

God in the Machine

The Urth list — 12 messages, 11 voices, 09 Oct 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3477>

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DSG20001 — 09 Oct 2002, 09:32

I'd intended to lurk around for (at least) a while longer, since the other thoughtful posts on this list are much more interesting to read than my own newbie contribution will be. But the theological chem vs. bio discussion got me musing over a few things, so I've thrown caution to the wind. (And since I've missed a few of the recent posts, I apologize in advance if any of the following is repetitious.)

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"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 found the possible Genesis parallel here particularly interesting. Roy's description of "tools" originally lacking the requisite self-awareness for moral agency sounded very much like a description of Adam and Eve before they became aware of Good and Evil.

Which implied, in my mind, that Wolfe's views of God and Typhon might actually be similar in some respects. Unless of course one assumes that God, being both omniscient and omnipotent, _intended_ His creations to acquire their moral sense by means of their tragic Fall.

But one is then left to wade through questions about divine predestination and the Gnostic doctrine of God as Author of All Things: both Good and Evil alike, both obedience and disobedience alike. (I've read elsewhere that Wolfe is, or was, very intrigued by Gnostic beliefs.)

Which in turn raises one of the oldest theological questions regarding Original Sin: if Adam and Eve weren't moral agents before partaking of the fruit of (moral) Knowledge, how might the Fall have resulted from their breaking a moral commandment? Pragmatic human conventions like "Ignorance is no excuse from the law" presuppose some basic moral agency, after all. (We don't apply such judicial conventions to toddlers, for example.)

In the context of Wolfe's chems, another question rears up: _whose_ "tools" had the chems originally been intended to be?

At the end of Chapter 7 of LotLS, Silk asks the talus he confronts: "Don't you fear the immoral gods, my son?" To which the talus retorts: "I serve Scylla!"

Does the talus serve a goddess? Or a woman digitized into the mere semblance of a goddess? The same questions that apply to chems (sentient beings created by humans, in their own image) apply to all the gods in Mainframe as well, don't they?

I'n the James Jordan interview, discussing _There are Doors_, Wolfe remarks: "Laura is my idea

of what a pagan goddess might be who survived into the Christian world. One of the places where I probably split off from conventional Catholic thinking is that I believe that the gods of paganism were real...Now, if Aphrodite were to survive into the contemporary world, what would she be like? Well, Laura was a shot at trying to show what she might be like." What sort of theological status Wolfe grants such entities (Laura doesn't seem like the Christian conception of a demoness), I don't know. But in the context of his invented Mainframe gods, the question seems worth speculating about.

At any rate, if the talus in LotLS is correct, the Whorl's chems weren't intended to be the tools of its human "cargo," but of the AIs who supervise it. That the gods themselves were the tools of _Typhon_ (who I suppose was a kind of man) doesn't simply bring the issue back to Man versus his Objects again, since the human cargo inside the Whorl were likewise Typhon's tools.

Roy also said:

"I can't tell from the text whether or not Wolfe thought 'the Outsider loves them as persons'."

I don't know whether Wolfe agrees with his protagonist on the subject, but Silk's words to the talus in LotLS are at least worth mentioning: "'I don't want to hurt you,' Silk told it. 'It's evil--that means very wrong--to destroy chems, as wrong as it is to destroy bios, and you are very nearly a chem.'" Then, after killing the talus in self-defense, Wolfe says of Silk: "His chant was flat and almost mechanical at first, but as the wonder and magnanimity of divine amnesty filled his mind, his voice grew louder and shook with fervor."

The passage seems to confer some measure of spiritual significance on the talus--at least in Silk's rapidly enlightening mind.

(On the other hand, it's worth noting that Silk (or Wolfe, anyway) doesn't invoke the Outsider during the ritual--which he had been doing with bios in similar circumstances.)

For myself, I suspect Wolfe sees both chems _and_ bios as slaves: not only (on occasion) in relation to each other, but (always) in relation to God.

St. Paul's Stoical attitude seems to dovetail with Wolfe's here, as in so many ways: "Slaves, obey your human masters with the reverence, the awe, and the sincerity you owe to Christ. Give your service willingly, doing it for the Lord rather than men. You know that each one, whether slave or free, will be repaid by the Lord for whatever good he does. Masters, act in a similar way toward your slaves. Stop threatening them. Remember that you and they have a Master in Heaven who plays no favorites." (Ephesians 6: 5-9)

Daniel Goss

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 09 Oct 2002, 15:46 · follows DSG20001

Welcome, Daniel Goss.

You wrote (among other interesting things):

the other thoughtful posts on this list are much more interesting to read than my own newbie contribution will be.

Oh, I don't know ... you've got some good points here.

(You quoted Roy):

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I found the possible Genesis parallel here particularly interesting. Roy's description of "tools" originally lacking the requisite self-awareness for moral agency sounded very much like a description of Adam and Eve before they became aware of Good and Evil.

Which implied, in my mind, that Wolfe's views of God and Typhon might actually be similar in some respects.

Bounce that against the idea that "demons who pretend to be gods become them" (or however Wolfe puts it), e.g. that Kypris is becoming (a part or aspect of) the Outsider, and you have a very interesting point here indeed. Though one then has to decide what one thinks was meant by their becoming "aware of Good and Evil" -- my own interpretation runs with that of Charles Williams, who rephrased it as "the knowledge of good as evil," i.e., that everything in creation is good unless one chooses to misperceive it, at which point anything can become evil. (As Gandalf puts it: "Nothing is evil in its beginning ... Sauron himself was not so.") Evil then has its origins in a failure of perception which leads to wrong thoughts, attitudes, and behavior, to misuse of the things and especially the people in the created world.

Many of the statements of bios and chems cited thus far in the dialog are easily understood under this rubric: for primary example, the various ways in which bios, chems, and "gods" disdain or worship each other as inferiors or superiors, when all are, in the end and in fact, created beings and so equal as over against the one Creator.

Unless of course one assumes that God, being both omniscient and omnipotent, intended His creations to acquire their moral sense by means of their tragic Fall.

This is a common but probably heretical interpretation. A somewhat more "nuanced" approach to the same quandary is that God, omniscient, knows all true things, but the Fall is not a true thing unless He actually creates the world -- this still fails, however, as it seems to attribute to God a failure of imagination, of ability to consider possibilities. Perhaps best is to say that God, knowing the Fall, would have been able to prevent it, but considered the ways in which He could have done so (which have the common characteristic of His in some way overriding the freewill of a creature), or their consequences (such as making the creature into an automaton, which would not be a proper candidate for divine love) to be worse than the Fall and its consequences ... which, to be sure, from a Christian (and so Catholic) perspective He chose to take upon Himself in His second Person.

Dragging that question back to the Long Sun, one then asks whether Typhon/Pas knew (or could have known) that the chemical persons would turn out to have "free will," "souls," etc., and if so, whether he intended this. The most likely partial answer I can suggest is that, if he did have any inkling of this, he would not have cared; his use of Piaton shows clearly his contemptuous approach to such servants.

But one is then left to wade through questions about divine predestination and the Gnostic doctrine of God as Author of All Things: both Good and Evil alike, both obedience and disobedience alike.

Not quite my understanding of Gnosticism -- rather, that there is a god, the "god of this world," which is the author of evil, matter, etc., and a higher God, Author of Good, to Whom we are to aspire.

Which in turn raises one of the oldest theological questions regarding Original Sin: if Adam and Eve weren't moral agents before partaking of the fruit of (moral) Knowledge, how might the Fall have resulted from their breaking a moral commandment?

Or: if they knew no evil, how could they commit an evil act?

In the context of Wolfe's chems, another question rears up:
whose "tools" had the chems originally been intended to be?

From what we know of Typhon, everything on the Whorl was, in all probability, intended to be his own personal tool and/or plaything.

At the end of Chapter 7 of LotLS, Silk asks the talus he confronts: "Don't you fear the immoral gods, my son?" To which the talus retorts: "I serve Scylla!"

Does the talus serve a goddess? Or a woman digitized into the mere semblance of a goddess?

...yes?

I'n the James Jordan interview, discussing _There are Doors_,
Wolfe remarks: "Laura is my idea of what a pagan goddess might be who survived into the Christian world."

[...]

What sort of theological status Wolfe grants such entities (Laura doesn't seem like the Christian conception of a demoness), I don't know.

He seems (at least in that novel, as well as the _Soldier_ books) to be taking the position that they are not demons, at least as such -- possibly they are the "spirits of the middle air" of which the medieval schoolmen spoke, who had served neither God nor Satan in the Rebellion. Or possibly he takes a related position that they are beings native to Earth but of a different order than humans -- rational souls with no physical body (and so no vegetable and animal souls), though in the case of Laura at least, this seems unlikely. A third possibility is that they are something similar to the wizard of "dufflepud island" in Lewis's VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER, who is actually placed on that island to guide the natives, who are not yet "ready" to meet Aslan (=Christ); this fits with the very common idea that other religions, including but not limited to Judaism, were given to humans as "preparation" for Christianity ... with the implication that their lingering after Christianity has come is either a mistake or a sin.

Still, the gods of Mainframe are clearly quite different from Laura and the various gods Latro meets ... they're "self-made" gods, man (6) elevating himself to the status of God (3), that is, in numerological terms, 666.

Roy also said:

"I can't tell from the text whether or not Wolfe thought 'the Outsider loves them as persons'."

I don't know whether Wolfe agrees with his protagonist on the subject, but Silk's words to the talus in LotLS are at least worth mentioning: "'I don't want to hurt you,' Silk told it. 'It's evil--that means very wrong--to destroy chems, as wrong as it is to destroy bios, and you are very nearly a chem.'"

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The passage seems to confer some measure of spiritual significance on the talus--at least in Silk's rapidly enlightening mind.

...as reported, of course, by Horn, who was not present. But, yes, this seems to give at least some credence to the idea that even a talus is to some extent an ensouled being; also in favor of this is Olivine's special devotion to Quadrifons, who turns out to be the Outsider. Quite possibly she also enjoys favor from Quadrifons ... but to understand that, we must remember how often the favored of God seem to "enjoy" special afflictions: Sts Teresa of Avila (Teresa of Jesus) and Therese of Lisieux both seem to be at least partial models for Olivine.

(On the other hand, it's worth noting that Silk (or Wolfe, anyway) doesn't invoke the Outsider during the ritual--which he had been doing with bios in similar circumstances.)

And, again, we have to remember that this is Horn's reconstruction.

For myself, I suspect Wolfe sees both chems _and_ bios as slaves: not only (on occasion) in relation to each other, but (always) in relation to God.

Ultimately, I think, yes. You cite St Paul; I would add to your citation his claim to be a slave to Christ. But first and more obviously, Crew, Cargo, and Chems are slaves to Typhon -- slaves, in St Paul's terminology, to sin, to the "god of this world," the god of the Whorl.

Great post, Daniel. Clearly you are deserving of an insectile cognomen.

Roy C. Lackey — 09 Oct 2002, 20:03 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Daniel Goss wrote a very thoughtful post; I look forward to more!

I will bravely duck the issue of the logical paradox that gave rise to Gnosticism, to pursue the Genesis parallel you mention.

I found the possible Genesis parallel here particularly interesting.

Roy's

description of "tools" originally lacking the requisite self-awareness for moral agency sounded very much like a description of Adam and Eve before they became aware of Good and Evil.

Which implied, in my mind, that Wolfe's views of God and Typhon might actually be similar in some respects. [snip]

The parallels of the _Whorl_ with the Garden of Eden are so numerous, someone must have pointed them out before. But in the event no one has, here is my admittedly irreligious synopsis. It is not intended to give offence to anyone's religious sensibilities.

God (for whatever reason) created the world, filled it up with mountains, rivers, flora, fauna, etc. Then He created Man. Not too many of them at first. He provided all the creature comforts Man needed to live happily ever after. All Man had to do was bow down to Him, don't make waves, and everything would be just swell. Oh, and keep his bugger-picking fingers off His Tree. But

would Man do what he was told? Nah. His just had to pluck that apple. God was miffed that Man had "become like one of us", and a little worried that His uppity creation wouldn't stop there, but would also "put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever". Being a jealous God, He couldn't stand the thought of competition, so He kicked Man out of the Garden and said don't come back.

Pas (for whatever reason) created the Whorl, filled it up with mountains, rivers, flora, fauna, etc. Then he put men on board. Not too many of them at first. He provided all the creature comforts Man needed to last the duration of the voyage. All Man had to do was bow down to him, don't make waves, and everything would be just swell. Oh, and keep his bugger-picking fingers off his Seal. Etc., etc. The details differ, but the result is the same. Pas kicked Man out of the Whorl and said don't come back. Now, the analogy isn't perfect, but the correspondence is too close not to be deliberate.

In the context of Wolfe's chems, another question rears up: _whose_
"tools"
had the chems originally been intended to be?

At the end of Chapter 7 of LotLS, Silk asks the talus he confronts:

"Don't

you fear the immoral gods, my son?" To which the talus retorts: "I serve Scylla!"

Interesting slip you made there. "Immoral" indeed! <g>

Does the talus serve a goddess? Or a woman digitized into the mere semblance of a goddess? The same questions that apply to chems (sentient beings created by humans, in their own image) apply to all the gods in Mainframe as well, don't they?

A talus is made to serve its 'owner'. Presumably Scylla possessed the talus just as she had Chenille, and compelled its devotion. The gods of Mainframe are not gods in a classical sense, not like Aphrodite or even Laura; they are tied to Mainframe. Erase them from Mainframe and they cease to exist. The small parts they split off from themselves via possession are just partial file copies, and when the host dies that piece dies. But the death of one of those pieces does not harm the original, so long as the original master file remains intact in Mainframe. Pieces of a god that reintegrate with the original supplement the original with any new data, rather like a PDA docking with a desktop computer.

The original gods of Mainframe were just copies of data obtained when Pas & Co. were scanned. This introduces another theological problem, the existence of the "soul" of the scanned human and the "spirit" of the copy. Which is the real deal? Which Scylla will answer to the Outsider? Both? If both, then, in theory (and I'm sure Dan'll correct me if I'm wrong <g>), one could be "saved" and the other "damned". I refuse to think about it.

-Roy

James Jordan — 09 Oct 2002, 20:33 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Some interesting stuff here, but I have to correct one item before I leave the country for 3 weeks. The notion that the fall of Adam was a good thing since apart from it he would not have acquired a moral sense will not stand up to the way the Biblical writers use the phrase "knowledge of good and evil." The idea of a "felicitous fall" is an old heresy in Christendom,

though an important piece of Mormon theology.

There are two ways to understand Genesis 2-3. The traditional one is that Adam would learn the differences between good and evil by interacting with the forbidden fruit either way. By rejecting it, he would learn about good and evil, but from the side of choosing the good. By eating it, he would learn about good and evil, but from the side of choosing the evil.

This is a decent notion, and probably has truth to it. BUT, the fact is that the phrase "knowledge of good and evil" in the Bible means "knowledge of how to pass judgments" not "moral knowledge." This emerges from Genesis, where God SEES and pronounces things GOOD (or before Eve was made, in Genesis 2, "it is NOT GOOD for the man to be alone"). Let me refer you to the following passages that show the meaning of the phrase (you can look them up):

Seeing (Adam's eyes were opened): Jeremiah 32:18-19; Psalm 11:4; Ezekiel 5:11; etc.

Knowledge of good and evil: 1 Kings 3:9; 2 Samuel 14:17; 2 Samuel 19:27; Deuteronomy 1:39 (children are not mature enough to make judicial pronouncements); Hebrews 5:13-14; Genesis 31:24.

Adam began as a "child" (naked), not yet mature enough to make judicial pronouncements.

That was something he would grow into over time. But he was expected to know moral right from moral wrong, and nothing indicates that he didn't.

Now, this is all a bit off the point, since Wolfe is not a practising theologian, and probably has not studied out this phrase. But as an orthodox Catholic, Wolfe is not going to believe that it was necessary for Adam to eat the forbidden fruit in order to acquire a knowledge of right and wrong. Whatever he might do with Genesis 2, it won't be that.

Patera Nutricious

At 04:32 AM 10/9/2002, you wrote:

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Daniel Goss

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James Wynn — 09 Oct 2002, 21:33 · follows James Jordan

First Roy drew a rather oppugnant comparison between the Lord's participation in events of the Fall of Man and those of Pas in the Whorl, then Patera Nutria (Coypu) opined: Now, this is all a bit off the point, since Wolfe is not a practicing theologian, and probably has not studied out this phrase. But as an orthodox Catholic, Wolfe is not going to believe that it was necessary for Adam to eat the forbidden fruit in order to acquire a knowledge of right and wrong. Whatever he might do with Genesis 2, it won't be that.

I'll set aside Roy's summary of God's motivations in Genesis 2 except to say it is about the worst spin I could imagine.

Speaking of which, the thing not to forget about Pas of the Long Sun is that he is similar to God (the Outsider) only in the sense of that he is a blasphemy of Him. The same is true with the similarity between the Garden and the Whorl. The Whorl is no paradise - especially by the time they leave. Pas doesn't remove the people from the Whorl because they broke his seal. In fact, the chems (who broke the seal with impunity) are the one group who seems not to leave the Whorl (although I admit I'm still not completely versed in the Short Sun books so maybe they do). Actually, in leaving, the people are fulfilling Pas' plan! It's Echidna and her brood who want to keep them there. Quetzal (who definitely does parallel the Serpent) is a booster of Pas' plan because he wants to lead everyone to Green (yikes!). So in this Genesis story God and the Devil are hand-in-hand.

I'm not saying that there aren't parallels between Genesis 2 and the BotLS, but the parallels are always turned upside down or (worse) sideways. This is a blasphemy of Genesis 2. I can't begin to derive from this story Wolfe's personal theories on the Fall.

Still, whatever he thinks of it, I don't think it's ever safe to say what Wolfe would or would not believe. Wolfe's perspective has always seemed to place him in the "free-thinking" category (in my mind anyway). I personally nominate him as the most-likely-believing-Christian-to-have-a-flakey-theological-theory.

-- Crush

Roy C. Lackey — 10 Oct 2002, 04:32 · follows James Wynn

I wrote, twice no less:

bugger-picking fingers

That should have been "booger-picking", alas. My mistake. Sheesh.

-Roy

matthew.malthouse — 10 Oct 2002, 10:37 · follows Roy C. Lackey

On 09/10/2002 21:33:30 James Jordan wrote:

Some interesting stuff here, but I have to correct one item before

I leave the country for 3 weeks. The notion that the fall of Adam was a good thing since apart from it he would not have acquired a moral sense will not stand up to the way the Biblical writers use the phrase "knowledge of good and evil." The idea of a "felicitous fall" is an old heresy in Christendom, though an important piece of Mormon theology.

And a persistant one:

Adam lay ybounden,
Bounden in a bond,
Foure thousand winter
Thought he nat to lang;
And alle was for an apple,
An apple that he tok,
As clerkës finden
Wretten in hires bok.

Ne had one apple taken been,
The apple taken been,
Ne had never Our Lady
A been Heavenes Queen.
Blessèd be the time
That apple takèn was.
Therefore we moun singen:
Deo gratias!

That's 15th Century.

Matthew

Michael Straight — 10 Oct 2002, 16:42 · follows matthew.malthouse

Re: Garden of Eden:

If Whorl=Garden and Pas=God, then Outsider=???

RE: knowledge of good and evil:

'Knowledge' here should be read as (if you know Spanish) 'conocer' rather than 'saber' (to be familiar with vs. to be aware of). I know a lot about Bill Clinton, but I don't know him. The same Hebrew word is used later in Genesis to say Adam knew his wife Eve and she gave birth.

So Adam and Eve (presumably) knew the difference between good and evil, but they had not had experience with (knowledge of) good and evil.

-Rostrum

tom — 10 Oct 2002, 17:22 · follows Michael Straight

Michael Straight writes:

Re: Garden of Eden:

If Whorl=Garden and Pas=God, then Outsider=???

Actually, the whole thing plays out as an almost perfect parallel to some Gnostic cosmologies:

Whorl = Garden

Pas+family = Aeons

Outsider = true God

inhumi = evil spirits

Even the cylinder shape with the people inside is a nice inversion of the real world.

Of course, there are a lot of different Gnosticisms. YMMV.

Josh Geller — 10 Oct 2002, 17:22 · follows tom

On Thu, 10 Oct 2002, tom wrote:

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Orthodox Christianity is one of them.

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Alice K. Turner — 11 Oct 2002, 02:42 · follows Josh Geller

From Matthew:

And a persistant one:

Adam lay ybounden,

Bounden in a bond,

[snip]

A perfectly lovely old lay. I was lucky enough to hear this sung as a round once by the Princeton Glee Club with some extraordinarily high and pure male voices. My eyes tear, just

remembering.

Meanwhile, Crush, I perfectly agree with you that Typhon is consciously presented in LS as the Demiurge, the false god who believes (both sincerely and cynically, in the modern way) that he is the only creator god of the Whorl. And the Outsider is (if not a hallucination!) the true god. And in SS, angels (archons)=Neighbors (Of course Zak and the gang are also angels), inhumis=demons (with the only excuse for all the histrionics at the end being an anti-Origen slant that demons cannot be saved, which I deplore critically but understand as fitting into orthodoxy), all that, yadda, yadda. I am truly sorry that Wolfe could not find a Sophia figure--Scylla in no way cuts it despite all that last-book sentimentality about her poor little real self--but I do not think he is a real Gnostic; he is once again too orthodox to dwell on such a powerful heresy. Not to mention being a little weak with female characters, as has been noted. Also, technically it would have been awkward; I doubt that Wolfe had such a vast contraption in mind when, working his way through these series, he first conceived of Typhon as a false god.

-alga

Jerry Friedman — 11 Oct 2002, 16:18 · follows Alice K. Turner

--- Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu> wrote:

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RE: knowledge of good and evil:

'Knowledge' here should be read as (if you know Spanish) 'conocer' rather than 'saber' (to be familiar with vs. to be aware of). I know a lot about Bill Clinton, but I don't know him. The same Hebrew word is used later in Genesis to say Adam knew his wife Eve and she gave birth.

So Adam and Eve (presumably) knew the difference between good and evil, but they had not had experience with (knowledge of) good and evil.

Just as a clarification: I don't remember any such distinction existing in Hebrew. The verb *lada`at* (root *yd`*) is used for both factual knowledge and familiarity. Of course, this is consistent with the possibility that *conocer*/*connaitre* may be the correct interpretation in this passage, or a useful one for modern Christians (and Jews and Muslims?).

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