

Bio bias

The Urth list — 7 messages, 4 voices, 05 Oct 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3472>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Roy C. Lackey — 05 Oct 2002, 05:59

Unfortunately, I must revisit the question of bias by bios against chems. I won't repeat what I've posted before, but bear it in mind; the subject is germane.

As I wrote in my original chem post, there are two types of chem. Beyond "male" and "female", the chems can be classified as military (soldiers) and civilian (servants). These two groupings are based on Marble's memories of the day she was picked up on Urth to be taken to the _Whorl_:

"Enormous darkness high overhead, blotting the sun-drenched field, the straggling line of servants in which she had stood, and the soldiers' precise column." (LS3, ch. 8)

When Kypris-in-Chenille was trying to explain possession to Silk (LS2, 5), she told him:

"The mechanical woman? Marble? Somebody too clever learned he could do it to them. Change programs in little ways. People made machines. Just to do that. So that people like Maytera Marble would work for them instead of for the State."

It's beyond dispute that all the "soldiers" worked for the State. The above quote implies that, among other things, _all_ chems originally worked for the State. As Marble told Quetzal: "I was the maid, the sibyls' maid, when the first bios moved into the city. I got our cenoby ready for them . . ." (LS4, 231) The servants group, of which Marble was a member, did most of the work that needed to be done for the early bios -- mostly growing food, making tools and clothes and mud bricks to build more buildings where they hadn't been ready-made by Pas, as well as domestic duties for the high and mighty. This is affirmed by Hammerstone, who told Silk (LS2, 9):

"Like I was saying, back three hundred years ago there wasn't all that many bios. A lot of the work was done by chems. Us soldiers did some, but mostly it was civilians. Maybe you know some. They don't have armor and they've got different software."

"They're largely gone now, I'm sorry to say," Silk told him.

And so they are. Marble was ready for the scrap heap before she got some new-to-her parts from Rose. Individual soldiers lasted much longer because they were regularly deactivated for decades at a time; they didn't wear out like the servants, who didn't "sleep". Silk also said, elsewhere, that there had been more chems around when he was a boy. Things on the _Whorl_ have been breaking down at an alarming rate in recent decades.

It has been maintained on this list that chems enjoyed equal status with humans. I think not. Urth-born bios regard chems as machines. The fact that there were only two groups of chems--soldiers and servants--when the _Whorl_ left Urth, indicates that they were intended as tools, not people. Chems were autonomous beings to the extent necessary to perform their

function without human direction. _If_ human attitudes towards chems changed over the course of three hundred years, so that in Silk's day the surviving remnants were treated as people, then that change was a process of social evolution. With each generation that passed on the _Whorl_, as people lost sight of the original objective, the masses became increasingly ignorant; by Silk's time few even realized they were living inside an artificial world, a giant spaceship. Scientific thought was all but extinct. A long glowing thing in the "sky" came to be accepted as natural. So also with the chems. After a few generations, there were few humans left alive who knew that chems were just machines, particularly those that looked human. They had just always been there, like the long sun.

Look at the three examples we have of the servant class. The valet and porter mentioned by Incus had been tinkered with by humans--their hardware and software modified by the black mechanics for their own ends. At least two of those black mechanics were augurs. The holy men had no moral concerns for the sanctity of chems--they were just machines. Marble's admission to the Chapter was a unique event, so far as I know. A shortage of teachers occasioned by a shortage of sibyls resulted in Marble being drafted as a teacher. Some parents of the school children complained, so she was made a sibyl, also. Being made a sibyl did not change her status as a maid. She continued to do the cooking and cleaning; neither Rose nor Mint are ever shown doing anything other than teaching and ceremonial duties. It was when Marble became a sibyl that she "got new clothes", that is, she stopped wearing the maid outfit and donned a habit. The official position of the Chapter is (or came to be) that chems and tali have spirits, but they are still not equal to humans because a chem can't become, according to Silk, an augur. The mere fact that, as Silk put it, "a talus is a person, both in law and in fact", indicates that it was necessary to enact legislation to establish a talus (and presumably a chem) as a person. Had a talus or chem been naturally regarded as a person, such a law would have been unnecessary.

Further evidence of bio bias: Rose-in-Marble told Silk (LS3, 10):

"But we were much more alike than you realized, not that I ever cared, myself, for machines like this. I never thought they could be people, really, no matter how many times they said they were. Now I'm just a message written on those teeny gold doodads you see in cards. But I'm still me, a person, because I always was."

Even though she was born two centuries after the _Whorl_ left Urth, Rose still thought of chems as just machines, not people. Likewise, Mint, on the first page of LS4, uttered a comment Remora considered bordering on blasphemy. He had said something about augurs dispatching the spirits of dead tali (the plural he uses on p. 18 of the hardback) to Mainframe. She said, of their spirits, "Or they really haven't any".

There are more hints along this line in the exchange Marble had with Mint when Marble was fixing breakfast the morning Rose was found dead, but it's too much to quote. Mint said that she would do whatever Marble told her to do, because Marble was her senior sib, but that was just meek, mild Mint, who either didn't know any better, or didn't care. Marble is clearly uncomfortable with it, and tells Mint "You don't have to obey me, sib." (LS2, 11)

The director of the talus factory, Swallow, knows that a talus lacks the discernment of a bio, pointing out that "Suppose you had taluses patrolling the streets instead of troopers, Calde. You'd have a dozen people shot every night, instead of one or two a week." The soldiers in the tunnels were also trigger happy and indifferent, at best, to the welfare of bios.

Swallow wanted to use Marble as a practical example of the principle he had just explained regarding a talus the factory had given a partial refund for, but Chenille and Oreb objected. The

refund was given for the sake of public relations, not because the talus was defective. The talus had been "abused". That is, it had been set to "piling bricks, which isn't natural". (124) The proper function of a talus was, in essence, as a "watchdog". Swallow wanted to know what kind of clothes Marble had been given when she first "woke", and Marble described her maid outfit.

"Swallow nodded again. 'You see, Calde, each of us is born to do certain things. Maytera was born to sweep and dust, and wash walls and floors, and she's still doing it. Did you have to urge her to?'

"Silk shook his head.

"'I would have been surprised if you'd said you did, and it shows the important principle I want to explain. When you're born to do a thing, and somebody gives you a chance to do it, that's all it takes. Everybody else is afraid I'll embarrass her, so let's talk about your bird.'"

And how was he going to embarrass her? By pointing out that the sibyl's habit she was then wearing was not the clothing she had been "born" to wear. It wasn't "natural".

BTW, chems are also biased.

"Sand said almost gently, 'He's just a bio, Patera. You get built inside each other, so there's millions of you. One more or less doesn't matter.'" (LS2, 8)

Marble thinking, as she approached Blood's house: "Through it [the door] she saw soldiers, and bios in silvered armor. (Bios got up like chems, as she put it to herself, because chems were braver.)" (LS3, 10) Well, duh! Maybe this sort of thinking is why chems can't hold positions of real authority over humans; they are incapable of appreciating the frailties of the flesh.

Marble also looks down on tali: "We chems aren't really like taluses. We were made in the Short Sun Whorl, and we can think and see a great deal better, and we don't burn fish oil . . ." It seems that being built on Urth is better than being built on the _Whorl_. (EXODUS, 53)

Marble spent two-and-a-half centuries as a maid. Even if she received only a peasant's wages, after all that time her piggy bank should have been overflowing. But the fact of the matter is that she was so poor she couldn't have made a down payment on a free lunch. A talus is born--er, created--in debt. It owes its creator for the mere fact of its creation. If it lives long enough it can, in theory, work off its debt. What happens then, the text pointedly does not say. Chenille had the temerity to ask what a talus would do with money. Marble ventured, "The same things that you or I would, I suppose, dear." (126) That has to be the Rose part of Marble talking. Swallow carefully ignored the question. What would Marble do with money if she had it? Spend it on beer and pizza, pillows for her weary head? The same for the soldiers. Chems were, de facto, slaves, whether they received any wages or not. Money could not buy for them the creature comforts that money provided for bios, which is, ultimately, all it's good for. (BTW, what did the original Cargo use for money? Surely not cards.) But even to call them slaves is to grant them a status their creators never intended--you don't pay a machine.

I've said it before and I'll say it again; yes, Wolfe clearly intended chems to be thought of as people in some sense, just as he has other automatons in other works. I have no idea whether or not he believes they have "souls" but, it seems to me, even for Wolfe there is a line that may be approached but that Man's creations may not pass, one that separates the created from the Creator, just as surely as in _Genesis_.

-Roy

Great post, Roy. I will chew it over.
-alga

Michael Straight — 06 Oct 2002, 22:05 · follows Alice K. Turner

Roy wrote a great post documenting the attitudes toward chems but he lost me here:

I've said it before and I'll say it again; yes, Wolfe clearly intended chems to be thought of as people in some sense, just as he has other automatons in other works. I have no idea whether or not he believes they have "souls" but, it seems to me, even for Wolfe there is a line that may be approached but that Man's creations may not pass, one that separates the created from the Creator, just as surely as in *_Genesis_*.

I don't think this conclusion follows from your observations.

Wolfe has created a society in which chems are created as tools, thought of as tools, treated like tools, and even those who would go the farthest toward treating them like persons, and even the chems themselves, harbor reservations and make distinctions between chems and bios.

But I don't think that this means Wolfe thinks chems are less persons than bios. If the Outsider loves them as persons, then it doesn't matter if Silk himself thinks of them as mere machines. I think that Wolfe's inclusion of various reasons to see the chems as persons alongside these attitudes is evidence he wants us to question the attitudes.

I think the chems and the inhumi are, among other things, meditations on determinism and free will. They are extreme cases of humanity. The chems programming and the inhumi's biology drive them to do things that we would regard as inhuman or even evil. Does that mean that they are not persons? God help us if it does.

Are there not human analogues for the callousness Sand shows toward bios? Can such callousness often be explained in part by analogues of biology and programming? To what extent do such explanations negate or mitigate moral culpability?

And what if there had been no dissent from the view that blacks were subhuman? What if they believed it themselves? Would that make it so?

(Similarly, in the Asimov story mantis quoted, I'm pretty sure we're supposed to be horrified by Susan's Calvin's action. Asimov was often accused of making her too perfect, as if she was his fantasy woman, or Mary Sue^[1] even, so this later story may have been written specifically to distance himself from the character.)

-Rostrum

[1] see this link if you're unfamiliar with the term "Mary Sue"

<http://writersu.s5.com/history/marysue.html>

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 07 Oct 2002, 15:53 · follows Michael Straight

But I don't think that this means Wolfe thinks chems are less persons than bios. If the Outsider loves them as persons, then it doesn't matter if Silk himself thinks of them as mere machines.

Thank you ...

In this context it might be worth considering the attitudes of that other great Catholic fantasist, J.R.R. Tolkien, on the subject; in THE SILMARILLION, ... oh, dear, it's a bit complex, but to keep it simple, let's say that there are these beings called the Valar who are sort of godlike but are really angels of a high order, and that one of them, eager for the coming of Men and Elves, makes the Dwarves so he can have people to love and teach and care for. God (who is never called that in the Silm., but is clearly the Christian God) comes and says, Yo, what have you done? And the Vala realizes that he's overstepped his boundaries and apologizes and goes to destroy his handiwork and God says, No, wait, see how they cringe from your hammer? I've given them free will -- they are the children of my adoption.

And that, I think, is a precise analogy of the condition of the chems in the SUN books: humans did not create machines with souls; they created machines with the capacity for souls, and God (the Outsider, the Increate) ensouled them: after which, they were people.

--Dan'l

Roy C. Lackey — 07 Oct 2002, 18:01 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Rostrum quoted me and writes:

I've said it before and I'll say it again; yes, Wolfe clearly intended chems to be thought of as people in some sense, just as he has other automatons in other works. I have no idea whether or not he believes they have "souls" but, it seems to me, even for Wolfe there is a line that may be approached but that Man's creations may not pass, one that separates the created from the Creator, just as surely as in _Genesis_.

I don't think this conclusion follows from your observations.

What I was getting at is the parallel between Man as creator of sentient beings (in Wolfe's work) and God as creator of Man (in _Genesis_).

Wolfe has created a society in which chems are created as tools, thought of as tools, treated like tools, and even those who would go the farthest toward treating them like persons, and even the chems themselves, harbor reservations and make distinctions between chems and bios.

Yes, and this is part of the parallel. As I have tried to show, chems were never intended to be "people" (the term used by Rose). "Clever tools" comes closer to what Typhon intended them to be. Chems did, however, come to be self aware (though they were always, to be sure, self aware) in a manner and to a degree not intended and not provided for by their creators. I see no evidence in the text to contradict this conclusion.

But I don't think that this means Wolfe thinks chems are less persons than

bios. If the Outsider loves them as persons, then it doesn't matter if Silk himself thinks of them as mere machines. I think that Wolfe's inclusion of various reasons to see the chems as persons alongside these attitudes is evidence he wants us to question the attitudes.

I can't tell from the text whether or not Wolfe thought "the Outsider loves them as persons". But the fact that the chems were left behind on the _Whorl_ seems to me to weigh against it. As has been pointed out by others, Wolfe is hardly the first writer to wrestle with the humanity of Man's creations. From Mary Shelly to those bad 1950s anti-science sci-fi films to today's human cloning debate, there is a common thread of sentiment _against_ Man having the audacity to usurp the role of the Old Testament God; to presume to create life in any form. Once Man has done so, a second problem arises--the nature of the created life. I have no doubt whatsoever

that this prejudice has its origins in the book of Genesis.

I think the chems and the inhumi are, among other things, meditations on determinism and free will. They are extreme cases of humanity. The chems programming and the imhumi's biology drive them to do things that we would regard as inhuman or even evil. Does that mean that they are not persons? God help us if it does.

I can't and won't argue with that.

Are there not human analogues for the callousness Sand shows toward bios? Can such callousness often be explained in part by analogues of biology and programming? To what extent do such explanations negate or mitigate moral culpability?

Yes, yes (sort of), and, it depends. Every killer on Death Row can give you some nature or nurture reason for being there, and some of those reasons may be good ones. But that sort of thing can't be tolerated, by and large.

And what if there had been no dissent from the view that blacks were subhuman? What if they believed it themselves? Would that make it so?

Of course not, but I don't think Wolfe intended the bio vs. chem issue to be read as one of race. Blacks and whites can and do interbreed; chems and bios can't. "The Brown Mechanics" chapter of EXODUS has the greatest concentration of information about the background of chems to be found in the series. The chapter is largely irrelevant to the plot of the story except in so far as it furthers our understanding of chems, and much of what we learn is disguised as talk about taluses. I've given some of that in earlier posts, so I'll just concentrate here on my reading of it.

It's a mark of a good writer when two or more readers can come away from reading the same story, compare notes, and find that they weren't reading quite the same story after all. The layers of meaning may not be arranged in the same order, and some of those layers may never even have occurred to the author. For me, there are two sub-surface layers. One, the main one, in my opinion, is the Genesis analogy. It goes something like this:

God created Man in his own image; Man created chems in his own image. Man challenged God's dominion by gaining access to forbidden knowledge; Man gave chems their intelligence. Lest Man become an even greater threat by also gaining access to immortality, God put a stop to it by removing Man from the Garden where such access was to be had; Man restricted chems' ability to reproduce, thus limiting their potential for immortality, something Man himself was denied. Fundamentalists may argue that Man never really threatened an omnipotent God, but it's hard to read the Genesis story without that concern coming through loud and clear, and man wasn't even omnipotent. The lessons to be learned from Genesis were not lost on Man; chems would never be allowed positions of authority over bios.

That is what I meant by the passage you quoted above. When Typhon caused chems to be created he intended them as a means to an end, nothing more. When they became something more, Wolfe used them to explore the relationship of Man to God. But just as Man is not God, chems are not men, and neither creation will ever equal, much less supplant, their Creator.

The second layer of meaning has to do with classes of people, their place in society, knowing that place, and keeping to it. It's the stuff Wolfe brought up in his Tolkien essay.

(Similarly, in the Asimov story mantis quoted, I'm pretty sure we're supposed to be horrified by Susan's Calvin's action. Asimov was often accused of making her too perfect, as if she was his fantasy woman, or

Mary Sue[1] even, so this later story may have been written specifically to distance himself from the character.)

I haven't read the story but, based on mantis's synopsis, that girl did the right thing. Lest that robot "become like one of us". <g>

-Roy

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 07 Oct 2002, 18:28 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. comments:

Once Man has done so, a second problem arises--the nature of the created life. I have no doubt whatsoever that this prejudice has its origins in the book of Genesis.

I can only observe that this is a very Judeo-Christian-centric view of the problem. Believe me, the same ethical questions are asked in the Far East.

Michael Straight — 07 Oct 2002, 19:18 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Mon, 7 Oct 2002, Roy C. Lackey wrote:

From Mary Shelly to those bad 1950s anti-science sci-fi films to today's human cloning debate, there is a common thread of sentiment _against_ Man having the audacity to usurp the role of the Old Testament God; to presume to create life in any form. Once Man has done so, a second problem arises--the nature of the created life.

The cloning analogy might be a good one. Catholics and others who object to cloning generally do so not because they fear that clones would not be fully human. Just the opposite, it is because a human clone would be a fully human person that it is a crime to bring him/her into existence deprived of the natural biological connection to a mother and father.

It is because man will inevitably create life for his own use, as a tool for achieving his own ends rather than receiving it as a gift that usurping the role of the Creator is wrong. The wrong done in creating the chems is not that they are not persons (if they weren't, then there would be no problem). The problem is that persons were created and used as tools.

Are there not human analogues for the callousness Sand shows toward bios? Can such callousness often be explained in part by analogues of biology and programming? To what extent do such explanations negate or mitigate moral culpability?

Yes, yes (sort of), and, it depends. Every killer on Death Row can give you _some_ nature or nurture reason for being there, and some of those reasons may be good ones. But that sort of thing can't be tolerated, by and large.

My point is that just as we hold people responsible for cruelty, even if they are predisposed to it by nature and nurture, we might hold Sand responsible for his callousness and not excuse it because of his programming. If we can't condemn Sand for his sins, then we can't admire Marble for her acts of love and sacrifice (which I think Wolfe wants us to do).

And what if there had been no dissent from the view that blacks were subhuman? What if they believed it themselves? Would that make it so?

Of course not, but I don't think Wolfe intended the bio vs. chem issue to be read as one of race. Blacks and whites can and do interbreed; chems and bios can't.

What I mean is that cataloguing the prejudices of the characters in the story is not sufficient evidence that Wolfe does not regard the chems as fully persons.

When they became something more, Wolfe used them to explore the relationship of Man to God. But just as Man is not God, chems are not men, and neither creation will ever equal, much less supplant, their Creator.

I think this disregards the radical incomensurability between God and the creation in most Christian philosophy. No matter how much tinkering Man does, bios and chems are equally part of God's creation. There can never be an x for which $\text{God:Man} = \text{Man}:x$. In this sense, a chem person is no more a creation of Man than a test tube baby.

Regarding the Asimov story:

I haven't read the story but, based on mantis's synopsis, that girl did the right thing. Lest that robot "become like one of us". <g>

That may be the crux of our disagreement. Killing the robot might have been "right" in the sense of "looking out for our interests," possibly even "right" in the sense that a time traveller murdering the baby Hitler would be "right" (although, if I recall the story correctly, I don't think Susan has enough information to be sure a robot uprising would mean war and death for humans), but it is not "right" because robots as Man's "creation" could never have the moral status of humans.

-Rostum