

Scylla, Oreb and transmigrational chain yanking

The Urth list — 13 messages, 10 voices, 20 Apr 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3184>

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Nigel Price — 20 Apr 2002, 20:19

Back in the "good ol' days" of 16-bit processors, people sometimes used to refer to machines based around these devices as having "a two-byte word". A byte is 8 bits, and the natural data size for input to and output from these chips was therefore two bytes.

I've sometimes wondered whether there wasn't some sort of joke or word play going on in Wolfe's mind with Oreb, who can talk but who can only use two syllables at a time. All Oreb's ideas are expressed in these compressed and occasionally gnomic two-syllable phrases. Perhaps he has a brain based around two-word bites, as it were.

I'm sure that there will be contributors to the list who have converted programs to work on different platforms and who may well have had to squeeze an application and its accompanying data so that it will work on a much smaller device than that for which it was originally intended. All sorts of clever techniques have been evolved over the years, and I still marvel at the way that the operating system on my PDA runs a form of Windows (so-called Windows CE) on an architecture vastly different and very much smaller than that used by my desktop machine. File formats are seamlessly changed as I shunt data back and forth between the handheld and the main PC.

Wolfe has the "windows" in the manteions carry out this sort of operation with a whole human personality, for example downloading an already digitised version of Scylla into Oreb's tiny memory and brain. As far as one can make out, all the data is downloaded, but the executable parts of Scylla's personality can only run in a highly truncated form.

I just love this mixing of imaginary engineering (how to effect the transfer of all that data!) and theological speculation (what is a personality? is it a soul? is it transferrable?), which seems quintessential to the Lupine version of science fantasy. But as others have pointed out, the "transfer of human identity" (Hartshorne) is a frequent occurrence in Wolfe's writing, whether it is Severian ingesting Thecla's personality and memories via the alzado, or Mr Million preserving a human intelligence in a mechanical environment in 5HC. (Hmmm. There must be more room in Mr Million than in poor old Oreb's head. Mr Million does at least talk in complete sentences. Anybody know what the data capacity of a night chough's brain might be? More or less than a fine old Spectrum 48, I wonder?)

I have to agree with Hartshorne that this transfer of identity business really doesn't seem very "biblical". It's always seemed downright odd to me - wonderful and intriguing, but also very odd! As a Christian, Wolfe clearly believes in the soul, but his experimental treatment of this theme within an SF context has always seemed very daring to me. He achieves all sorts of extraordinary and complex effects, some of which carry deep symbolic resonances, but the actual plot devices are definitely speculated and wholly science fictional, or at least, science fantastical.

I was therefore deeply puzzled by Tom's recent post where he wrote:
Matt 16:13-17 seem to address the issue. It appears that Jews of the

time believed in some sort of soul-type transmigration, or something pretty darn weird. And apparently Jesus does, too, as he praises Simon for getting it right, since doing so requires some sort of divine assistance. So it looks like the idea of the same soulish thing moving from one incarnation to another is not anti - or even extra-Biblical.

I almost wondered whether we were looking at the same passage here, Tom! Peter's comments on the popular view of Jesus' ministry can be interpreted in a number of ways. He might mean, "They think you are a prophet like John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah!" He is probably referring to the fact that the people are making reference to Malachi 4.5, where there is a promise that "Elijah" will come before "the day of the Lord", and saying that Jesus is the one who comes as the reconciliatory herald who precedes the judgement. He may even be referring to an opinion, however metaphorical or literal we may take it, that some people are saying that Jesus is one of the prophets come back to life, but I really can't see any reference to the transmigration of souls in this exchange. When Jesus praises Simon in verse 17 and tells him that he has received divine revelation, it's not because he has agreed with whatever it was that the people believed about Jesus, but rather because Peter recognized that Jesus was the messiah, the Son of God (v16).

As for Alga's post which begins...

This is a Pharisees vs. Saducees question...

...I strongly suspect that my chain is being yanked! I refuse to rise to the bait! The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, the Saducees didn't. Although he was famously critical of the shortcomings and hypocrisies of the Pharisees, Jesus did agree with them about the reality of life after death.

Forgive a stodgy old, humourless Baptist, Alga, but that seems to be about it!

Nigel

(Stodgy and humourless and Baptistical in Minety)

Andy Robertson — 20 Apr 2002, 20:56 · follows Nigel Price

----- Original Message -----

From: "Nigel Price" <nigel.a.price at virgin.net>
environment in 5HC. (Hmmm. There must be more room in Mr Million than in poor old Oreb's head. Mr Million does at least talk in complete sentences.
Anybody know what the data capacity of a night chough's brain might be?

More

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A cubic millimeter of brain has 14 kilometers of biological wiring packed into it. There is no comparion between the brain of any living creature and ANY contemporary computer.

I won't comment on the Pharasees/Saducsees debate, but I will note one other thing about Wolfe. Apparently machines - computer, Taloses, Solders and chems - are themselves to be redeemed, and become children of God.

Isn't that interesting? It also occurs in Lafferty (ARRIVE AT EASTERWINE) and in Cordwainer Smith, but neither of them thought to preent it as accepted, routine, ordinary, boring.

hartshorn (no capital H, no terminal e)

Alice K. Turner — 21 Apr 2002, 06:16 · follows Andy Robertson

From: "Nigel Price" <nigel.a.price at virgin.net>
As for Alga's post which begins...

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Forgive a stodgy old, humourless Baptist, Alga, but that seems to be about it!

Nigel
(Stodgy and humourless and Baptistical in Minety)

Your chain was not being yanked. That was a completely serious post, in which I tried to identify Matthew (whom I consider an interesting and imaginative nut-case, which may bring out your humourless Baptist feelings--rising to the bait) as a hard-line resurrectionist going against the at-the-time and still orthodox Jewish majority feeling that this was/is a somewhat ridiculous position.

-alga

Roy C. Lackey — 22 Apr 2002, 07:16 · follows Alice K. Turner

hartshorn wrote:
I won't comment on the Pharasees/Saducsees debate, but I will note one other thing about Wolfe. Apparently machines - computer, Taloses, Solders and chems - are themselves to be redeemed, and become children of God.

I know you are presenting what seems to be Wolfe's viewpoint, not your own.

First of all, redeemed from what, exactly? Original Sin? For a Christian who subscribes to that doctrine (as all, I assume, must; otherwise what need of a "Savior"?), that's a rather queer notion. I mean, the progeny of Eve, even unto the nth generation, cut off from the Tree of Life and cursed to live by the sweat of their brows, are all doomed by the nature of their flesh--the perils and temptations and foibles attendant upon it--to live out their lives as best they may, then to die. After death they are to be judged, and rewarded or punished eternally, according to how well they acquitted themselves while alive and in the flesh. That flesh is subject, by definition, directly to Lust and Gluttony and, indirectly, to others of the Deadly Sins. It is very hard, if not impossible, to "sin" in any way that is not reducible, ultimately, to the animal nature of the species.

For a non-corporeal entity (never mind where the "soul" came from) to be held to the same standards as one of flesh and blood, strikes me as, well, . . . unfair, to say the least. It's easy to be a "saint" when it can't be helped. Has your PC ever lusted after an iMac? Have you ever known a robot who spent the rent money on wine, women, and the horses? Where is the virtue of resisting temptations one isn't even subject to?

Look at Hammerstone; he had his basic, factory-issue value system changed by an ignorant

priest with a screwdriver! Talk about an epiphany! Did that augur save that Iron Man's soul with his meddling, or doom him to hell when he got some wires crossed?

-Roy

matthew.malthouse — 22 Apr 2002, 08:20 · follows Roy C. Lackey

On 21/04/2002 07:16:44 Alice K. Turner wrote:

I tried to identify Matthew (whom I consider an interesting and imaginative nut-case,

Charmed, I'm sure.

;-)

Matthew

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 22 Apr 2002, 16:27 · follows matthew.malthouse

Alga wrote:

Your chain was not being yanked. That was a completely serious post, in which I tried to identify Matthew (whom I consider an interesting and imaginative nut-case, which may bring out your humourless Baptist feelings--rising to the bait) as a hard-line resurrectionist going against the at-the-time and still orthodox Jewish majority feeling that this was/is a somewhat ridiculous position.

H'mmmm. Well:

First of all, the Pharisees essentially won -- if you look at modern Orthodox-with-a-capital-O Jewish practice, it's almost entirely descended from the practices of the Pharisaical party. I believe that Orthodox Judaism today takes no official position on "what happens after death," but I'm not sure -- I'd have to do some research in books that I don't keep here at work (for some reason).

tom — 22 Apr 2002, 17:52 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Nigel Price writes:

I was therefore deeply puzzled by Tom's recent post where he wrote:

Matt 16:13-17 seem to address the issue. It appears that Jews of the time believed in some sort of soul-type transmigration, or something pretty darn weird. And apparently Jesus does, too, as he praises Simon for getting it right, since doing so requires some sort of divine assistance. So it looks like the idea of the same soul-ish thing moving from one incarnation to another is not anti - or even extra-Biblical.

Warning: discussion of what the word "is" means follows. Not for the faint of heart.

I almost wondered whether we were looking at the same passage here, Tom! Peter's comments on the popular view of Jesus' ministry can be interpreted in a number of ways. He might mean, "They think you are a prophet like John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah!"

Then they should have said that. But they say (in KJV): "Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets." They say "is" (well, "art"), not "like" or "reminds us of". What could they mean but some sort of soul-ish transmigration? Especially since the crowds could easily tell the difference between

Jesus and John the Baptist? A straightforward reading would seem to indicate that when they said that Jesus "was" John the Baptist, they mean that some essential part of John was in Jesus, or something of the sort.

He is probably referring to the fact that the people are making reference to Malachi 4.5, where there is a promise that "Elijah" will come before "the day of the Lord", and saying that Jesus is the one who comes as the reconciliatory herald who precedes the judgement.

Elijah is the only one who could really fit the bill without some form of transmigration, as he's the only one of the group that didn't die in the usual way.

He may even be referring to an opinion, however metaphorical or literal we may take it, that some people are saying that Jesus is one of the prophets come back to life, but I really can't see any reference to the transmigration of souls in this exchange.

When people said Jesus "was" John the Baptist, what did they mean? I hate to jump on this point, but the whole Long/Short Sun series is filled with this sort of identity bluriness.

When Jesus praises Simon in verse 17 and tells him that he has received divine revelation, it's not because he has agreed with whatever it was that the people believed about Jesus, but rather because Peter recognized that Jesus was the messiah, the Son of God (v16).

Note that Jesus does not correct the apostles with the equivalent of "You morons! Do I look like John the Baptist? How could I be Isaiah when he's been dead for hundreds of years?". He apparently finds the idea plausible. Heck, it requires divine revelation for Peter to get the right answer.

Forgive a stodgy old, humourless Baptist, Alga, but that seems to be about it!

Mention might be made of the demon named Legion, who is driven from a possessed man into a herd of swine.

Nigel
(Stodgy and humourless and Baptistical in Minety)

Tom

Dan Meliza — 22 Apr 2002, 18:21 · follows tom

-----Original Message-----

From: Nigel Price [mailto:nigel.a.price at virgin.net]
Sent: Saturday, April 20, 2002 1:19 PM
To: urth at urth.net
Subject: (urth) Scylla, Oreb and transmigration chain yanking
(Hmmm. There must be more room in Mr Million than in poor old Oreb's head. Mr Million does at least talk in complete sentences. Anybody know what the data capacity of a night chough's brain might be?

More

or less than a fine old Spectrum 48, I wonder?)

It's hard to compare algorithmic computers to brains but I'm almost certain Oreb has the spectrum 48 beat. In fact, if he's at least as smart as Alex the parrot (who can identify objects on the basis of verbal cues) he's smarter than any software/hardware in existence today, though probably not in 20-50 years. Now with a vastly smaller hippocampus and frontal lobes

it's questionable how much of a human-god's memory and personality you could store in a bird-brain even if you weren't using it. But then, there must be some way to vastly compress an intelligence if you're going to send it through the optic nerves in a few seconds.

now if only this sort of speculation were acceptable at qualifying exams.

cheers,
dan

Jeff Wilson — 24 Apr 2002, 00:08 · follows Dan Meliza

From: "Andy Robertson" <andywrobertson at clara.co.uk>

A cubic millimeter of brain has 14 kilometers of biological wiring packed into it. There is no comparison between the brain of any living creature and ANY contemporary computer.

I'm sorry, but you are mistaken; we've had simulated worm and insect brains for a few years. Another worm or fly might find the difference plain, but the comparative function's been demonstrated.

Jeff Wilson

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"If your SecOp can see you, so can the enemy." -Cpt Law

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Jeff Wilson — 24 Apr 2002, 00:40 · follows Jeff Wilson

From:

"Roy C. Lackey" <rclackey at stic.net>

hartshorn wrote:

I won't comment on the Pharasees/Saducsees debate, but I will note one other

thing about Wolfe. Apparently machines - computer, Taloses, Solders and chems - are themselves to be redeemed, and become children of God.

I know you are presenting what seems to be Wolfe's viewpoint, not your own.

First of all, redeemed from what, exactly? Original Sin? For a Christian who subscribes to that doctrine (as all, I assume, must; otherwise what need of a "Savior"?), that's a rather queer notion.

There's sin learned from others, Unoriginal Sin. :) Seriously, it's generally accepted among all but the most reactionary Christians that Jesus' sacrifice redeemed everyone from original sin, both retroactively and for all generations to come. So, innocent babies do not go to hell if they die before being baptised or otherwise "cleansed" of sin.

I mean, the progeny of Eve, even

unto the nth generation, cut off from the Tree of Life and cursed to live by the sweat of their brows, are all doomed by the nature of their flesh--the perils and temptations and foibles attendant upon it--to live out their lives as best they may, then to die. After death they are to be judged, and rewarded or punished eternally, according to how well they acquitted themselves while alive and in the flesh. That flesh is subject, by definition, directly to Lust and Gluttony and, indirectly, to others of the Deadly Sins. It is very hard, if not impossible, to "sin" in any way that is not reducible, ultimately, to the animal nature of the species.

In the same way, most Christians other than the crustiest fundamentalists will consider yielding to lust and gluttony to be sinful because/if the person chooses to indulge when they know better.

For a non-corporeal entity (never mind where the "soul" came from) to be held to the same standards as one of flesh and blood, strikes me as, well, . . . unfair, to say the least. It's easy to be a "saint" when it can't be helped. Has your PC ever lusted after an iMac? Have you ever known a robot who spent the rent money on wine, women, and the horses? Where is the virtue of resisting temptations one isn't even subject to?

Salvation's not about cultivating virtue, it's about refraining from harming yourself and others. There are plenty of precedent for the behavior (or imagined behavior) of nonhuman beings being held up as an example of virtuous conduct worth of emulation; the various animal species that mate for life, the work ethic and community spirit of the beaver, a lion's courage, the indomitability of the bear.

Look at Hammerstone; he had his basic, factory-issue value system changed by an ignorant priest with a screwdriver! Talk about an epiphany! Did that augur save that Iron Man's soul with his meddling, or doom him to hell when he got some wires crossed?

possibly, would he have had time to realize the difference between right and wrong?

Jeff Wilson

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Andy Robertson — 24 Apr 2002, 05:38 · follows Jeff Wilson

Sheesh. OK "Any vertebrate". My bad.

----- Original Message -----

From: "Jeff Wilson" <jwilson at io.com>

I'm sorry, but you are mistaken; we've had simulated worm and insect brains for a few years

Michael Straight — 24 Apr 2002, 17:27 · follows Andy Robertson

On Mon, 22 Apr 2002, Roy C. Lackey wrote:

First of all, redeemed from what, exactly? Original sin?

[...]

It is very hard, if not impossible, to "sin" in any way that is not reducible, ultimately, to the animal nature of the species.

Classically, Pride is seen as the chief of sins, and one that is least connected to our animal nature. Thought to be the source of

If angels (e.g. Satan) can sin and fall away from God, it seems consistent that it would be possible for machines and other non-animal persons.

Also, one conjecture that because humanity is fallen, the machines we make are subject to the same flaws we are.

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Many human beings have biological problems that similarly effect their behavior. One imagines/hopes that if people of any sort are held accountable for their actions, God would take that sort of thing into account. One man's half-hearted attempts to believe, repent, and do good might produce more apparent virtue than the whole-hearted effort of another, but perhaps God judges the heart. And if grace can forgive intentional sins, it can forgive acts done under the influence of crossed wires.

-Rostrum

Andy Robertson — 24 Apr 2002, 16:39 · follows Michael Straight

----- Original Message -----

From: "Michael Straight" <straight at email.unc.edu>

Look at Hammerstone; he had his basic, factory-issue value system changed by an ignorant priest with a screwdriver! Talk about an epiphany! Did that augur save that Iron Man's soul with his meddling, or doom him to hell when he got some wires crossed?

Many human beings have biological problems that similarly effect their behavior. One imagines/hopes that if people of any sort are held accountable for their actions, God would take that sort of thing into account.

And Wolfe is well aware of the moral side of it.

The aggressive appropriation of the mechanical into the divine is on one level an argument against the idea that **humans** are merely mechanical.

Humans, **as well as** machines, have free will, hence responsibility, hence authentic moral status.

hartshorn

One man's half-hearted attempts to believe, repent, and do good

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