

Smart Robots

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 22 Apr 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3190>

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James Jordan — 22 Apr 2002, 15:00

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.

Roy wrote:

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.

(rest of good points skipped)

In defense of Wolfe, he has said (in the my old interview with him) that he does not take the Genesis account literally. (And, it's really the sin of Adam, not Eve. Adam stood by silently and put Eve up to tasting the fruit to see what would happen. He ate it when she failed to die immediately. He was the first Male Chauvinist Pig in history, but hardly the last. Thus, in the Bible it is always the sin of Adam, not the sin of Eve, that corrupted humanity. But back to the main topic:)

This, of course, makes it hard for Wolfe to explain the origin of sin. He's not going to want to fall back on some kind of evolutionary notion that human "sin" has some kind of "animal" and "pre-rational" past as its root. So, for him the origin of sin has to be some kind of mystery. Cordwainer Smith also has "redeemed" underpeople-animals and robots, but in his case this is tied to his view of language as an aspect of the Word of God. Any creature that rises to the ability to use language creatively has risen to the point where he/she comes into contact with the Divinity. For him, the image of God is tied closely to language, and thus when animals and robots learn to speak for themselves (not just what has been programmed in), they acquire the image of God also. He could then have said, if he had chosen to do so, that such creatures are "adopted" into humanity, thus receiving both the blessings (language) and curses (sin) of humanity, and also thus being able to receive redemption from the Word Incarnate. I think there is enough indication in Smith's works to make a case for this model.

But I don't see this kind of reflection in Wolfe. I think he's just using an SF-trope, and we have to give him permission. It's really no different from allowing for time travel, faster than light space travel (assuming an Einsteinian universe), etc.

The same kind of theological problem arises from intelligent alien species -- which in almost all SF are just human beings in different shapes. Christians writing SF either need to have no aliens, or else their aliens need to be sinless -- or at least to have fallen as a result of someone

other than Adam. But then, if they are redeemed, you wind up with an incarnation of the Son and His death over and over on planet after planet -- and this creates many more theological problems that I won't bore you all with.

My way of taking Wolfe on this is that he is writing fiction, and using some SF tropes in a non-realistic, symbolic way. If he's projecting a "real possibility for the future," then all the problems you mentioned arise. If he's using this mingling of personalities, and intelligent robots, as ways of speaking about the human condition, then there is really no problem. It's fiction, after all. Intelligent robots are just symbols for "other kinds" of people. Mingling of personalities is a way of expressing the way people share a common life and bear one another's burdens; and also the way Christ lives in us and we in Him, and in each other. Etc.

I tend to divide SF into three types: the Science type, the Fiction (literary) type, and the Adventure type. The Science type moves toward projecting some kind of real future. The Adventure type just wants to amuse us with a good yarn, and does not care about faster than light spaceships or that his aliens are just like human beings. The Fiction type uses SF tropes for literary purposes. Jack Vance is a good example of this. He was asked at the Orlando World Con a few years back why he has so few robots and computers. His answer was that such things did nothing for him as a writer. If in the future robots and computers do everything, then the kind of things he want to write about become uninteresting and pointless. He affirmed that he was not trying to write some kind of "real" future fantasy. I think we can agree that Wolfe is mostly also of this second type of SF. He's enough of a hard scientist to put lots of hard science thinking into his writing, but ultimately he's writing Fiction about human beings.

FWIW.

Nutria

Andy Robertson — 22 Apr 2002, 16:51 · follows James Jordan

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

From: "James Jordan" <bjordan4 at cox.net>
hartshorn wrote:

I won't comment on the Pharisees/Saducees 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.

Roy wrote:

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

To be redeemed AND BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD. Please.

To be subject to the Fortunate Fault is a blessing, not a curse.

You may argue that robots can't do this, but in the Lupiverse they can.

And this undercuts Nutrias probable smooth arguments about Robot as symbolic of different sorts of people.

It's not just that these robots are marginally human. It is that they have the same spiritual status as people. They are outrageously, flamboyantly, human - irrational, emotional, lovable, ridiculous.

Wolfe is saying something by this, perhaps that the Spirit is immanent in matter and only needs a very little permission to stand up in the image of god.

hartshorn

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 22 Apr 2002, 17:07 · follows Andy Robertson

Hartshorn said it pretty darn well:

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

To be redeemed AND BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD. [...]0

You may argue that robots can't do this, but in the Lupiverse they can.

While I think it may be a stretch to simply say "they can," I think we can safely say "it appears that they can." I would suggest that in the Lupiverse (as quite possibly in the universe which we are please to call "real"), if humans make something capable of ensoulment, God will provide the soul -- which does not necessarily mean that it is a "good" thing to make such an object, other than by the means which have been provided us (i.e., reproduction); but a robot or a clone would not, I think, be punished for the sins of its makers.

And this undercuts Nutrias probable smooth arguments about Robot as symbolic of different sorts of people.

Why? Because one thing is true does not mean that another thing is not; certainly, these two things don't contradict. Or, if you think they do, please show how. Make sure that it accounts for Olivine.

--Dan'l

Andy Robertson — 22 Apr 2002, 17:26 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

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

From: "Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <ddanehy at siebel.com>

And this undercuts Nutrias probable smooth arguments about Robot as symbolic of different sorts of people.

Why? Because one thing is true does not mean that another thing is not; certainly, these two things don't contradict.

I agree with that. Your pardon, Nutria.

hartshorn