

silk horn

The Urth list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 05 Dec 2004

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turin — 05 Dec 2004, 13:05

I think Chris is right, and the Silk/Horn problem is central to the debate of the soul, the mind-body problem (which is different because we have already ruled out, thank gooness, Descartes), and identity.

Silk/Horn is a more complex of Severian's own identity "crisis", (I don't know if any situations like this is in Cerebus or Latro), but I think Severian's acquisition of extra personae has anything to do with the part of our debate that concerns the soul, and here's why.

With Severians acquisition of Thecla's

Both are examples of communion, though one is profane and the other well if not exactly sacred as in communing with God, it is certainly not evil. I don't think there is anything "mystical" about it, how a drug and a bit of muscle tissue transfer memories or even eating a piece of neocortex is unclear, and how that effects Severian's neurophysiology is unclear, but Wolfe is writing creative neuroscience; however, I think it's safe to assume he means that they are downloading mindware, not only narrative memories but also cognitive processes and sensory memory, which minds he is downloading in full or in part of the model of that person's entire mind. If Wolfe fails to mention a change in Severian's neural pathways or how it is supported within his body, that's understandable, but I definitely think we are meant to see this as a biological if fantastic process.

In the same way I don't think Marble is sharing a body with Rose. It seems Rose had a secondary memory storage, a harddrive, if you will which Marble acquired in a physical way, a way that is similar to Severian ingesting the flesh of Thecla and the Autarch. These events in many ways are scientific if not scientific, they involve hardware or meatware. I would argue the same for Auk and Chenille's possession by the god's. Of this class, I am not sure which of these cases is the most complex or representative of what Wolfe is trying to say.

Severians "ressurrection", however, is of the same type as Silk/Horn and the Inhum. I think of this class, it is fairly obvious Silk/Horn is the most important case.

As far as the "complex" and "simple" views are concerned, I think the first class is complex and the second simple. We would call them instead the dynamic and static self, though this isn't very descriptive either. Here is a question. Descartes believed the soul is an "object" outside of time and space which somehow corresponds to consciousness and is interact with the meat world. This is of course logically impossible. However, for Wolfe it does not seem the soul is the mind, otherwise why the distinction between the cases we've looked at, if of course, you think the distinction is valid. However, does Wolfe think of the soul outside of time?

The reason I say this is because for medieval Catholicism, and this is translating it into our terms today, it seems the soul is an object inside time and space corresponding to the mind and emotions supported by an unknown energy structure called "spirit" which supports these processes of cognition etc after bodily death but in a different way, since incarnation means you

are subject to certain changes in emotions and cognition due to changes in your body.

In the same way does Wolfe treat the soul at any time treat informational singularity? I am not sure how Wolfe if he does, reconcile the complex view with the static view or even tries to present a discourse on the simple view in the same way as he has with the complex one.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 06 Dec 2004, 11:12 · in reply to turin

On Sun, 5 Dec 2004 13:05:16 -0800 (PST), turin <turin at hell.com> wrote:
I think Chris is right, and the Silk/Horn problem is central to the debate of the soul, the mind-body problem (which is different because we have already ruled out, thank goodness, Descartes), and identity.

Ummm, yeah. Please read the archives on this. I've been preaching this basic idea for a couple of years now.

Silk/Horn is a more complex of Severian's own identity "crisis", (I don't know if any situations like this is in Cerebus or Latro),

Well, the only interesting identity crisis I can think of in Cerebus is Artemis, the Roach, but perhaps you're thinking of Cerberus? 8*)

but I think Severian's acquisition of extra personae has anything to do with the part of our debate that concerns the soul, and here's why.

There are two basic mechanisms of memory and/or soul transfer in the Solar books:

1. Some kind of pan-and-scan, which allows people to be "uploaded" to Mainframe, downloaded to chems, possession, and so on. (Analogous to the scanning that creates Mr. Million in 5HC, though apparently not as destructive.) I would posit that some form of this basic process is also behind Jonas' possession of the dead Miles and the Narrator's translation by the Neighbors from the Horn-body to the Silk-body.

2. "Communion," ranging from the Alzabo and the analeptic, to the sharing of body parts. Severian's communions, of course; but also the way memory seems to transfer with chem parts, the blooddrinking of the inhum, and many other things.

I suspect that Wolfe is writing from instinct here and has not really worked out a full "techne" of soul/memory transference. But if we can find some intersection point between these two major categories, we might find what he has in mind (whether or not he is fully consciously aware that he has it in mind).

With Severian's acquisition of Thecla's

Paragraph lost?

Both are examples of communion, though one is profane and the other well if not exactly sacred as in communing with God, it is certainly not evil. I don't think there is anything "mystical" about it, how a drug and a bit of muscle tissue transfer memories or even eating a piece of neocortex is unclear, and how that affects Severian's neurophysiology is unclear, but Wolfe is writing creative neuroscience; however, I think it's safe to assume he means that they are downloading mindware, not only narrative memories but also cognitive processes and sensory memory, which minds he is downloading in full or in part of the model of that person's entire mind.

Well, I think we need to start with the idea of memory as hologrammatic, so that one piece contains an image of the whole, but in less detail. Thus, the earlier Autarchs are less clear in

Severian's memory than that of his immediate predecessor. (Hologrammatology - yes, that word is quite deliberate - is also a major if hidden theme of the whole BotNS; indeed, the Book itself is hologrammatic, with the shape of the whole contained, in at least a vague image, in any significant (say a few chapters) portion.

If Wolfe fails to mention a change in Severian's neural pathways or how it is supported within his body, that's understandable, but I definitely think we are meant to see this as a biological if fantastic process.

One of Wolfe's major techniques is to blur the distinction between the "natural/scientific" and the "supernatural/religious." One of the more obvious signs of this is his constantly providing "scientific" explanations for the more obviously "supernatural" events, which turn out not to be very good explanations at all - such as Crane's explanation of Silk's enlightenment as a brain accident.

In the same way I don't think Marble is sharing a body with Rose. It seems Rose had a secondary memory storage, a harddrive, if you will which Marble acquired in a physical way, a way that is similar to Severian ingesting the flesh of Thecla and the Autarch. These events in many ways are scientific if not scientific, they involve hardware or meatware.

That is the sign that they are moments of communion.

I would argue the same for Auk and Chenille's possession by the gods.

How do you find this similar?

Severian's "resurrection", however, is of the same type as Silk/Horn and the Inhum. I think of this class, it is fairly obvious Silk/Horn is the most important case.

You've clearly divided matters into some interesting duality but you have not made clear what the division is, at least to me.

As far as the "complex" and "simple" views are concerned, I think the first class is complex and the second simple. We would call them instead the dynamic and static self, though this isn't very descriptive either. Here is a question. Descartes believed the soul is an "object" outside of time and space which somehow corresponds to consciousness and interacts with the meat world. This is of course logically impossible. However, for Wolfe it does not seem the soul is the mind, otherwise why the distinction between the cases we've looked at, if of course, you think the distinction is valid. However, does Wolfe think of the soul outside of time?

I suspect that he thinks it capable of existing outside of time, but as bound to time as long as it is bound to a body.

The reason I say this is because for medieval Catholicism, and this is translating it into our terms today, it seems the soul is an object inside time and space corresponding to the mind and emotions supported by an unknown energy structure called "spirit" which supports these processes of cognition etc after bodily death but in a different way, since incarnation means you are subject to certain changes in emotions and cognition due to changes in your body.

The relation between soul, spirit, and body is complex and not at all well understood - indeed, I don't think that there is any really definitive Catholic teaching on the subject (certainly it is not covered in the Catechism of the 1990s, which is supposed to be an encyclopaedic reference of the definitive teachings).

--Dan'l

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Freedom has no barcode.

--J.G. Ballard

Alan Lewis — 06 Dec 2004, 20:32 · in reply to turin

turin wrote:

With Severians acquisition of Thecla's

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I don't think there is anything "mystical" about it, how a drug and a bit of muscle tissue transfer memories or even eating a piece of neocortex is unclear, and how that effects Severian's neurophysiology is unclear, but Wolfe is writing creative neuroscience; however, I think it's safe to assume he means that they are downloading mindware, not only narrative memories but also cognitive processes and sensory memory, which minds he is downloading in full or in part of the model of that person's entire mind. f Wolfe fails to mention a change in Severian's neural pathways or how it is supported within his body, that's understandable, but I definitely think we are meant to see this as a biological if fantastic process.

I can't agree with this, interesting as most of the analysis is. One may argue the line of previous autarchs are within Severian by a purely mechanical process, but Thecla within Severian poses us with an entirely different situation. There are many examples, but to name a few: the girl in the antechamber believes there is a lady present when Severian is there, the Cumaen (sp?) knows there is another entity present at their ritual, Thecla takes control of Severian to confront the Autarch, etc. Later on, Severian will say that the Claw brought Thecla back. At one point Thecla even narrates part of the text. In short, it's clear that the only explanation that will seem to suffice is that Thecla's soul is present in Severian's body, which is I suppose about as mystical as it can get. The interesting thing is that Severian becomes fully aware of it, but derives no comfort from it as his soul does not seem able to interact with Thecla directly, just access her memories. They are 'together', but as two souls effectively 'alone.' I think one explanation for this is that Thecla is basically dormant in there, she is the visitor and takes possession only when Severian is weak. The other point is that without Thecla in her own body, she cannot be the Thecla that Severian loves.

Though there is no direct evidence for this, note that the Thecla-in-Severian references cease in the last part of UotNS, and I like to think the reason why is that when Tzadkiel gives Severian his Reward -- a night sleeping with a woman he never sees, but knows is Thecla -- Tzadkiel has taken Thecla out of Severian and given her another body, in much the same way as Severian produces a new one when he needs one. It's interesting that she must disappear from the narrative after this point however, that notion that the perfect moment can't last.

Alan

Chris — 08 Dec 2004, 11:10 · in reply to turin

Turin said:

As far as the "complex" and "simple" views are concerned, I think the first class is complex and the second simple. We would call them instead the dynamic and static self, though this isn't very descriptive either. Here is a question. Descartes believed the soul is an "object" outside of time and

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I should clarify something here, the way I was using the terms, none of these examples are in themselves complex or simple. There are just complex and simple **views** you can take of each case. Example:

A complex view of Severian/Thecla would say that Sev's body actually combines both identities, Severian and Thecla, sometimes acting as one, the other, or a combination of the two. From this view you can either argue that both Severian and Thecla's souls are present, **or** alternately that they have become a single entity that is neither Severian nor Thecla but a sort of Theclavian.

A simple view of this same case would say that Severian is Severian, period; Thecla is not present in soul, it's just that Severian sometimes behaves like Thecla sometimes. (I leave out the possibility that you could argue, even with the simple view, that Thecla's soul really was transferred to Severian by some other means - it's just that such a transfer could not be accomplished by the mere ingesting of memories).

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The case of Rose in Marble has a breakdown that is more or less similar. What I think Silk (and possibly Wolfe) is doing with that case is, finally, throwing his hands up and giving up on the attempt to answer, in truth, whether Rose is really in there (in soul) and instead focussing on the moral aspect: if it thinks it is a moral agent (thinks it is, more specifically, Rose) and behaves like a moral agent (Rose) then you should treat it as such, lacking any real way to know for sure. This would apply to all ethical issues, including reward/punishment and promise-keeping - if you had made a promise to Thecla and she spoke to you through Severian, you would be bound to keep that promise. Similarly, Silk feels a duty to apologize to Rose-in-Marble for problems he had had with Rose.

This ethical synthesis doesn't favor either the complex or simple views. In fact, a "true believer" of either of these views would be unlikely to adopt such a stance: the "simple view" would tend to say that you're only bound by your obligations to **Severian** (since Thecla isn't really there), and the die-hard proponent of the "complex view" generally has only the most tenuous grounds for honoring any promise/obligation at all - because identity is changing constantly your obligation isn't to that person, who no longer exists, but rather your obligation is **at most** to uphold the institution of promise-keeping, which would pretty much allow you to violate any promise so long as nobody knows about it (as long as nobody witnesses your violation, their faith in the institution of promises won't be undermined). So you would be as likely to honor a promise to Thecla as to Severian, unless nobody was looking.

This is something of an oversimplification. The complex and simple views don't really lock you into an ethical position, but they do make certain ethical positions easier to hold than others.

Silk/Horn is a more complex case which I don't have time to go into right now, but what's interesting there is that there are 2-4 alternate accounts of what happened to choose from if you take the simple view, and 2-4 more on the complex view (just choosing the obvious possibilities). And these alternate accounts end up being substantially different when it comes to describing what happened in the Short Sun series, to the point where it might actually be

possible to eliminate one of the views as being incompatible with Wolfe's overall theme. But I haven't really worked all that out yet.

Civet

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 08 Dec 2004, 12:41 · in reply to Chris

Chris,

While this is more of a riff on what you wrote than a direct response to it, I should like to observe that a lot of the problems of identity in the solar books (and 5HC) are extensions of real problems encountered today, where neurobiology and psychology meet theology (specifically pneumatology).

Examples:

* V, abused as a child, develops a second personality as a protector. This personality, V', is active about one third of the time, and has a complex life of her own. V is unaware of the existence of V', and she of him. Is there one soul or two present here?

* W undergoes neurological damage due to alcohol abuse, following which he becomes aggressive, impatient, belligerent, and violent. Is he morally responsible for his behavior - are his violent outbursts moral sins?

* X undergoes a more severe trauma, resulting in functional amnesia; all memories of identity and relationships vanish. She wanders off and begins a new life as X', with a new husband, a job unlike her old one, etc. Is this a separate person with a separate soul? Suppose some other circumstance restores her old memories - what is the identity of the personality who now has memories of being X and X'?

* Y is born profoundly autistic, unable to respond to other human beings in any way. Y develops certain "savant" talents, such as the ability to draw extraordinarily accurate and detailed pictures of any face he has seen. Is he an ensouled human being or a biological machine?

* In the near future, following a terrible accident, large parts of Z's body are replaced by prosthetic devices, including parts of her central nervous system. Is she human any more? If so, is she the same person she was prior to the accident and prostheses?

It seems to me that problems like Severian-Thecla-Autarchs, Chenille- Kypris-Scylla, and Rose-Marble are clearly extensions of these problems. Gene Wolfe is using SF for its by now time-honored function of taking real problems and exaggerating or isolating them to examine them more closely.

As it happens, in this case, doing so makes the problems even more problematic.....

--Dan'l

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--J.G. Ballard

Seth Lombardi — 09 Dec 2004, 13:10 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

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It probably means I'm a geek, but I snickered so loud in my amusement at "Theclaverian" that I garnered strange looks in the library.

Carry on!

seth

Seth Lombardi

sethlombardi at hotmail.com

sethopotropolis: <http://pages.prodigy.net/nlom/blogg.html>

AIM: melombardi

"Two faces are alike; neither is funny by itself, but side by side their likeness makes us laugh"

-Pascal