

Those chems

The Urth list — 19 messages, 9 voices, 03 Sep 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3434>

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Roy C. Lackey — 03 Sep 2002, 05:26

The subject of chems having been brought up lately, I want to say a few things about them in general, some of which may bear on recent discussion.

First is the silly anthropomorphic notion of gender in machines: they don't have any. Gender outside of biological life forms is devoid of meaning. Yeah, Wolfe has consistently given us such characters in his fiction, but that doesn't make it true. I can, for the sake of a story, accept sentient automatons, just as I do FTL ships, time travel, and ghosts, but logic can't be left entirely on this side of the looking glass.

Chems were built on Urth, not the _Whorl_, to the evil madman Typhon's specifications. Lest the chems wear out, like Marble, or otherwise be lost to his plan, he made provision for replacements. For some reason he decided that individual machines should not replicate themselves alone, so each machine was programmed with only half the data needed to build a replacement. It was a stupid idea, as subsequent events proved, and gave rise to the notion of gender, based on the obvious and convenient human analogy.

Chem is a term coined on the _Whorl_. Both Urth-born Kypriis and Mamelta give them no more regard as sentient beings than I do my car or computer, each calling them by some variation of "robot" and "machine", which is what they are. The chems are "its", not "hes" and "shes". They have no instincts beyond their "standing orders", which can be subverted, as Incus demonstrated, by a little rewiring and reprogramming. They do not have glands or hormones to influence behavior. The gamut of human emotions attributed to the head movements and body language of Marble exist only in the eye of the beholder; they are learned associations or fanciful projections with no more (probably less) real-world meaning than those my wife assigns to one of our cats.

I'm a little over half through my nth reading of the LS series. From all I've been able to determine, there are two basic models of chems. One is the tall (two heads taller than Silk), heavy model used primarily, if not exclusively, as "soldiers", such as Hammerstone. These machines are, according to Hammerstone, basically identical in terms of hardware; the differences, such as military rank, are in the programming they were given and a certain ability to "learn" from experience. These tall chems are, so far as I can tell, designated exclusively as "male". The other model is smaller (nearer normal human size) and lighter, though still heavier than a same-sized human. These shorter chems seem to be all "female".

The only differences between what are termed "male" and "female" chems is a matter of programming and relative size. Many of their inner components were probably interchangeable. None of those components can be identified as male or female. Marble's modesty is entirely an affectation; she has no female features to hide beneath a habit, no more than the soldiers have male features. In fact, the soldiers wear only different colors of paint to indicate their function.

Hammerstone might just as well have been programmed as "female" and spent "her" waking

hours sewing nighties for Orchid's girls and empathizing with their monthly courses; but no, its fingers were too big for fine work. But it makes just as much sense as wandering around on patrol in the tunnels, talking Silk's ears off with stereotypical army gripes, pining over lost love, and bitching about the shortage of chem nookie--or whatever equivalent non-biological itch Hammerstone was programmed to scratch.

-Roy

Andy Robertson — 03 Sep 2002, 05:00 · follows Roy C. Lackey

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

From: "Roy C. Lackey" <rclackey at stic.net>
To: "urth" <urth at urth.net>
Sent: Tuesday, September 03, 2002 6:26 AM
Subject: (urth) Those chems
Chem is a term coined on the _Whorl_. Both Urth-born Kypris and Mamelta give them no more regard as sentient beings than I do my car or computer, each calling them by some variation of "robot" and "machine", which is what they are. The chems are "its", not "hes" and "shes". They have no instincts beyond their "standing orders", which can be subverted, as Incus demonstrated, by a little rewiring and reprogramming. They do not have glands or hormones to influence behavior. The gamut of human emotions attributed to the head movements and body language of Marble exist only in the eye of the beholder; they are learned associations or fanciful projections with no more (probably less) real-world meaning than those my wife assigns to one of our cats.

Um!

Wolfe deliberately gave the chems souls. Whatever "soul" is, they have it as much as do the bios. After all bios are just machines, too.

You might argue that the chems are radically less complex mentally than the bios, but there is no evidence for this. A human mind can reside in the chem's cards, it seems - people are transferred back and forth all the time - and so the chems' native minds apparently can be as complex and idiosyncratic as a bio's.

I won't argue that Typhon intnded this. I think it just happened, after hundreds of years interaction with the bios and with each other.

Your cats do have emotions, which they communicate to you very well. Or communicate to your wife, at least, it seems.

hartshorn

matthew.malthouse — 03 Sep 2002, 10:48 · follows Andy Robertson

On 03/09/2002 06:26:35 Roy C. Lackey wrote

The only differences between what are termed "male" and "female" chems is a matter of programming and relative size. Many of their inner components were probably interchangeable. None of those components can be identified as

male

or female. Marble's modesty is entirely an affectation; she has no female features to hide beneath a habit, no more than the soldiers have male features. In fact, the soldiers wear only different colors of paint to indicate their function.

The suggestion that Marble's behaviour is an affectation is an interesting one.

An affectation. A show, pretense, or display. Behavior that is assumed rather than natural; artificiality. A particular habit, as of speech or dress, adopted to give a false impression.

But is it?

You also say that the behaviour of the chems is programmed. We know this and more we know, I think, that the function of those placed directly in society is in part and perhaps in the greatest part is to inhibit change, providing a static referent against which novelties can be measured and so improve the chance that the societies Typhon/Pas designed would arrive at their destination in the form he intended.

Programmed behaviour - in the literal sense of being codes and instructions - is as "natural" to the chems as any learned behaviour is to humans. Marble's modesty is exactly the opposite of an affectation. It is likely as deep seated in her as any instinct in us, perhaps more so, and for a very specific reason: to make her (and her kind) not only fit in with the human society in which she exists but also to make her a model for that society. Yes, it is an artifice to give a false impression - that she is human. But it is not assumed or adopted: it and other such mannerisms are fundamental to her creation.

So too with gender. Gender-less chems would not, could not have performed so well in the role assigned them. A difference so fundamental between gendered humans and non-gendered chems would have been a significant barrier to the chems function. Just look at where Marble is; in a religious establishment and a teacher of the young. Church and school, two central institutions for society and thus most effectively placed. She should be an exemplar for the children and adults who come into contact with her. The effectiveness of this compromised only by the unplanned long extended wait in the Whorl where the degradations of age made the differences between chems and humans more apparent.

Gender is not sex. It is not the presence or absence of particular organs. Here it is a designed matter based on the human model with which the chems must blend. If Marble is programmed to act in ways that are accepted as being appropriate to women and does so then for the purposes of her function she is effectively female because she is seen as female in that society. She is modest not because there is physically anything to be modest about but because humans seeing her must be taught that a good woman is modest and a good man respects that modesty.

Having chems differentiated into male and female types - and given those types occupations stereotypically appropriate in that society - a methodology for governing the replacement of chems in the small numbers that it was anticipated might be required immediately suggests itself and further fits into the designed differentiation that helps chems fit into human societies. To do otherwise, to have one chem alone be able to create another or to have new chems appear from some "magic" portal would have diminished their effectiveness.

The entities in Mainframe might understandably be dismissive of "machines". After all those entities designed the machines and their part in the plan. More the machines function has come

to an end. Having stabilised societal forms for the length of the journey and subsequent wait in orbit there is no further use for them. But for the humans aboard the whorl the chems are personalities. Marble would have been known to many in her part of the town from their very earliest days and as such most assuredly a person and a woman.

What should our view of chems be? The mainframe view of a small, useful tool? Or the passenger view of personality and fellow?

Matthew

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 03 Sep 2002, 18:07 · follows matthew.malthouse

Roy C. wrote:

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Now, this is an interesting statement. Roy, you seem to be stating that behavior influenced by hormones is thereby less mechanistic, or something? I wonder if that's a trap Wolfe deliberately laid ...

The chems (in my reading) are a perfect analogue of the human situation, and I think Wolfe very much intended them as such. We are (by Christian belief) free willed souls housed in biological "hardware" that deeply affects our behavior -- an injury to the head can cause amnesia, radical personality change, all sorts of things. Simple surgical alterations to the brain can have strange, and often unpredictable, effects on our behavior.

Yet we (Christians) claim that there is something, a soul or spirit, underlying this which remains constant through all such changes and is the root of free will, the locus of moral choice, and is what is "judged" after this life.

Materialists claim that the way changes to the brain affect personality is "proof" that this intangible thing does not exist, and it's certainly an ongoing challenge to refute this; where is free moral choice when the right combination of implanted electrodes, injected hormones, and/or operant- conditioning can turn any "normal" person into a Gandhi or a raging killer? (Forgive the exaggeration, if it is one. I don't know how far the state of this art has expanded since I last read up in it. Neither, I expect, do any of you; those likely to fund really advanced research in this field are unlikely to publicize it.)

So how do we differ from the chems? "Glands?" Pfui; the equivalent can be programmed, or hardware-coded -- the little we learn of chem reproduction leads me to think the latter. Though each has half the information needed to build a child, it appears that they can't simply share the information, as they surely could (with, perhaps, the help of someone like Incus) if it were simply software. Both must be present through the entire operation. Chems, apparently, have behavior and urges which are outside their conscious control and reside below the "software" level.

The analogy is not perfect but it's enough to allow Wolfe to play safely with questions of the meaning of free will when the brain is interfered with. Since this is a theme also with the bios (Who is morally responsible for the acts of a bio possessed by a god? Or of that bio after the god

has returned to Mainframe but left traces behind? In Short Sun, where does Horn's moral responsibility end and Silk's begin? Etc.), it seems likely that Wolfe intended the chems to extend this theme ... especially, but not only, in Hammerstone's case.

Onward, back to you Roy:

The gamut of human emotions attributed to the head movements and body language of Marble exist only in the eye of the beholder; they are learned associations or fanciful projections with no more (probably less) real-world meaning than those my wife assigns to one of our cats.

And here the agenda steps forward: Roy, you are a victim of pseudoscientific behaviorism, the idea that humans are somehow the only creatures with real emotions or consciousness. While only a fool would claim that the exact natures of a cat's consciousness and emotions are identical to a human's, it is equally silly to suppose that they don't have 'em ... in fact, the only plausible argument for this is a religious one that we have souls and they don't.

But if you accept even in part the idea that our emotions and consciousness are evolved for specific purposes -- and if you don't accept that, then we (despite my professing Catholic Christianity) simply do not live in the same universe -- then it becomes ludicrous to claim that the same general kind of mind and emotions are not present in, at least, other vertebrates, and certainly other mammals. Take two animals descended from a common ancestor as relatively recently as us and a squirrel, cat, or (especially) chimp, and demonstrate (as is easily done) not only that they behave similarly under circumstances we would describe using emotional words, but (more difficult but it has been done) that the same regions of the brain are firing -- for emotions do not fire primarily in the uniquely human areas of the cortex but in the deeper and older regions of the brain, shared with our fellow vertebrates -- and that similar chemicals flood their systems at those times -- demonstrate all this, I say, and a claim that they do not experience something very close to our emotions is not a least hypothesis at all, at all, but a highly motivated claim intended to make it okay to treat animals as we far too often do.

Let me make clear that I am not a PETA loonie and do not seek to shut down all animal research; far from it, I am a supporter of animal research for medical and scientific purposes. However, I believe that this is a case of the "naked lunch" principle -- which I describe as the idea that those who eat meat need to visit a slaughterhouse, see what is done, and understand that they are hiring people to do this for them. Use of animals for our own purposes is (in my very firm opinion) morally acceptable only by those who clearly and fully understand what they are doing.

--Dan'l

Roy C. Lackey — 03 Sep 2002, 19:36 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Matthew wrote:

The suggestion that Marble's behaviour is an affectation is an interesting one.

An affectation. A show, pretense, or display. Behavior that is assumed rather than natural; artificiality. A particular habit, as of speech or dress, adopted to give a false impression.

That definition fits Marble perfectly!

Programmed behaviour - in the literal sense of being codes and instructions - is as "natural" to the chems as any learend behaviour is to humans. Marble's modesty is exactly the opposite of an affectation. It

is likely as deep seated in her as any instinct in us, perhaps more so, and for a very specific reason: to make her (and her kind) not only fit in with the human society in which she exists but also to make her a model for that society. Yes, it is an artifice to give a false impression - that she is human. But it is not assumed or adopted: it and other such mannerisms are fundamental to her creation.

I don't think so. Marble was not programmed on Urth to be a sibyl. I don't know how/why she became a sibyl, but several decades back she was a maid.

So too with gender. Gender-less chems would not, could not have performed so well in the role assigned them. A difference so fundamental between gendered humans and non-gendered chems would have been a significant barrier to the chems function. Just look at where Marble is; in a religious establishment and a teacher of the young. Church and school, two central institutions for society and thus most effectively placed. She should be an exemplar for the children and adults who come into contact with her.

After entering the religious order she "assumed" and "adopted" the conventions of the order. Marble is the only example I am aware of of a chem entering the order. That being so, her programmers on Urth assuredly did not waste her storage space by giving her unneeded (and from her programmers' perspective, pointless) "mannerisms" "fundamental to her creation". I mentioned that chems have a certain ability to learn from experience. That is what she did. She adopted the mannerisms of the bio sibyls, acquiring her modesty from their nun-like example.

Marble and Olivine are the only female chems I can recall from the LS/SS books. Olivine does not share Marble's sense of modesty. She spied on Silk's nakedness. Olivine clothes herself like a human, not from innate modesty, but because male chems she encounters want to mate with her. She doesn't want to mate, apparently because she is "ashamed" of her imperfections. (RTTW, 240)

[snip]

What should our view of chems be? The mainframe view of a small, useful tool? Or the passenger view of personality and fellow?

Wolfe clearly intended the latter, as I think I indicated. Olivine is a pathetic figure, like some street urchin out of Dickens. But, hell's bells, somebody smear some grease on her sticking relays and get rid of that annoying stammer and lurch!

-Roy

Roy C. Lackey — 04 Sep 2002, 01:15 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Dan'I wrote:

[snip]

So how do we differ from the chems? "Glands?" Pfui; the equivalent can be programmed, or hardware-coded -- the little we learn of chem reproduction leads me to think the latter.

Why would any robot designer in their right mind even consider building one hardwired (or programmed) to be subject to the equivalent vagaries of human emotions occasioned by glandular secretions? Hard to imagine Marble with a robot version of PMS. Would Sand have been any meaner to Silk if he had cranked out a little more of the robot version of testosterone?

And where do those parts needed to build a new chem come from? Central warehouse? I guess not, or Olivine wouldn't have been left in the lurch. (There shouldn't have been a shortage of fem-chem parts; there never had been many females.) Carried inside the chem parents? Then how is it that Hammerstone and Marble used up theirs?

The gamut of human emotions attributed to the head movements and body language of Marble exist only in the eye of the beholder; they are learned associations or fanciful projections with no more (probably less) real-world meaning than those my wife assigns to one of our cats.

And here the agenda steps forward: Roy, you are a victim of pseudoscientific behaviorism, the idea that humans are somehow the only creatures with real emotions or consciousness. While only a fool would claim that the exact_natures of a cat's consciousness and emotions are identical to a human's, it is equally silly to suppose that they don't have 'em ... in fact, the only plausible argument for this is a religious one that we have souls and they don't.

Perhaps you missed the "(probably less)" part of that quote. Anyone who has seen a whipped cur, or one that has just been handed a piece of meat, can see that the dog acts very differently in those cases. Likewise the cats don't purr when I yell at them to get off the screen door. Animals seem to have a certain degree of consciousness and emotions, sure; they just don't have the ones my wife projects them to have: they can't--their brains don't have room for that complexity, even if they could think like a human, which they can't.

[snip]

Let me make clear that I am not a PETA loonie and do not seek to shut down all animal research; far from it, I am a supporter of animal research for medical and scientific purposes. However, I believe that this is a case of the "naked lunch" principle -- which I describe as the idea that those who eat meat need to visit a slaughterhouse, see what is done, and understand that they are hiring people to do this for them. Use of animals for our own purposes is (in my very firm opinion) morally acceptable only by those who clearly and fully understand what they are doing.

Although this animal-rights stuff had nothing to do with my post, you have several times brought up Heinlein on this list. In *TIME ENOUGH FOR LOVE* he said that when the need arises you must be able to shoot your own dog. I can; I have. That doesn't mean I liked it. I wouldn't eat chicken for years; I kept seeing them headless, flapping around spouting blood as I had seen them as a kid when they were fresh killed. But I got over it. And I know how sausage is made.

-Roy

Charles Reed — 04 Sep 2002, 13:56 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

. . . Take two animals descended from a common ancestor as relatively recently as us and a squirrel, cat, or (especially) chimp, and demonstrate (as is easily done) not only that they behave similarly under circumstances we would describe using emotional words, but (more

difficult but it has been done) that the same regions of the brain are firing -- for emotions do _not_ fire primarily in the uniquely human areas of the cortex but in the deeper and older regions of the brain, shared with our fellow vertebrates -- _and_ that similar chemicals flood their systems at those times -- demonstrate all this, I say, and a claim that they do _not_ experience something very close to our emotions is not a least hypothesis at all, at all, but a highly motivated claim intended to make it okay to treat animals as we far too often do.

This is off-topic and trivial beyond belief, but I'd just like to express my admiration for the above sentence. My seventh-grade English teacher would love to see it diagrammed. :-)

Charles

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 05 Sep 2002, 17:59 · follows Charles Reed

Roy, on chem "glands":

Why would any robot designer in their right mind even _consider_ building one hardwired (or programmed) to be subject to the equivalent vagaries of human emotions occasioned by glandular secretions?

Because the designers' goals are not what you assume they are -- they are attempting to build "chemical persons," the term actually used in the text which "chems" is short for. More specifically, they are attempting to create a consciousness of equivalent nature (though not identical to) human consciousness. From my own reading in the field (which is, granted, mostly on the level of Pinker and Dennett), I am inclined to suppose that it is necessary for some kind of irrational drives to be present for a consciousness as such to have even the possibility of evolving/emerging.

Hard to imagine Marble with a robot version of PMS.

Granted; but then, she's _old_. I don't think we actually know enough about younger fem chems to make a statement like this meaningfully.

Would Sand have been any meaner to Silk if he had cranked out a little more of the robot version of testosterone?

Would Severian have been taller if he had been born on Lune instead of Urth? You're asking questions which are contratextual, and given that the text itself is a contrafactual, it's hard to make the questions mean anything at all. Even if you grant per hypothesi that the chems do have a hardprogrammed equivalent of "glands," that doesn't mean that they duplicate the specific functions of human glands; only that there is some built in drive equivalent to the (glandularly influenced though not, I think, determined) human drive to reproduce. We see in Marble at least one other drive

-- a drive to maintain her own bodily "health" to the extent possible.

(Both of these are drives I can imagine even a highly pragmatic engineer building into pure "robots"; reproduction to maintain the "supply" in the isolated _Whorl_ and self-preservation/maintenance, to extend the useful lifespan of the "units.")

And where _do_ those parts needed to build a new chem come from? Central warehouse? I guess not, or Olivine wouldn't have been left in the lurch.

I have the distinct impression that they have to _make_ the parts, though just _how_ this is done is not clear

-- but there's no reason it should be, since we don't see any of it happening. Olivine isn't incomplete because they ran out of parts; she's incomplete because Marble left too soon. (I think this much, at least, is pretty clear from the text.)

The gamut of human emotions attributed to the head movements and body language of Marble exist only in the eye of the beholder; they are learned associations or fanciful projections with no more (probably less) real-world meaning than those my wife assigns to one of our cats.

And here the agenda steps forward: Roy, you are a victim of pseudoscientific behaviorism, the idea that humans are somehow the only creatures with real emotions or consciousness. While only a fool would claim that the _exact_natures_ of a cat's consciousness and emotions are identical to a human's, it is equally silly to suppose that they don't have 'em ... in fact, the only plausible argument for this is a religious one that we have souls and they don't.

Perhaps you missed the "(probably less)" part of that quote. Anyone who has seen a whipped cur, or one that has just been handed a piece of meat, can see that the dog acts very differently in those cases. Likewise the cats don't purr when I yell at them to get off the screen door. Animals seem to have a certain degree of consciousness and emotions, sure; they just don't have the ones my wife projects them to have: they can't--their brains don't have room for that complexity, even if they could think like a human, which they can't.

Why in Heaven's name do you assume that emotions are more complex than thinking? The parts of the brain where emotions are seated in humans are much older than in animals, and have not changed terribly much in lo these many millions of years. To assume that they do not produce similar emotions in animals seems very odd.

And why in Heaven's name do you assume that they can't "think like a human?" John W. Campbell used to ask for aliens that think as well as humans but not like humans; some animals, I submit, particularly a lot of our fellow mammals, are the converse: they think not as well as humans but like humans.

I have seen animals do what I can only call reasoning -- I have even seen a cat behaving in a way that I can only explain, admittedly by a sort of projection, by saying that the cat enacted a primitive form of the scientific method: observing, forming a hypothesis, testing the hypothesis by further observations, and acting on the results. Lengthy story on request, but it's even more off-topic than this -- which, I believe, remains topic- relevant in that it relates (a) to the question of the chems, and (b) to such creatures as Oreb and Tik.

Although this animal-rights stuff had nothing to do with my post, you have several times brought up Heinlein on this list. In TIME ENOUGH FOR LOVE he said that when the need arises you must be able to shoot your own dog. I can; I have.

Are we establishing some kind of credentials? I haven't shot my own dog; it would be illegal where I live. I have held my dog, and my cat, while the vet gave it the final shot, and continued to hold them until well after their hearts had stopped. Same logic, different environment.

That doesn't mean I liked it. I wouldn't eat chicken for years; I kept seeing them headless, flapping around spouting blood as I had seen them as a kid when they were fresh killed.

Ditto -- my dad raised chickens in a suburban yard, earning the enmity of his downwind neighbors. I never stopped eating chicken, but then my own position on animals has only gradually evolved (and still does). Someday I may talk myself into becoming a vegetarian...but I sure do like meat.

Meanwhile, back at the Whorl: one last question ... why, do you suppose, Wolfe chose to call them "chemical" persons instead of (say) "electromechanical" persons? Does this have any bearing on your assumption that they are what we would call "robots" and not "androids?" (Yes, I know that Li'l Scylla uses the word "robot." Proves very little, I think.)

President and Founder,
Chem Rights Now

Andy Robertson — 05 Sep 2002, 17:05 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Surely this is a reference to "alchemy"?

Plus, the Golem's written sigil was called a "chem".

hartshorn

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

From: "Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <ddanehy at siebel.com>
Meanwhile, back at the Whorl: one last question ... why, do you suppose, Wolfe chose to call them "chemical" persons instead of (say) "electromechanical" persons? Does this have any bearing on

James Wynn — 05 Sep 2002, 21:43 · follows Andy Robertson

Whipping that

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes said:

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Hartshorn replied:

Surely this is a reference to "alchemy"?

Crush weighs in:

Here's a quote from Chenille (roughly) -

"Poppy is cute. But Hyacinth is pure gold"

Roy C. Lackey — 06 Sep 2002, 06:24 · follows James Wynn

Blattid

President and Founder,

Chem Rights Now wrote:
anything at all. Even if you grant per hypothesis that the chems do have a hardprogrammed equivalent of "glands," that doesn't mean that they duplicate the specific functions of human glands;

The books may be fresher in my mind since I am currently re-reading them, and have paid particular attention to the chems. Time and again Wolfe portrays chems, mostly Hammerstone and Marble, experiencing all-too-human emotions, and that's the very thing I can't swallow -- at least on this side of the looking glass. Trivial (to the plot) example: Marble thinks that it may rain and spot the clean sheets she needs to hang out to dry: "Fuming, she put aside the wicker clothes-basket . . .". (LS3, chapter 8) That just happens to be where I am in my reading; I didn't take notes, but there are many such examples. Hammerstone's obsequious adoration of Incus includes wanting to just stare at him like some star-struck teenager. (LS3, 3) At one time or another chems are made to experience shame, anxiety, anger, timidity, doubt, joy, worship (oh yeah; Hammerstone lectures Auk about it), wistfulness, and a whole lot more. And Olivine is such a twisted mass of emotions it's pathetic. Literally. When she gave up an eye for her mama, I thought I was gonna cry. :-)

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some built in drive equivalent to the (glandularly
influenced though not, I think, determined) human drive
to reproduce. We see in Marble at least one other drive
-- a drive to maintain her own bodily "health" to the
extent possible.

Then why did Olivine give up an eye if it wasn't in her best interest? Human altruism, that's why.

Look, I've acknowledged that Wolfe intended chems to be regarded as sentient automatons pretty much on a par with humans. (The question of chem "souls" is one I'd rather not get into, but I seriously doubt the Vatican would buy it.) He goes out of his way to do it. But I don't start turning on the lights before entering a dark room just because I've read a ghost story, either.

Perhaps you missed the "(probably less)" part of that quote.
Anyone who has seen a whipped cur, or one that has just been
handed a piece of meat, can see that the dog acts very
differently in those cases. Likewise the cats don't purr when
I yell at them to get off the screen door. Animals seem to
have a certain degree of consciousness and emotions, sure;
they just don't have the ones my wife projects them to have:
they can't--their brains don't have room for that complexity,
even if they could think like a human, which they can't.

Why in Heaven's name do you assume that emotions are more complex
than thinking?

How does that follow from what I wrote? I didn't say that.

And why in Heaven's name do you assume that they can't "think
like a human?"

Because they can't. Language and thought are inextricably related in humans; cats don't have the language, ergo . . .

Although this animal-rights stuff had nothing to do with my
post, you have several times brought up Heinlein on this list.
In TIME ENOUGH FOR LOVE he said that when the need arises you
must be able to shoot your own dog. I can; I have.

Are we establishing some kind of credentials?

It was my response to your "'naked lunch' principle" spiel.

I haven't shot my
own dog; it would be illegal where I live. I have held my dog,
and my cat, while the vet gave it the final shot, and continued
to hold them until well after their hearts had stopped. Same

logic, different environment.

Not the same at all, and it's also illegal where I live, but this is way off topic. I should have given the full quote, which is on page 260 of the hardback. Suffice it to say I agree with Heinlein, but I don't deride those who don't.

Meanwhile, back at the Whorl: one last question ... why, do you suppose, Wolfe chose to call them "chemical" persons instead of (say) "electromechanical" persons? Does this have any bearing on your assumption that they are what we would call "robots" and not "androids?" (Yes, I know that Li'l Scylla uses the word "robot." Proves very little, I think.)

I assume that they were so called because chemical reactions (as take place in modern dry-cell batteries) were their power source. As I said before, both Urth-born Mamelta and Kypris called them robots and mechanical (LS2, 10 and 4, respectively). Mamelta was so incensed when Lemur (the chem version killed by Crane with the azoth) was hurting Silk, that she screamed at him "_You damned robot! You THING!_" (emphasis in text, LS2, 12). (I would give page numbers, instead of chapter numbers, but I have only the paperbacks of the first three books.) Clearly, people who had not been born on the _Whorl_ did not regard chems as equal to bios.

Even on the _Whorl_, in Silk's day, such an attitude still apparently persisted, lest Silk would not have said to Lemur:

""You said something else that I ignored, Councillor."

For the first time, Lemur sounded dangerous and even deadly. 'Which was . . .?'

'You said that you were not a chem. I'm not one of those ignorant and prejudiced bios who consider themselves superior to chems, but I know--'

'You lie!'"

Then Lemur pitched a fit and fired the azoth. (LS2, 12) He didn't want to admit that he was a chem because he was aware of the prejudice, and even seems to have shared it.

-Roy

matthew.malthouse — 06 Sep 2002, 08:52 · follows Roy C. Lackey

On 06/09/2002 07:24:02 Roy C. Lackey wrote:

Look, I've acknowledged that Wolfe intended chems to be regarded as sentient

automatons pretty much on a par with humans. (The question of chem "souls"

is one I'd rather not get into, but I seriously doubt the Vatican would buy

it.) He goes out of his way to do it. But I don't start turning on the lights before entering a dark room just because I've read a ghost story, either.

I was (hic!) thinking about this - in general terms - last night on my way home from the bar. By alcohol alone is the mind set in motion...

Actually I was think more generally that the depiction of the alien (vide the comment about JWCambel's remark) is probably impossible because a human writer for a human audience cannot but produce a human concept.

Thought the next was that a very few writers get close. C J Cherryh being one who does so

regularly; V Vinge's "A Deepness in the Sky" manages something akin by playing with the reader's perceptions (to say more would be a spoiler I think).

And thought the last as that Wolfe never does. I don't think he even tries to nor wishes to.

The not-human beings encountered in his work might be outre in form and somewhat mannered in behaviour but from Baldanders to Marble are comprehensible in solely human terms.

Whether analogy or parable or "just a story" Wolfe's work is essentially humanistic.

So the lack of chems with chem-centric behaviours and motivations, enjoying a uniquely chem-oid lifestyle (still less driving for a family of cheap green retractables) isn't a surprise.

Matthew

James Wynn — 06 Sep 2002, 15:27 · follows matthew.malthouse

A response and a question.....

Roy C. Lackey said:

Then Lemur pitched a fit and fired the azoth. (LS2, 12) He didn't want to admit that he was a chem because he was aware of the prejudice, and even seems to have shared it

Crush responds:

Hmmm. I thought it upset him because it would mean he was dead - a ghost like the gods at which he sneered. While the **real** Urth of Typhon viewed robots as non-persons, in the Whorl where everything is artificial (except for an ignorant minority) they are as real as anything else. Thus, in Viron chems have full rights. Marble seems to face no barriers as a sibyl.

But I could be wrong about the extent of the general prejudice. Silk's statement "I'm not one of those ignorant and prejudiced bios who consider themselves superior to chems" is subtexted by the fact that he himself is an "artificial" and "engineered" person, only one constructed of flesh. And IMO while Silk is not a bio-supremist, he is a bio-separatist to an extent that he must soon face.

Roy C. Lackey said:

But, no, Jonas wasn't a chem, at least not one like those on the Whorl. Jonas was very light weight, as Sev noticed when he picked him up in the Antechamber. Male chems are much heavier than humans. Even female chems are heavier than same-sized humans.

Crush asks:

Is anyone aware of any textual evidence that non-military chems are not light-weight? I know Sand was five-hundred weight, but that was useful for his function.

-- Crush

Jerry Friedman — 06 Sep 2002, 20:39 · follows James Wynn

--- "Roy C. Lackey" <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:

Blattid

President and Founder,

Chem Rights Now wrote:

anything at all. Even if you grant per hypothesis that the chems do have a hardprogrammed equivalent of "glands," that doesn't mean that they duplicate the specific functions of human glands;

The books may be fresher in my mind since I am currently re-reading them, and have paid particular attention to the chems. Time and again Wolfe portrays chems, mostly Hammerstone and Marble, experiencing all-too-human emotions, and that's the very thing I can't swallow -- at least on this side of the looking glass...

Look, I've acknowledged that Wolfe intended chems to be regarded as sentient automatons pretty much on a par with humans. (The question of chem "souls" is one I'd rather not get into, but I seriously doubt the Vatican would buy it.) He goes out of his way to do it. But I don't start turning on the lights before entering a dark room just because I've read a ghost story, either.

I think what you're assuming--that machines can't have emotions--is not only unproven, but has a very strong argument against it. If human bodies including brains work by the laws of physics, than computers should be able to simulate them as well as desired. That is, it should be possible to build robots that behave and feel the way we do. Unless you think that our behavior or our feelings are not something our bodies do unassisted, in which case your position needs *lots* of explanation. Not necessarily on this list.

Of course the materialistic view I'm arguing for can't (yet) explain how something made of matter can be conscious, but that is still easier to deal with than claiming that matter organized in one way (bios) can be conscious or interact with conscious spirit or whatever, but matter organized in another way (chems) can't.

Or maybe your arguing that engineers and tyrants on Urth [*] wouldn't want chems with consciousness and emotions. But maybe they would, or quite possibly consciousness and emotions are necessary to something to something that has as much independent judgement as a person, or maybe they're not but it was much easier to follow the model of human beings (with minor modifications) than to create a new kind of independent rational being. ...

Meanwhile, back at the Whorl: one last question ... why, do you suppose, Wolfe chose to call them "chemical" persons instead of (say) "electromechanical" persons? Does this have any bearing on your assumption that they are what we would call "robots" and not "androids?" (Yes, I know that Li'l Scylla uses the word "robot." Proves very little, I think.)

I assume that they were so called because chemical reactions (as take place in modern dry-cell batteries) were their power source.

Nuclear reactions are probably involved, since Crane mentions toward the end of Lake that lots of isotopes are released when a chem blows.

As I said before, both Urth-born Mamelta and Kypris called them robots and mechanical (LS2, 10 and 4, respectively). Mamelta was so incensed when Lemur (the chem

version

killed by Crane with the azoth) was hurting Silk, that she screamed at him

"_You damned robot! You THING!_" (emphasis in text, LS2, 12). (I would give

page numbers, instead of chapter numbers, but I have only the paperbacks of

the first three books.)

Same buying plan as me.

Clearly, people who had not been born on the _Whorl_ did not regard chems as equal to bios.

Well, two out of two people surveyed, anyway. Kypris's position is ironic since she herself is a machine intelligence.

Even on the _Whorl_, in Silk's day, such an attitude still apparently persisted, lest Silk would not have said to Lemur:

""You said something else that I ignored, Councillor.'

For the first time, Lemur sounded dangerous and even deadly. 'Which was

. . .?'

'You said that you were not a chem. I'm not one of those ignorant and

prejudiced bios who consider themselves superior to chems, but I know--'

'You lie!'"

Then Lemur pitched a fit and fired the azoth. (LS2, 12) He didn't want to

admit that he was a chem because he was aware of the prejudice, and even seems to have shared it.

Good point.

Jerry Friedman

--

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 06 Sep 2002, 22:12 · follows Jerry Friedman

The books may be fresher in my mind since I am currently re-reading them, and have paid particular attention to the chems. Time and again Wolfe portrays chems, mostly Hammerstone and Marble, experiencing all-too-human emotions, and that's the very thing I can't swallow -- at least on this side of the looking glass.

Okay, then, we're agreed on this pernt: in the Lupiverse of discourse, chems experience emotions reasonably comparable to those experienced by humans.

Now, assuming (and I think that this is a reasonable thing to assume) that Wolfe has point in giving them emotions, I can see at least three "thematic" possibilities:

1. As Bre'r Jerry done point out, in a mechanistic universe, there is no Urthly reason why emotions and all the other things that us bios think of in relation to a "soul"

should not be plausible in a construct. For consciousness and emotion to emerge in a computing device of sufficient capacity is a time-honored, even a creaky, stfnal theme ... of precisely the sort Wolfe loves to reappropriate and make anew.

2. In a divinely created universe, on the other appendage, there is no reason to believe that, if we bios were to build a device _capable_ of housing a soul, the Increate (or the Outsider or whatever you want to call the divine) should or would refrain from instantiating a soul in that device. (Related to this is the fundamental Catholic position on test tube babies, genetically engineered humans, etc. Technical language aside, it comes down to the idea that their creation would be a sin, but their existence would not be a sin on their part; God would give them a soul just like any other human.)

3. One of the overarching "themes" of the Long/Short books is imitation and identity. Perhaps its most explicit statement is found in Silk's comment that a demon who impersonates a god is in danger of becoming the god. This is an example of a general theme I first encountered in Vonnegut, and so often think of as "Bokonon's Law": you must be careful what you pretend to be, because if you pretend to be something long enough you become it. An excellent example of this "theme," discussed occasionally here and there, is Quetzal; he pretends to be a good shepherd to the flock of Viron, and in the end dies to save them, because he has become one.

Now the interesting point about these three "thematics" on chem emotions is that they are in no way exclusive of each other; in fact, I think that all three are necessary to a proper understanding of what Wolfe is doing.

The third "thematic" presents no problems, but I think it important to observe that the first two blesh in a way precisely harmonious with Wolfe's observed practice in other matters. In short, and I'm going to leave specifics to your own memory, Wolfe repeatedly presents us with events that simultaneously have a miraculous quality and are completely explicable in materialistic terms ... Wolfe brings this out in the discussion of the flying Cathedral of the Pelerines, observing that the rising of hot air doesn't make it not a miracle; rather, the miracle is that the universe was made so that hot air would rise, so that the Cathedral would fly. (This is a gross over-simplification from memory, but I believe it captures the essence of the argument.)

Simply, then: "thematic" 2 is the miracle, and "thematic" 1 is the mechanistic explanation that does not make it any less a miracle.

... there is some built in drive equivalent to the (glandularly influenced though not, I think, determined) human drive to reproduce. We see in Marble at least one other drive -- a drive to maintain her own bodily "health" to the extent possible.

Then why did Olivine give up an eye if it wasn't in her best interest? Human altruism, that's why.

Quite likely, but that's hardly a contradiction of my general point. Indeed, it's another example of humanlike irrational emotional ("glandular") behavior where I had only offered two ... Humans have a survival drive too, and (as the phrase 'human altruism,' though unfairly ignoring the many examples of self-sacrificing behavior on the part of many other species, usefully points out) do similar things to what Olivine does -- the actual donation of an eye not being perhaps on the spot, organ donations (a kidney, part of a liver...) are, if not everyday behavior, certainly well within the normal spectrum (in cultures where they can be performed).

Look, I've acknowledged that Wolfe intended chems to be regarded as sentient automatons pretty much on a par with humans.

So ... uh ... what were we arguing about?

(The question of chem "souls" is one I'd rather not get into, but I seriously doubt the Vatican would buy it.)

I suspect that the Curia would be against the proposition until powerful evidence (though it is hard to imagine what would constitute "evidence" in this matter) was offered; I further suspect that they would be opposed to the building of such a device in the first place. But I don't know, and the Vatican often takes surprising positions on issues.

He goes out of his way to do it. But I don't start turning on the lights before entering a dark room just because I've read a ghost story, either.

You're braver than me. I was afraid to get into a bathtub for weeks after I read THE SHINING. I don't even want to tell you what IT did to me.

Perhaps you missed the "(probably less)" part of that quote. Anyone who has seen a whipped cur, or one that has just been handed a piece of meat, can see that the dog acts very differently in those cases. Likewise the cats don't purr when I yell at them to get off the screen door. Animals seem to have a certain degree of consciousness and emotions, sure; they just don't have the ones my wife projects them to have: they can't--their brains don't have room for that complexity, even if they could think like a human, which they can't.

Why in Heaven's name do you assume that emotions are more complex than thinking?

How does that follow from what I wrote? I didn't say that.

Clearly I misunderstood; You said that their brains haven't the room for the complexity of emotion, without making a parallel statement supporting your belief that they don't think "like a human."

And why in Heaven's name do you assume that they can't "think like a human?"

Because they can't. Language and thought are inextricably related in humans; cats don't have the language, ergo . . .

Do you do all your thinking in words? I'm one of the most verbally-oriented persons I've ever known, and I certainly don't. Language isn't how we think, it's how we express our thinking -- including to ourselves in the "conscious" mind. If you think this is an overfine distinction, just consider the many times you've had a complete thought (and even perhaps acted on it, as in an emergency) prior to language-ing the thought. (If you say this has never happened to you, I will take your word for it but consider you a statistical freak.)

Are we establishing some kind of credentials?

It was my response to your "'naked lunch' principle" spiel.

Okay, though I wasn't sure how it applied.

I haven't shot my own dog; it would be illegal where I live. I have held my dog, and my cat, while the vet gave it the final shot, and continued to hold them until well after their hearts had stopped. Same logic, different environment.

Not the same at all,

Doubtless true, though at a minimum there is the commonality of feeling that you've killed something that trusted you.

Meanwhile, back at the Whorl: one last question ... why, do you suppose, Wolfe chose to call them "chemical" persons instead of (say) "electromechanical" persons?

I assume that they were so called because chemical reactions (as take place in modern dry-cell batteries) were their power source.

Noooo ... their power source is clearly nucyulehr. Isotopes everywhere when a chem blows. That won't work.

If you're wondering, I don't have an answer sitting up my sleeve; I just think it's an interesting question with some bearing on the question of "glandularity" and emotion.

Regarding the use of the word "robot" by Kypris and Mamelta, well, most people don't distinguish the two words the way SF people do -- consider the use of the word "droid" in the Star Wars films for what any SF person would call a robot. Nonetheless, we are given lots of evidence to support the idea that they are android in appearance -- that is, they seem to have been built to visually resemble bios to as great an extent as possible, to the point of including plastic or plastic-like "skins" -- and in design, to the point that they are clearly part-compatible with replacement parts for bios.

Roy C. Lackey — 06 Sep 2002, 23:37 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Crush asks:

Is anyone aware of any textual evidence that non-military chems are not light-weight? I know Sand was five-hundred weight, but that was useful for his function.

Yes. Silk was no weakling -- he threw Mamelta over his shoulder and ran with her, bad ankle and all, after Lemur was killed. Yet when Marble/Rose was telling him about Blood's birth, and it finally dawned on Silk that somehow Rose was speaking through Marble, he tested his theory:

"Watching carefully for her reaction, Silk said, 'I would have carried you, Maytera, if I could; but I knew you'd be too heavy for me to lift.'" (LS3, 4; p. 119 pb.)

Also, earlier, following Marble's collapse after being possessed by Echidna, Silk gave her a hand to help her to her feet: "He heaved with all his strength, reawakening the half-healed wounds left by the beak of the white-headed one." (ibid. 117)

-Roy

Alice K. Turner — 07 Sep 2002, 01:20 · follows Roy C. Lackey

In this discussion, which is pretty interesting (I admit to having cruised past most everything here lately, but this arrested me), I am surprised that no one has yet brought up Sidero or Ossipago. Sev believes that Jonas must once have been an automaton (Urth, 93). But I think that part of Wolfe's grand plan is to meld or confuse the differences between Als, sci-fi "robots" (already so out of date except for those over-priced "dogs"), mythological or genre-endorsed supernatural beings (confused deliberately with religious beings--though I guess that goes without saying), enhanced (and regular) humans, and aliens. Anyway, Sidero is a sort of Hierodulian chem (or automaton) and and Sidero is pretty interesting in himself. So don't leave them out!

-alga

Alice K. Turner — 07 Sep 2002, 01:26 · follows Alice K. Turner

Whoops, I meant that Ossipago was the hierodulean chem!

-alga

Michael Straight — 07 Sep 2002, 02:36 · follows Alice K. Turner

On Fri, 6 Sep 2002, Roy C. Lackey wrote:

'You said that you were not a chem. I'm not one of those ignorant and prejudiced bios who consider themselves superior to chems, but I know--'
'You lie!'"

Then Lemur pitched a fit and fired the azoth. (LS2, 12) He didn't want to admit that he was a chem because he was aware of the prejudice, and even seems to have shared it.

Yeah, but knowing human beings, that prejudice could easily exist whether there was any basis for it or not.

You could re-write that substituting whites, blacks, and the accusation that a man who looked white had some black ancestry, and you'd have a conversation that would have represented the attitudes of a whole lot of real-world people a hundred years ago. But I wouldn't site that fact as evidence that blacks aren't really sentient.

-Rostrum