that the translation that Burton has in the Bibliography uses "myth-making," rather than fabulation to translate "*la fonction fabulatrice*." Fabulation is the preferred translation in recent work on Bergson, but Burton does not make reference to that in the book.

Chapter 2, "Fabulating Salvation in Four Early Novels," looks at four of Dick's novels written between 1955 and 1959 (*Solar Lottery*, *The World Jones Made*, *Vulcan's Hammer*, and *Time Out of Joint*). What they have in common is that the protagonists are close to being "the archetypal no-nonsense hero of pulp science fiction and space opera" (81) and the societies in each novel are in some way threatened by "exaggerated levels of industrialization and bureaucracy, conventional science fiction dangers and such as the replacement of humans by androids and robots, paranoid supercomputers trying to take

over the world, and crucially, more physical and metaphysical mechanizing forces, such as determinism and entropy" (63). What these protagonists are trying to do, for Burton, is find an immanentized soteriology in a world that does not make sense. Burton ties this goal with Bergson's rejection of mechanism, as mentioned above.

Tying the ideas of salvation and fabulation together is furthered explored in Chapter 3, "The Empire that Never Ended." The empire referred to here is the Roman Empire and is mentioned in the epigrams for the chapter taken from works by both Bergson and Dick. In Dick's visions from 1974, he had "the experience that the Roman Empire had somehow persisted, and that it continued to constitute the background of his contemporary reality" (85). The majority of this chapter is a discussion of interpretations of politics and salvation in the Pauline tradition by the French philosopher Alain Badiou and the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. The chapter is a kind of interlude that provides a framework for the interpretations of Dick's more mature works in Chapters 4-6. Burton concludes that the political theology of Paul's writings are relevant "for an era and a worldview characterized by an immanent, materialist perspective, in which 'salvation' must entail earthly emancipation" (110)—a parallel for the Roman empire of Paul's time and the societies in Dick's later novels discussed in the later chapters discussed below.

Chapter 4, "Objects of Salvation: *The Man in the High Castle*," begins the shift to later works that are the subject of the last three chapters. On the surface, *The Man in the High Castle* is part of the sub-genre of alternate history novels. Burton highlights a contrast between what he calls "mainstream history" of our world and the history of the novel's base world in which the Axis won World War II. Inside the world of Dick's novel, there is a novel by Hawthorne Abendsen, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, which is, itself, an alternative history novel which presents a world closer to what we readers would call mainstream history. Burton is less interested in the question of World War II itself, but rather the question of a deterministic world—a world that is "inevitably, fixedly the way it is" (116). Burton focuses here on the connections between characters saved by material objects—such as a Mickey Mouse watch, a Colt .44, or a silver pin—as opposed to gods or aliens or technology. Also, it is flawed ordinary people here, instead of the pulp heroes of the earlier novels, that bring about a "dynamic, changeable world" (134) instead of a fixed one: Dick's "dynamic fabulation attempts to resist the most fixed, immovable facets of reality" (135).

Burton looks at dynamic fabulation in *Galactic Pot-Healer* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* in Chapter 5, "How We Became Post-Android." The protagonists in these novels have their views of reality "eroded as others come into view" (165) as they have to reject both a mechanizing reality and transcendent solutions through a "process of immanentization" (165). The futures of these characters are still open when the book ends, as opposed to much traditional sci-fi which ends with a resolved success or failure.

The last and longest chapter, Chapter 6, "The Reality of Valis," discusses Dick's later works *Exegesis* (creative non-fictions) and *VALIS* (novel) after his 1974 religious experience. Burton characterizes each work as an example of a soteriological fabulation. A lens Burton uses here is the Gnostic idea of *salvator salvandus*, the savior needing salvation. Dick himself is a character in *VALIS*, for example.

In an "Epilogue" at the end of the book, Burton sums up the themes of *The Philosophy of Science Fiction*, stating in a way that he considers both Bergsonian and Dickian

> There is no general or fundamental distinction between the fictional and the real, between dreams and technologies: there is merely the degree to which the reality-fictions that I have been calling fabulations become static or dynamic in our experience. That is not to say that the world is an idealist construct, that it has no material substance beyond thought: rather, that we experience 'things' as more or less 'thing-like', more or less 'real', according to the extent to which we perceive them as changing or unchanging, as autonomous and static or embedded in dynamic flows of matter and energy. (205-206)

For Burton, to engage with Bergson and Dick is to engage with the "philosophical fictionalizing" activities that dynamically make and remake reality.

The *Philosophy of Science Fiction* is an ambitious book. Where it succeeds the most is in the analysis of Dick's fiction itself. Using the notions of fabulation and salvation as interpretive lenses ties together often overlooked themes in Dick's works that span his entire oeuvre. Looking at the changes over time in this manner illuminates a new path into the storytelling, that is missing when they are read as more traditional science fiction novels. The discussions of *Time Out of Joint*, *The Man in the High Castle,* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* stand out in particular.

Although the literary analysis is interesting, there are elements that are less successful. If one were to look at the title alone, the expectation might be that this book is a philosophy of science fiction more expansively. The subtitle gives a more accurate predictor of the subject matter. Though there is some definitional work here about what philosophy and science fiction are, Burton's book is not a philosophy of science fiction. It is better to characterize this as an analysis of some of Dick's works in light of Bergson's philosophy of religion.

As mentioned above, Burton does not let his readers know that "fabulation" is not a word that the reader would find if looking at the standard translation of Bergson's *Two Sources*. The French edition is not in the bibliography. So, where does "fabulation" come from? It is a standard that comes through from looking at Deleuze and some later thinkers, but which is not explicitly stated here. A related issue is that the language of immanent vs. transcendent salvation could be more clearly explained. The index is also incomplete for the use academics might want to make of a book like this. A lot of the interpretive concepts like "fabulation," "salvation," and "soteriology" do not occur in the index, nor do the major works discussed in the book. Some of this might be part of the process of revising a doctoral dissertation for publication. In many ways, like the unexplained use of "soteriology," *The Philosophy of Science Fiction* reads like a dissertation.

Nevertheless, this book is a good resource for scholars pursuing philosophical analyses of Philip K. Dick. It is less recommended for those not already familiar with Bergson's work. Undergraduate and general audience readers less familiar with Bergson's philosophy or recent interpretations of Paul will likely find this book more challenging.

RICHARD L. BILSKER

Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Department of Arts & Humanities

College of Southern Maryland

rlbilsker@csmd.edu