

5HC : Skinner, Turing

The Urth list — 187 messages, 23 voices, 03 Feb 2005

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4354>

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Jim Raylor — 03 Feb 2005, 07:08

There seems to be an allusion on these threads that B.F.Skinner may bear some similarity to the father of Number Five in 5HC.

As a first year Psychology student at Exeter University in the 1970's I was a rampant anti-behaviourist, based on commonly held misconceptions, some of which have been aired here. By my third year, my views had changed, helped by a series of tutorials with Professor Reid, the Head of Department, a keen behaviourist who was personally acquainted with Skinner.

William James focus on Psychology as the study of human consciousness had some unfortunate consequences.

Soon Freud, Jung et al. had created rich and exotic topologies of the human mind, though differences of opinion were evident and apparently irresolvable.

Is a pipe a male or female symbol?

Pioneers of behaviourism such as Watson and Pavlov were attempting to put psychology onto a more scientific focus, by concentrating on observable behaviour and repeatable experiments.

Skinner's experiments were generally far more humane than those of the neurologists who sacrificed their subjects to measure changes of state in their brains. Possibly his greatest contribution to humanity is his demonstration that rewards are for more effective in conditioning behaviour than punishments.

I am not saying he was a saint. For example, during the war he advocated the use of trained pigeons to guide missiles, perhaps though this is preferable to the use of Kamikaze pilots.

He did create an artificially enhanced environment for his second daughter and spent considerable time observing and influencing her behaviour, which I see as nothing more sinister than the actions of a devoted parent. By all accounts she is a successful and well adjusted academic who continues to support her father's ideas. At university, the rumour was that she had gone mad after being treated as an experimental subject by her wicked father and was hospitalised! Skinner did not entirely deny the relevance of

internal states (is the pigeon hungry?), but found objective work-arounds in most cases (Take a pigeon at 95% of its previously established normal body weight).

Turing's approach also focused on observable inputs and outputs, though he had a more mathematical and abstract notion of internal state than was formerly available.

For what it is worth, I do find the apparent references to these individuals in 5HC to be more than coincidence.

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<http://prisoner143.50megs.com/>

I am not a number I am a free person!

Iorwerth Thomas — 03 Feb 2005, 10:12 · in reply to Jim Raylor

From: Jim Raylor <rjraylor at yahoo.co.uk>

Pioneers of behaviourism such as Watson and Pavlov were attempting to put psychology onto a more scientific focus, by concentrating on observable behaviour and repeatable experiments.

Which was a worthy and probably necessary thing to do, given the excesses of their predecessors. One does get the impression that the pendulum _did_ swing too far the other way, though. I'm not entirely certain that the criteria for objectivity used in natural sciences are entirely appropriate for psychology, while that type of criterion was what the behaviourists tried to impose (not that _anything_ goes, it's just that the study of humans and animals and AIs may require different methodologies with different criteria from the study of say, quarks). But you have to start somewhere, learn from your mistakes etc.

Skinner's experiments were generally far more humane than those of the neurologists who sacrificed their subjects to measure changes of state in their brains. Possibly his greatest contribution to humanity is his demonstration that rewards are far more effective in conditioning behaviour than punishments.

I am not saying he was a saint. For example, during the war he advocated the use of trained pigeons to guide missiles, perhaps though this is preferable to the use of Kamikaze pilots.

I'm not sure that I'd like to live in his ideal society though.

He did create an artificially enhanced environment for his second daughter and spent considerable time observing and influencing her behaviour, which I see as nothing more sinister than the actions of a devoted parent. By all accounts she is a successful and well adjusted academic who continues to support her father's ideas. At university, the rumour was that she had gone mad after being treated as an experimental

subject by her wicked father and was hospitalised!

Ah! I thought that it might have been an exaggeration. On the other hand, what I've read of Watson's 1930 child rearing handbooks probably contributed to this impression; by all accounts they were rather... peculiar, and probably didn't do kids raised by their principles much good.

Skinner did not entirely deny the relevance of internal states (is the pigeon hungry?), but found objective work-arounds in most cases (Take a pigeon at 95% of its previously established normal body weight).

I guess he'd have to, given the limits of language observed in behaviourism[1], but I suspect that there's an implicit connection between internal and external states that that manouver exploits.

Turing's approach also focused on observable inputs and outputs, though he had a more mathematical and abstract notion of internal state than was formerly available.

Is that what's called fuctionalism? (Just to get terminology clear).

I'll elaborate on something I said earlier. What seems to have happened with behaviourism is analagous to what seems to have happened with the Copenhagen interpretation of Quantum Mechanics. You have a fairly well defined _operational_ definition of what you're looking for (behaviour in psychology, particle spin - for example - in QM) and a good idea of the basic philosophy behind what you're doing and its limits. Your students, however, aren't so careful. Neither are the popularisers of your ideas (who may or may not be identical with you), largely because they're writing what amounts to a polemic. At some point, the operational definition becomes an _ontological_ one, and then you get crass behaviorism (version [2]) and bad pop-sci nonsense on state-vector reduction.

I tend to automatically assume (knee-jerk prejudice) that most behaviorists are crass, as opposed to thoughtful (type [1]) because I'm a massive intellectual snob. Oh well.

For what it is worth, I do find the apparent references to these individuals in 5HC to be more than coincidence.

It hadn't ocured to me, but there might be something in that. I do tend to think that he was more of the cold, rational and amoral scientist archetype [1] rather than a depiction of anyone in particular though.

[1] I won't say steriotype as there may have been one or two of this kind lurking around the more unpleasant reaches of 20th century research, eg. those motherhood experiments with monkeys, etc. And then there's Edward Teller for us physicists.

Iorwerth

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 03 Feb 2005, 10:56 · in reply to Iorwerth Thomas

Well ... Of course the "hard" sciences set the gold standard for "sexy science" in the 20th century (especially the middle part of it) - both because they were as "scientific" (i.e., measurable, empirical, repeatable, etc.) as you can get, and also because they produced big, obvious results like A- and H-bombs, reactors, Saturn V-1Bs, all sorts of useful chemicals, and, oh, yeah, computers.

Lots of fields of endeavor then tried to be "more like" the hard sciences. Behaviorism was psychology's move toward "scientificity" by not merely concentrating on the empirical, but ignoring just about anything else.

For what it's worth, there's a lot of interesting work going on right now that is putting some of the "human sciences" on what I would call a genuinely and appropriately scientific basis. In psychology, for example, you have the whole "evolutionary psychology" movement, which is producing some pretty stunning results in terms of explaining "why we are the way we are," and a lot of it looks to be apply-able, for purposes of creating more human(e) "behavioral technologies" than the Skinnerians ever could have done.

But my favorite example right now is Jared Diamond's amazing book, GUNS, GERMS AND STEEL, which I think may do for cultural anthropology what Darwin did for biology.

--Dan'l

"We're going to sit on Scorsese's head"
-- The Goodfeathers

Maru Dubshinki — 03 Feb 2005, 12:42 · in reply to Iorwerth Thomas

I don't like the Copenhagen interpretation in the least bit: anything which requires you get rid of elegance like unitary wave evolution, accept things which are completely muddled and really, metaphysical, and introduces a bunch of paradoxes like Von Neumann's Catastrophe, or Wigner's Friend, is a bad thing in my book. We need a better solution, in QM as well as psychology. With QM you've got multiverse models you can switch to, but what alternatives do we have in psychology and philosophy?

~Maru

Microsoft delenda est.

On Thu, 03 Feb 2005 18:11:01 +0000, Iorwerth Thomas
<iorwerththomas at hotmail.com> wrote:

....

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Iorwerth

Andy Robertson — 03 Feb 2005, 13:34 · in reply to Maru Dubshinki

I don't like the Copenhagen interpretation in the least bit:

Nor do I

With QM
you've got multiverse models you can switch to, but what alternatives
do we have in psychology and philosophy?

Skinner's work pretty much comprised insisting that behaviour was mostly environment driven
or could only usefully be understood as such and studying how this worked out.

I am sure Skinner knew this was untrue: but he attempted to ignore that fact, perhaps because nothing can be found out without making wild guesses and testing them (a true and noble attitude).

However, the basic model is not simply wrong; it is so completely wrong that even as a wild and brave guess it is worse than useless.

Human behaviour is so much more circumscribed and programmed (by evolution) than learned that the "blank slate" dogma is much, much, worse than useless. Since the basic model is wrong, Skinner's work can not be use to understand humanity.

We are chattering about science, and forgetting what is really important in understanding the human world (even the world of humans in books), which is politics.

The real emergent utility of Skinner's work - the way it was **used** in the real world - iwas to provide a shield of intellectual justification to those who want to reshape human behaviour through social engineering; which aim is, itself, merely a cloak over their own Inner Party desire for power.

I'm not sure Skinner was guilty of intending this end (I doubt it), but his work fitted perfectly into the environmentalist dogmas of his age, like the fraudulent "anthropology" of Margaret Mead and her mentor Franz Boaz.

Wolfe sets his face like granite against this slavery, in book after book.

.

Andy Robertson — 03 Feb 2005, 16:53 · follows Andy Robertson

Doesn't behaviour, and epiphenomenon arising from mechanisms
responsible for behaviour *have* to be enviromentally driven?
Anything else would have elements of randomness in it (with respect to

environmental concerns; other behaviour driven by things other than epiphenomenon or alternative, not environmentally driven motives might make perfect sense in its own scheme, but still at least somewhat random from the environmental point of view.) and so would selected against evolutionarily, and by now, non-existent.

This really doesn't mean any thing I can understand.

How is it we are talking about Wolfe and Skinner without mentioning "The Death of Doctor Island", his most obviously anti-Skinnerian story?

Andy Robertson — 03 Feb 2005, 16:54 · follows Andy Robertson

~Maru

I'd say that The Death of Doctor Island was pretty Skinnerian- the trio got massively manipulated, Doctor Island controlled the environment absolutely, and he got one of two planned, predicted outcomes.

Not at all. Doctor Island is indeed a nearly omnipotent Skinnerian conditioning machine, but he is not merely evil, but - more importantly - in error.

He works on an estimate of the boy's IQ (and consequentially his economic value) which is fake, having been made up by a nurse when the boy refused to take a test.

Read the story

TDODI is an example of something seen frequently in Wolfe's writing. You have "undomesticated" human beings who can not fit into a society and are terribly punished for it (punishment being another form of skinnerian Operant Conditioning, of course).

But the reason why they can not fit in, not because they are sick, but because they are sane, and the society does not allow healthy human beings to survive in it.

..

Andy Robertson — 03 Feb 2005, 16:54 · follows Andy Robertson

Maru Dubshinki writes:

In error? You think Dr. Island would resort to a different strategy for the boy if his IQ had been accurately recorded?

Dr Island says as much to Nicholas. I'm looking at page 106 of the Pocket Books edition. Sorry, I am too busy to transcribe it

Iorwerth Thomas — 04 Feb 2005, 05:39 · in reply to Maru Dubshinki

From: Maru Dubshinki <marudubshinki at gmail.com>

I don't like the Copenhagen interpretation in the least bit: anything

which requires you get rid of elegance like unitary wave evolution, accept things which are completely muddled and really, metaphysical, and introduces a bunch of paradoxes like Von Neumann's Catastrophe, or Wigner's Friend, is a bad thing in my book.

Ah, but the Copenhagen interpretation isn't metaphysical - not in its original form. All it involves is acceptance of the fact that QM provides a description of the probabilities of events and no description of what's really happening because there's no way we can access that level. The trouble is that that is somewhat unsatisfactory, so people badly staple the metaphysics to a framework that isn't really intended to support it, and as a result you get weirdness like John Wheeler's 'participatory Anthropic Principle'.

The modern equivalent of the original Copenhagen interpretation is Chris Fuchs et al's Bayesian subjectivist interpretation, which I think has quite a bit going for it, though I'm not entirely convinced.

We need a better solution, in QM as well as psychology. With QM you've got multiverse models you can switch to, but what alternatives do we have in psychology and philosophy?

Myself, I tend to regard the multiverse interpretation as slightly extravagant (and there are some technical problems with it and the related 'consistent histories' approach). I tend to prefer (in no real order, but the least deterministic ones are more favoured at the moment) Penrose's objective reduction (which needs work), the Bayesian approach (a bit conservative), Cramer's transactional account (which does peculiar things to time) and non-local hidden variables (a touch deterministic).

I guess that the solution to a lot of these problems is to be very clear about what you're doing, the tentativeness of your conclusions and to shoot overenthusiastic pop-sci authors on sight [1], because they'll only add to the confusion.

Iorwerth

[1] Apologies to any popular science authors reading this. But there is a tendency within the genre (particularly in physical and biological pop-sci) to latch onto eye catching ideas that are probably bollocks. There are exceptions to this rule. Roger Penrose, for example is always careful to state when he's being speculative.

Iorwerth Thomas — 04 Feb 2005, 06:02 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

From: Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com>

For what it's worth, there's a lot of interesting work going on right now that is putting some of the "human sciences" on what I would call a genuinely and appropriately scientific basis. In psychology, for example, you have the whole "evolutionary psychology" movement, which is producing some pretty stunning results in terms of explaining "why we are the way we are," and a lot of it looks to be apply-able, for purposes of creating more human(e) "behavioral technologies" than the Skinnerians ever could have done.

Yeah. Of course, with most stuff like this, you have to be careful with how you proceed; evolutionary psychology got a very bad name when it started up due to the flagrant crassness of some of its backers (a good history of this is Andrew Brown's 'The Darwin Wars'). Things have apparently improved, though on the origins of ideas that some evolutionary psychologists don't approve of (say, religion) things don't appear to have moved much beyond Freud (this is less an

attack on the scientific study of religions, how they form, develop and what this has to say about us as a species - which is wholly worthwhile - and more a statement that a lot of these commentators don't actually know what they're talking about).

Iorwerth

Iorwerth Thomas — 04 Feb 2005, 06:28 · in reply to Andy Robertson

From: "Andy Robertson" <andywrobertson at clara.co.uk>

Doesn't behaviour, and epiphenomenon arising from mechanisms responsible for behaviour *have* to be environmentally driven? Anything else would have elements of randomness in it (with respect to environmental concerns; other behaviour driven by things other than epiphenomenon or alternative, not environmentally driven motives might make perfect sense in its own scheme, but still at least somewhat random from the environmental point of view.) and so would selected against evolutionarily, and by now, non-existent.

This really doesn't mean any thing I can understand.

It sounds like version of Hume's fork (either my actions are determined [by the laws of physics, or in this case, the environment] or not; if they aren't, they are random, which is false; therefore they are determined) with an adaptationist sting in its tail. The problems with this version are:

1) Why are random events (wrt the environment) selected against? There are situations where being unpredictable is an advantage (an example from human society that could be generalised are some forms of Cold War nuclear strategy).

2) It assumes that evolutionary selection is a fine mesh, not a coarse one (it probably varies between the two extremes depending on the circumstances). If something doesn't provide a significant advantage or disadvantage _when all circumstances are taken into account_ (say, compensating factors, low selection pressure and so forth) then it may be passed on to the successive generation regardless.

3) What, exactly, do we mean by 'environment'? It's a lot less obvious than it seems.

Hence, it is possible that non-environmental (for some value of environment) influences on behaviour exist.

Iorwerth

Iorwerth Thomas — 04 Feb 2005, 06:58 · in reply to Andy Robertson

From: "Andy Robertson" <andywrobertson at clara.co.uk>

We are chattering about science, and forgetting what is really important in understanding the human world (even the world of humans in books), which is politics.

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Oh God, the justification of dubious politics by attaching the word 'scientific' to it. The same happened with Darwinism - Herbert Spencer and the 'scientific' Social Darwinists. Yes, I can see why some would find it useful. You'd be referring to certain Marxists, right?

It's probably not a coincidence that the conspiracy in Grant Morrison's 'Invisibles' sometimes slip into behaviourist-type rhetoric.

I'm not sure Skinner was guilty of intending this end (I doubt it), but his work fitted perfectly into the environmentalist dogmas of his age, like the fraudulent "anthropology" of Margaret Mead and her mentor Franz Boaz.

One of the best critiques of environmentalist 'blank-slate' dogma, IMO, is probably 'Beast and Man' by Mary Midgley, herself a left-wing moral philosopher. But she's a virtue ethicist, and thus can't believe the 'blank slate' stuff on pain of self contradiction.

Wolfe sets his face like granite against this slavery, in book after book.

And rightly so. It's one of the few political views I share in common with him.

Iorwerth

Maru Dubshinki — 04 Feb 2005, 16:57 · in reply to Iorwerth Thomas

!!

Why is it every philosophical idea I think is amazingly clever turns out to have been stolen from me by some long dead philosopher?! "Hume's fork" ? Dammit! Well, I hope I at least get credit for the adaptationist addition. Time to dispose of your arguments: Randomness in nature is bad for obvious reasons. If any time I meet a dreaded lion or hippo (let's pretend I am a human pre-cursor living in Africa) I have a random chance of either a) fleeing in abject terror, wetting my pants, and the next time I go to that place I am extra-cautious or b) walking up to said dangerous, unfriendly creature and poking him in the snout. Or some other random action which doesn't involve killing/fleeing the creature. It's equally obvious, I hope, that the set of actions which will preserve my life is shrinkingly smaller than the set of all possible actions. So, random actions would be selected against, and actions with sense, which are non-random (ie, presented with an identical situation, the actions will not be utterly chaotic when iterated. If a creature is hungry and good food is near by, we should see it the majority of times engaging in the highly ordered, non-random sequence of going to it, checking it out, checking out the surroundings, eating it etc.) and fairly deterministic would be selected for. Your analogy with WWII nuclear strategies is not really relevant. It was an attempt to manipulate an opponent's game-theoretic optimum strategy. The one acting 'crazy'/'random' was anything but. And your second thing? Evolution is *very* fine-meshed. The slightest advantage, compounded like interest over thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions, tens of millions etc will win out. If you wish to argue that 'non-environmental' influence exists, please provide an example, any example. For my purposes, 'environment' is anything which affects an organism's chances of living or reproducing. This keeps everything nice and neat and evolutionary :)

~Maru

I once wrote up a weak version of 'Hume's fork' as a fancomic for DC. This is just to show I did think of it a while back. Too bad I can't prove I never read Hume or anything about him. Oh well. <http://www.qwantz.com/fanart/qwantz-lhadnochoicelmsorry.png>

On Fri, 04 Feb 2005 14:27:33 +0000, Iorwerth Thomas

<iorwerththomas at hotmail.com> wrote:

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situations where being unpredictable is an advantage (an example from human society that could be generalised are some forms of Cold War nuclear strategy).

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Hence, it is possible that non-environmental (for some value of environment) influences on behaviour exist.

lorwerth

Chris — 04 Feb 2005, 18:56 · in reply to Maru Dubshinki

I am not sure where Hume's fork comes into play here. The fork, as I understand it, isn't about determinism or randomness. It's a division of types of statements as either analytic (strict products of definitions and logical operations) or synthetic (products of empirical observation, statements about the world). Some people think this distinction is more important than others; Quine, for example, argued that there was really no such thing as an analytic statement in (natural) language.

As far as determinism, randomness, and evolution go: if you take an ideal coin with zero thickness (so that it can't land on an edge), is it a determined system (because there are a fixed set of ways it could possibly come down: heads or tails) or is it random (because on any given toss it could come down either way)? The answer to the question is "yes". As a poor pseudo-evolutionary example, let's use the game of chess (pre-computer). If you take a set of players, then a guy who always starts with the Queen's Gambit will do more poorly than one who chooses from a range of similarly decent openings, because his opponent will key in on the Queen's Gambit when preparing for the game. The second person does choose their opening randomly, but not just any random opening move will do - the random selection is made from a set of viable choices, some of which may be slightly worse than others but gain a little something back by way of unexpectedness. Does chess, then, select for randomness or not?

re: the nuclear example, it is not so much a matter of randomness that is selected for, but it does show that sometimes non-prudential strategies/traits **are** selected for. That is, prudential in the sense of immediate gain. Nuclear weapons fail to act as a deterrent if your opponent knows that you won't use them against your own best interest. Similarly and more to the point with a (normal) bee's sting.

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So, random actions would be selected against, and actions with sense, which are non-random (ie, presented with an identical situation, the actions will not be utterly chaotic when iterated. If a creature is hungry and good food is near by, we should see it the majority of times engaging in the highly ordered, non-random sequence of going to it, checking it out, checking out the surroundings, eating it etc.) and fairly deterministic would be selected for.

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Iorwerth

Iorwerth Thomas — 07 Feb 2005, 05:22 · in reply to Maru Dubshinki

From: Maru Dubshinki <marudubshinki at gmail.com>

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Oops. My bad. I misconstrued you. I thought you were arguing that environment alone rather than 'environment plus internal state' were determining factors for behaviour. An action might be 'random' in the first sense but it wouldn't be in the second (though it might be free but not random, if you reject Hume's eating implement). Sorry about that (esp. as the first view is so silly that I'd hate to ascribe it to anyone).

Your analogy with WWII nuclear strategies is not really relevant. It was an attempt to manipulate an opponent's game-theoretic optimum strategy. The one acting 'crazy'/'random' was anything but.

I hope my remark makes sense now.

And your second thing?

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If you wish to argue that 'non-environmental' influence exists, please provide an example, any example.

(Caveat: I'm no biologist, and I'm willing to be told that I'm wrong on this) I imagine that there's a significant difference between the harshness of the selection of hairless tropical apes during a time of relative calm (when genetic drift will predominate) and the onset of an ice age. Also, if a circumstance comes up rarely enough that, say, only one or two individuals are ever affected, it might not really impinge on an species' history. It might prove hard to predict the reaction (though I'd have to be something very odd not to invoke a flight or fight behaviour).

For my purposes, 'environment' is anything which affects an organism's chances of living or reproducing. This keeps everything nice and neat and evolutionary :)

Ok, I think I have a criterion for a 'non-environmental' [1] influence. Something which has not, up until this point, had a significant influence on the organism's chance of living or reproducing. Good enough for ya? :)

Iorwerth

[1] Ok, it's not really. But it's not environmental in the sense of the word you're using, if you see what I mean.

Iorwerth Thomas — 07 Feb 2005, 05:30 · in reply to Chris

From: "Chris" <rasputin_ at hotmail.com>

I am not sure where Hume's fork comes into play here. The fork, as I understand it, isn't about determinism or randomness. It's a division of types of statements as either analytic (strict products of definitions and logical operations) or synthetic (products of empirical observation, statements about the world). Some people think this distinction is more important than others; Quine, for example, argued that there was really no such thing as an analytic statement in (natural) language.

Curses. My memory is as bad as ever. I'm sure I have seen it called that somewhere. But you're probably right. It is an argument I've seen attributed to Hume, though.

Iorwerth

James Wynn — 07 Feb 2005, 06:55 · in reply to Iorwerth Thomas

I am not sure where Hume's fork comes into play here. The fork, as I understand it, isn't about determinism or randomness.

Curses. My memory is as bad as ever. I'm sure I have seen it called that somewhere. But you're probably right. It is an argument I've seen attributed to Hume, though.

Hmmm...seems like a pretty cynical philosophy. It works for all the choices people never have to make and begins to teeter when we consider all the ones they do. How does it explain why people cheat on their spouses? How does it explain why they don't? How does it explain heroism and cowardice? Generosity and greed? Honesty and duplicity? How about twelve-step programs? How does it explain listening to free-form jazz?

~ Crush

Chris — 07 Feb 2005, 10:47 · in reply to James Wynn

Hume was actually a compatibilist, and believed in both free will and determinism. You really do choose whether or not to cheat on your spouse (and are thus responsible for that choice), but

that choice is determined by your belief, character, and desires (which are in turn determined by other things). The freedom comes into play because, he says, if you **did** have different beliefs or desires you **could** have chosen differently.

I've never found this point of view to be particularly compelling, but perhaps there are people who could present it more convincingly.

Hume was, notoriously, stymied by the infamous Free Form Jazz Objection.

-- Civet

Hmmm...seems like a pretty cynical philosophy. It works for all the choices people never have to make and begins to teeter when we consider all the ones they do. How does it explain why people cheat on their spouses? How does it explain why they don't? How does it explain heroism and cowardice? Generosity and greed? Honesty and duplicity? How about twelve-step programs? How does it explain listening to free-form jazz?

~ Crush

maru — 07 Feb 2005, 16:20 · in reply to lorwerth Thomas

lorwerth Thomas wrote:

Oops. My bad. I misconstrued you. I thought you were arguing that environment *_alone_* rather than 'environment plus internal state' were determining factors for behaviour. An action might be 'random' in the first sense but it wouldn't be in the second (though it might be free but not random, if you reject Hume's eating implement). Sorry about that (esp. as the first view is so silly that I'd hate to ascribe it to anyone).

Your analogy with WWII nuclear strategies is not really relevant. It was an attempt to manipulate an opponents game-theoretic optimum strategy. The one acting 'crazy'/'random' was anything but.

I hope my remark makes sense now.

And your second thing?

Evolution is **very** fine-meshed. The slightest advantage, compounded like interest over thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions, tens of millions etc will win out.

If you wish to argue that 'non-environmental' influence exist, please provide an example, any example.

(Caveat: I'm no biologist, and I'm willing to be told that I'm wrong on this) I imagine that there's a significant difference between the harshness of the selection of hairless tropical apes during a time of relative calm (when genetic drift will predominate) and the onset of an ice age. Also, if a circumstance comes up rarely enough that, say, only one or two individuals are ever affected, it might not really impinge on an species' history. It might prove hard to predict the reaction (though I'd have to be something *_very_* odd not to invoke a flight or fight behaviour).

For my purposes, 'environment' is anything which affects an organism's chances of living or reproducing. This keeps everything nice and neat and evolutionary :)

Ok, I think I have a criterion for a 'non-environmental' [1] influence. Something which has not, up until this point, had a significant influence on the organism's chance of living or reproducing. Good enough for ya? :)

Iorwerth

[1] Ok, it's not really. But it's not environmental in the sense of the word you're using, if you see what I mean.

I'd like to reply inter-linearly, but I haven't figured out how to make Thunderbird do so. So I'll reply in order; I hope that works. I was arguing in essence that environment is first and foremost- internal states are derived always from that. A thought-example. We live in a universe where basic laws of logic hold. I cannot set my internal states (imagination and fantasizing really) to respond to the environment of a universe where, say, Modus Tollens did not hold. I just can't. I can try to work it out, but it never really gels. It's like trying to experience a 9 spatial dimension universe. We might work out the math of it, but our internal states will never reflect it, since they didn't evolve to do so. We might reflect the changes in our environment (our calculations about the environment of a 9-d universe) but we will never get internal states directly corresponding.

And of course selection pressures differ. That's why we can witness evolution, instead of always looking for indirect evidence.

I'd like to hear a 'non-environmental' influence. But of course, you must remember, the 'NE' influence must not fall under any of the general rules/heuristics evolution or culture (which derives from evolution-given abilities and evolutionary environmental influences, remember.) have worked out. I suspect you will have trouble :)

~Maru

Microsoft delenda est.

Iorwerth Thomas — 08 Feb 2005, 04:40 · in reply to maru

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I think it may be a bit more two way than that - in some ways, largely because there's a lot of contingency and flexibility in the way someone's belief structure can be constructed, and the same event can be subject to quite a few interpretations, but when it comes down to the raw material of these systems, you're probably right.

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I think there's a guy who's working on a program that helps people visualise 4-d surfaces. But not 9-d... It can get quite tricky in 2-d as well. I just finished reading the chapter in Penrose's 'The Road to Reality' on gauge fibre bundles and I'm not sure my mind has quite survived the experience.

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Arrgh. Sounds like a 'limits of thought' type problem (in order to think about it we'd have to think what can't be thought, paraphrasing Wittgenstein). This doesn't mean that such a thing can't exist - the main difference between biology and physics (so I've heard) is that exceptions to general rules are commonplace - but it does mean that I can't give an example. I can wave my hands furiously and try and convince you that one could exist, but you'd be rational in ignoring me. Oh well. :)

lorwerth

maru — 08 Feb 2005, 13:18 · in reply to lorwerth Thomas

lorwerth Thomas wrote:

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lorwerth

Well, if 4-d things really interest you (and you run a *nix), the guy who maintains www.urticator.net wrote a 4,3,2,1 -d maze, which you can explore from a First Person perspective. It's really pretty cool, and gave me a wee bit of insight into multiple dimensions. Of course, all I have are heuristics :) And I'd only be rational in ignoring if I was a good logical postivist (darnit, confirmation *can* too be support for a theory! We don't have to rely on just disproof.) But I'd tend to agree with you about the 'limits of thought'- all our ideas come from things-in-environment, through things-in-environment, and processed by things-in-environment and designed by that great, occasionally short-sighted, blind watchmaker called evolution. It's not surprising that we'd be blinkered. I don't like ending things with 'silence' to ref wittengenstein, so I'll add a little poser: Consider that every situation can be broken down to a binary choice (you never are forced to take three-at-a-time; this is possible, there are several election procedures which would work under such circumstances.) Further consider that there is always a better choice, a choice that however infinitesimally better it might fulfill your desires, is none the less at least a little better than the other, so you always can choose if you think about it. Another way of putting it is you are never in a states of complete ignorance where you might as well flip a coin. Now, choices are always made according to desires, and expectations about those, whether those desires be apparently irrational or masochistic, they are desires nonetheless. So in all these situations you break down your choices to whatever of the two satisfies your desires best. Which means that your choice, to someone who knows you well enough (where 'well enough' ranges from a good friend, to requiring a vast scientific enterprise's knowledge), are predictable. Which means you are deterministic. But wait! What if you disagree? What if you think that we don't always follow what we see as in the best interests of our desires? Well then, that means some of the time you will be choosing against one's interests and desires, and by definition that's bad! So you are confronted with a di-lemma: Either you are a slave to your desires, and free will is an incoherent, but comforting illusion; or you are doomed to unhappiness, when you 'freely' choose against what really matters to you, what makes you happy. Nice dilemna eh?

~Maru <http://www.qwantz.com/fanart/qwantz-lhadnochoicelmsorry.png>

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 08 Feb 2005, 14:33 · in reply to maru

And I'd only be rational in ignoring if I was a good logical postivist
(darnit, confirmation *can* too be support for a theory! We don't have
to rely on just disproof.)

Mmmm. Yes and no. Support, yes. Not proof ... except ... Well, there are real-world problems with limited domains, and in those domains, you can sometimes demonstrate that only a certain number of possible _theories_ exist. But most such situations concern theories-about-fact rather than theories-about-general- principles.

(Ex: Three people are locked in a room. One is stabbed to death - several wounds. There are only seven possible answers to the question "whodunit?")

But for more general (scientific) problems ... it seems to me that disconfirmation is the best we can hope for, because there are always more theories and, while we can generally rank them in loose probability-clusters,

(Ex: How does gravitation work?

High probability: gravitation is mediated by a particle exchange. Lower probability: exchange of massive, charged particles. Still lower probability: exchange of protons. Extremely low probability: exchange of gumballs. Vanishingly small probability: massive particles yearn for each other.)

and in fact we _have_ to rank them this way, because otherwise there's no way of deciding which theories are most worth testing.

(Ex: We will probably never test the gumball theory, nor the theory I've just invented, that gravitation is mediated by tiny alien elephants flying around in the noosphere, propagating morphogenic resonance and administering random rectal probes to isolated humans.)

But, alas, now and then theories that look like they should be ranked very low turn out, with new experimental data, to be much more likely true than the ones in the former high probability grouping. (Ex: the heliocentric theory. Evolution. Quantum decoherence - well, no, anyone with any common sense recognized the inherent rightness of that one immediately...)

Consider that every situation can be broken down to a binary choice

I suspect that this is true only of situations where you are faced with countably finite numbers of possible choices...

Regarding your "bi-lemma": It only works if you're reasonably confident of your ability to choose the option that best matches your desires. Some of us (me) often wind up like the famous donkey that starved to death because he was equidistant from two equally tasty-looking piles of hay.

This example was originally cooked up to prove that animals _aren't_ automata, because this would never happen to any _real_ donkey. Which however suggests to me that the real donkey is indeed the automaton, which evolution has thoughtfully provided with a nonalgorithmic solution to such situations - "pick one at random." Whereas we, nonautomata, can dither forever.

--Dan'l

"We're going to sit on Scorsese's head"
-- The Goodfeathers

Iorwerth Thomas — 09 Feb 2005, 07:23 · in reply to maru

From: maru <marudubshinki at gmail.com>

Consider that every situation can be broken down to a binary choice (you never are forced to take three-at-a-time; this is possible, there are several election procedures which would work under such circumstances.) Further consider that there is always a better choice, a choice that however infinitesimally better it might fulfill your desires, is none the less at least a little better than the other, so you always can choose if you think about it. Another way of putting it is you are never in a states of complete ignorance where you might as well flip a coin. Now, choices are always made according to desires, and expectations about those, whether those desires be apparently irrational or masochistic, they are desires nonetheless. So in all these situations you break down your choices to whatever of the two satisfies your desires best. Which means that your choice, to someone who knows you well enough (where 'well enough' ranges from a good friend, to requiring a vast scientific enterprise's knowledge), are predictable. Which means you are deterministic. But wait! What if you disagree? What if you think that we don't always follow what we see as in the best interests of our desires? Well then, that means some of the time you will be choosing against one's interests and desires, and by definition that's bad! So you are confronted with a di-lemma: Either you are a slave to your desires, and free will is an incoherent, but comforting illusion;

or you are doomed to unhappiness, when you 'freely' choose against what really matters to you, what makes you happy.
Nice dilemma eh?

Pretty good. Here's a possible counterexample (original to a Calvinist cognitive scientist by the name of Donald Mackie - or Mackay; I forget which
- via John Barrow's nice little book 'Impossibility').

Let's assume all of the above, plus the not unreasonable - given our present state of knowledge - that these desires correlate with brain states. Let's also (just for fun) assume that the laws of the universe are completely deterministic - no quantum mechanics - and reductionist - all is controlled by the laws of physics with no emergence. None of these additional assumptions appear to be necessary for this argument, they merely point out how strong it is.

In this hypothetical universe, I have indulged in a little black magic and conjured Laplace's Demon, the bodiless, omnescent intelligence which can predict the actions of everything in the universe. I have asked you what you wish to have for lunch tomorrow. I am told that you will, given your brain state now, have a cheese sandwich for lunch tomorrow.

Fine. If I wait and watch, I will see you eating a cheese sandwich tomorrow. But what if (loony sorcerer that I am) I tell you what you are going to have to eat tomorrow as soon as I acquire the information?

It transpires that I change your brain state from a) not knowing what I was going to eat tomorrow to b) knowing what I am going to eat tomorrow. This throws the prediction a little out of whack, so I rush back to my summoning circle and ask the Demon for a new prediction concerning your actions given your present brain state of b). Which he does.

Enthused, I run back to you and tell you what you are going to eat tomorrow and thus change your brain state to c) knowing what I'm going to eat tomorrow given I have brain state b). Which throws the prediction out of whack, so I run back to the Demon and.... etc.

I can't tell you what you're going to do (even if I have perfect knowledge of it) without no possibility of changing what you will do, which removes some of the sting from physical determinism. Replace 'brain states' with the 'my desires' and, assuming that you're responsive to the environment your desires might well change when you're told what you're going to do (particularly if you tend to desire the frustration of arrogant black magicians who wish to predict the future!).

There are almost certainly a lot of problems with this story, but I'm fond of it.

Iorwerth

Iorwerth Thomas — 09 Feb 2005, 07:31 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

From: Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com>

(Ex: How does gravitation work?

High probability: gravitation is mediated by a particle exchange.

Lower probability: exchange of massive, charged particles.

Still lower probability: exchange of protons.

Extremely low probability: exchange of gumballs.

Vanishingly small probability: massive particles yearn for each other.)

Bizarre historical aside: Many of Newton's contemporaries objected to his theory of gravitation because, to them, it smacked of the last answer in that list. Which wasn't really the case; it just sounded like that if you'd been trying to remove the last vestiges of alchemy from your scientific system (Isaac's fondness for attempting to find the philosopher's stone probably didn't help, I imagine).

Iorwerth

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 09 Feb 2005, 10:13 · in reply to Iorwerth Thomas

On Wed, 09 Feb 2005 15:30:46 +0000, Iorwerth Thomas
<iorweththomas at hotmail.com> wrote:
Vanishingly small probability: massive particles yearn for
each other.)

Bizarre historical aside: Many of Newton's contemporaries objected to his
theory of gravitation because, to them, it smacked of the last answer in
that list.

If I recall correctly (and it may be that I don't) even Newton shied away from it at first because it
smacked of - heck, at that point, it
was - "action at a distance."

-Dan'l

"We're going to sit on Scorsese's head"
-- The Goodfeathers

James Wynn — 09 Feb 2005, 16:21 · in reply to Iorwerth Thomas

From: maru
So you are confronted with a di-lemma: Either you are a slave
to your desires, and free will is an incoherent, but comforting illusion;
or you are doomed to unhappiness, when you 'freely' choose against what
really matters to you, what makes you happy.
Nice dilemma eh?

The thing that bothers me about this is that it clumps all desires into the same bin. It gathers
my (once a week or so) desire to run away from home leaving my wife and children to start a
new life where no one knows me with my "desire" to do what I am convinced I "ought" to
do--sometimes by reason, sometimes by instruction -- which is contrary to what I generally
think of as my "desires". This willy-nilly reductionism does not strike me as reasonable. (Of
course Hume apparently deals with choices, not desires - so this has nothing to do with his
theories).

Also, while this has nothing directly to do with the current discussion, it has brought to mind the
characters, John and Vertue in C.S. Lewis' allegory
Pilgrim's Regress. Both John and Vertue are traveling the same road together. John is seeking
an Island he saw in a vision where he desires to be with all his heart. Vertue traveling the road
because he wants to exert his free will, choosing without regard to "bribes" of happiness or
"threats" of consequences. The worthiness of a path in Mr. Vertue's mind is that it is the path he
has chosen on his own and not one chosen for him. Otherwise, he doesn't see any particular
value of one path over another. But Vertue, after discussion with a Nietzscheistic Nazi dwarf
named Savage, comes to an impasse where he cannot choose between two (moral) forks in the
road because he has no basis to pick between them:

"John, I do not know what is coming over me. Long ago you asked me...where I was going and

why: and I remember that I brushed the question aside. At that time it seemed to me so much more important to keep my rules and do my thirty miles a day. But I am beginning to find that it will not do. In the old days it was always a question of doing what I chose instead of what I wanted; but now I am beginning to be uncertain what it is I choose."

"How has this come about?" said John.

"Do you know that I nearly decided to stay with Savage?"

"With Savage?"

"It sounds like raving, but think it over. Supposing there is no Landlord, no mountains in the East, no Island in the West, nothing but this country. A few weeks ago I would have said that all those things made no difference. But now--I don't know. it is quite clear that all the ordinary ways of living in this country lead to something which I certainly do not choose....Then there is the life I have been leading myself-- marching on I don't know where. I can't see that there is any other good in it except the mere fact of imposing my will on my inclinations. And that seems to be good

training, but training for what? Suppose after all it was training for battle? Is it so absurd to think that that might be the thing we were born for? A fight in a narrow place, life or death; -- that must be the final act of will -- the conquest of the deepest inclination of all."

"I think my heart will break," said John after they had gone many paces in silence. "I came out to find my Island. I am not high-minded like you, Vertue: it was never anything but sweet desire that led me. I have not smelled the air from that Island since--since--it is so long that I cannot remember. I saw more of it at home. And now my only friend talks of selling himself to dwarfs."

"I am sorry for you," said Vertue, "and I am sorry for myself. I am sorry for every blade of grass and for this barren rock we are treading and the very sky above us. But I have no help to give you."

"Perhaps," said John, "there are [good and bad] things East and West of this country after all."

Don't you see?" he said. "Suppose there is anything East and West. How can that give me a motive for going on? That is a threat. I meant to be a free man. I meant to choose things because I chose to choose them -- not because I was paid for it. Do you think I am a child to be scared with rods and baited with sugar plums? It was for this reason that I never even inquired whether the stories about the Landlord were true; I saw that his castle and his black hole were there to corrupt my will and kill my freedom. If it was true it was a truth an honest man must not know."

Evening darkened on the tableland and they sat for a long time immovable.

"I believe that I am mad," said Vertue presently. "The world cannot be as it seems to me. If there is something to go to, it is a bribe, and I cannot go to it: if I can go, then there is nothing to go to."

"Vertue," said John, "give in. For once yield to desire. Have done with your choosing. Want something."

"I cannot," said Vertue. "I must choose because I choose because I choose; and it goes on forever, and in the whole world I cannot find a reason for rising from this stone."

"Is it not reason enough that the cold will presently kill us here?"

It had grown quite dark and Vertue made no reply.

"Vertue!" said John, and then suddenly again in a louder voice, frightened, "Vertue!" But there was no reply.

Based on Wolfe's major characters in the Sun cycle, and other novels, I suspect that he is very much compelled by Lewis' argument (he makes it elsewhere as well) that our truest desires were designed to lead us to the highest Good.

~ Crush

maru — 14 Feb 2005, 17:32 · in reply to James Wynn

James Wynn wrote:

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We cannot desire to be good, virtuous people, with all the concomitant restrictions that imposes?

~Maru

'That shalt have no desires above Virtue'
to mangle a quote.

maru — 14 Feb 2005, 17:32 · in reply to lorwerth Thomas

lorwerth Thomas wrote:

Pretty good. Here's a possible counterexample (original to a Calvinist cognitive scientist by the name of Donald Mackie - or Mackay; I forget which - via John Barrow's nice little book 'Impossibility').

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There are almost certainly a lot of problems with this story, but I'm fond of it.

Iorwerth

Laplace's demon is truly omniscience no?

Then he knows you are going to tell me, and has factored that in.

He will also know that you will ask for an updated prediction.

That too will be foreseen by his omniscience right?

Furthermore, he will see you scurrying back to tell me.

But, omniscient being he is, he can see how many times you will be able to upset the temporary equilibrium of my desires, and indeed, when I will begin to ignore you (or ask what you are smoking and how can I synthesize *suma* that?). That number being finite, he can easily work out what my final desires will be, and give the answer which will both start the sequence and end it. Even better, in a deterministic universe like this, to the Demon, the only unknown will be himself. So he can easily choose how he will perturb the universe, and make his predictions on that basis or self-fulfilling. If this is an argument, seems more like one against omniscience.

~Maru

maru — 14 Feb 2005, 17:32 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

Mmmm. Yes and no. Support, yes. Not proof ... except ... Well, there are real-world problems with limited domains, and in those domains, you can sometimes demonstrate that only a certain number of possible theories exist. But most such situations concern theories-about-fact rather than theories-about-general-principles.

(Ex: Three people are locked in a room. One is stabbed

to death - several wounds. There are only seven possible answers to the question "whodunit?")

Well, that's assuming quite a number of givens or axioms e.g. 'no one else coulda got in' 'people cannot commit suicide or help each other murder a person' 'stab wounds cannot magically or spontaneously appear- all stab wounds correspond with a stab and vice versa' etc.

But for more general (scientific) problems ... it seems to me that disconfirmation is the best we can hope for, because there are always more theories and, while we can generally rank them in loose probability-clusters,

(Ex: How does gravitation work?

High probability: gravitation is mediated by a particle exchange.

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(Ex: We will probably never test the gumball theory, nor the theory I've just invented, that gravitation is mediated by tiny alien elephants flying around in the noosphere, propagating morphogenic resonance and administering random rectal probes to isolated humans.)

But, alas, now and then theories that look like they should be ranked very low turn out, with new experimental data, to be much more likely true than the ones in the former high probability grouping. (Ex: the heliocentric theory. Evolution. Quantum decoherence - well, no, anyone with any common sense recognized the inherent rightness of that one immediately...)

Consider that every situation can be broken down to a binary choice

I suspect that this is true only of situations where you are faced with countably finite numbers of possible choices...

Sounds to me like someone has thought up a situations in which one is faced with transfinite choices

Wait, does that even make sense in our universe? ><

Regarding your "bi-lemma": It only works if you're reasonably confident of your ability to choose the option that best matches your desires. Some of us (me) often wind up like the famous donkey that starved to death because he was equidistant from two equally tasty-looking piles of hay.

This example was originally cooked up to prove that animals _aren't_ automata, because this would never happen to any _real_ donkey. Which however suggests to me that the real donkey is indeed the automaton, which evolution has thoughtfully provided with a nonalgorithmic solution to such situations - "pick one at random." Whereas we, nonautomata,

can dither forever.

--Dan'l

Or the odds are against a static enviroment *AND* static internal variables. Consider a donkey in such a dilemma sitting outside- a bird or human will eventually fly/walk by and startle the donkey, who will thereby find himself nearer one hay rather than the other. So he picks the easier nearer one. Problem solved. Or another similar scenario. I just don't think it is possible for a situation to occur in which anybody can dither forever, because of everyone else doing other things. But maybe a dead-lock breaker was built-in by evolution. Doesn't seem very likely tho'

~Maru

One more thing!

I was reading in my Star Wars collection t'other day, when, en route to Boba Fett's story in Tales from Jabba's Palace, to see whether I could place anymore of the anecdotes, an excruciating name caught my eye. It was remarkably similar to yours. A relation?

James Wynn — 14 Feb 2005, 18:26 · in reply to maru

We cannot desire to be good, virtous people, with all the concomitant restrictions that imposes?

Sure we can -- Jesus said we were "blessed" if we did -- but that desire strikes me as quite different from the desires to eat "whatever I like" (note that that idiom wasn't picked out the air) or otherwise "do what comes naturally". It is not fun. It does not feel good in the same way. It is not the pursuit of happiness by any direct route (who said happiness cannot be caught by those who pursue it?). The desire to be good is of a higher order. I do not think it is reasonable to toss it in the bin with those desires I have as "a brute beast", as the Apostle Paul put it.

~ Crush

maru — 14 Feb 2005, 19:09 · in reply to James Wynn

James Wynn wrote:

We cannot desire to be good, virtous people, with all the concomitant restrictions that imposes?

Sure we can -- Jesus said we were "blessed" if we did -- but that desire strikes me as quite different from the desires to eat "whatever I like" (note that that idiom wasn't picked out the air) or otherwise "do what comes naturally". It is not fun. It does not feel good in the same way. It is not the pursuit of happiness by any direct route (who said happiness cannot be caught by those who pursue it?). The desire to be good is of a higher order. I do not think it is reasonable to toss it in the bin with those desires I have as "a brute beast", as the Apostle Paul put it.

~ Crush

That is entirely your prerogative. Myself, I see people desiring to be happy. So, they act good so others do not harm them, so they can get things they want that less-deviuous maneuvering wouldn't get them, and in a religious context, to get to the infinite bliss of heaven. Perhaps this strikes you as entirely too cynical.

~Maru

Nathan Spears — 14 Feb 2005, 20:10 · in reply to maru

That is entirely your prerogative. Myself, I see people desiring to be happy. So, they act good so others do not harm them, so they can get things they want that less-devious maneuvering wouldn't get them, and in a religious context, to get to the infinite bliss of heaven. Perhaps this strikes you as entirely too cynical.

~Maru

As I've gotten older, I've noticed more and more that I read my own motivations into other people's actions. Not that I *do* it more and more, just that I've noticed how much I do it, because it's very difficult not to when you haven't been exposed to alternate motivations. Would it then be a mistake for me to read that reading of my own actions into your reading of other people's motivation for happiness?

Chris — 14 Feb 2005, 22:51 · in reply to maru

There is a problem with any example that drags in Laplace's demon (well, granted, he's meant to be problematic). Probably more than one. But working with what you've hinted at, start by asking if the demon is inside the universe or apart from it on some higher level? If the latter then either he's not available for your thought problem or your universe isn't deterministic, and if the former you run into the whole drawing-a-scale-map-of-the-universe deal.

Civet

"[W]hat everyone does not know, so that it counts as differential knowledge, that is a glorious thing to be concerned with. What everyone knows on the other hand, so that the difference is the trivial one of how it is known, that is a waste of effort to be concerned about - for one cannot possibly become self-important through knowing it."

Laplace's demon is truly omniscience no?

Then he knows you are going to tell me, and has factored that in.

He will also know that you will ask for an updated prediction.

That too will be foreseen by his omniscience right?

Furthermore, he will see you scurrying back to tell me.

But, omniscient being he is, he can see how many times you will be able to upset the temporary equilibrium of my desires, and indeed, when I will begin to ignore

you (or ask what you are smoking and how can I synthesize suma that?).

That number being finite, he can easily work out what my final desires will be, and give the answer

which will both start the sequence and end it.

Even better, in a deterministic universe like this, to the Demon, the only unknown will be himself.

So he can easily choose how he will perturb the universe, and make his predictions on that basis or self-fulfilling.

If this is an argument, seems more like one against omniscience.

~Maru

Chris — 14 Feb 2005, 22:53 · in reply to maru

Have you ever heard of a particular type of monkey trap? I have never heard anything but anecdotal evidence as to whether it really works.

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One more thing!

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It was remarkably similar to yours. A relation?

James Wynn — 15 Feb 2005, 07:54 · in reply to Chris

Or another similar scenario. I just don't think it is possible for a situation to occur in which anybody can dither forever, because of everyone else doing other things.
But maybe a dead-lock breaker was built-in by evolution. Doesn't seem very likely tho'

Have you ever heard of a particular type of monkey trap? I have never heard anything but anecdotal evidence as to whether it really works.

Put so fruit in a jar and tie the jar to a stake. The monkey grabs the fruit but cannot extract his hand while he holds it. He must drop the fruit to escape but he never does (at least for the ones that are caught). I've seen it work. I've even seen it work on a young chimpanzee.

It's not exactly dithering between two choices, however, is it? But I get your point that evolution does not provide a life-preserving automatic resolution to all choices.

~ Crush

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 15 Feb 2005, 09:29 · in reply to maru

(Ex: Three people are locked in a room. One is stabbed to death - several wounds. There are only seven possible answers to the question "whodunit?")

Well, that's assuming quite a number of givens or axioms e.g. 'no one else coulda got in' 'people cannot commit suicide or help each other murder a person' 'stab wounds cannot magically or spontaneously appear- all stab wounds correspond with a stab and vice versa' etc.

I did include suicide as one of my seven options, as well as suicide assisted by one or both of the other two. To be precise, my seven possible answers to "whodunit" were:

1. Suicide by V
2. Murder by A
3. Murder by B
4. A+V
5. A+B
6. B+V
7. A+B+V

I admit that I am taking as axiomatic that being "stabbed to death" (the given condition was that V was in fact stabbed to death, not just that V is dead and there are stab wounds on the body) implies that someone did the stabbing, By "locked in a room" I intended (by the conventions of the locked room mystery) to make it axiomatic that nobody could get in or out during the period in which the stabbing took place.

I suspect that this is true only of situations where you are faced with countably finite numbers of possible choices...

Sounds to me like someone has thought up a situations in which one is faced with transfinite choices
Wait, does that even make sense in our universe?

H'mmm. Good question; assume that time and space are quantized and there's no situation I can think of in which we might have a _genuinely_ transfinite number of choices. However, we can have situations which are for all purposes nonfinite - like the "infinitely variable" speed control on a power drill, or the analog volume control on a tube-driven stereo receiver: it must have some quantized number of states, but those states are closer together than the limit of our ability to distinguish them, so they are indistinguishable from an uncountably infinite set to the limits of our perceptions.

One more thing!

I was reading in my Star Wars collection t'other day, when, en route to Boba Fett's story in Tales from Jabba's Palace, to see whether I could place anymore of the anecdotes, an excruciating name caught my eye. It was remarkably similar to yours. A relation?

The closest possible relation, me. What are you doing reading such trash?

--Dan'l

"We're going to sit on Scorsese's head"
-- The Goodfeathers

Andy Robertson — 15 Feb 2005, 12:39 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Good heavens!!!!

The closest possible relation, me.

maru — 15 Feb 2005, 12:50 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

One more thing!

I was reading in my Star Wars collection t'other day, when, en route to Boba Fett's story in Tales from Jabba's Palace, to see whether I could place anymore of the anecdotes, an excruciating name caught my eye. It was remarkably similar to yours. A relation?

The closest possible relation, me. What are you doing reading such trash?

--Dan'l

What are you doing writing such trash?

But seriously, when I was younger, I was very much into Star Wars, (having never got the appeal of Star Trek, nor was I exposed to D & D. So my geek creds are largely confined to that sector.) and bought most of the novels. When I stopped, around the lousy New Jedi Order releases, I had about 70, a pretty comprehensive collection. Now, recently, I got 'Zen Flesh, Zen Bones'. One of the stories in it was of a fellow dangling from a cliff, tigers above and below. The branch he is clinging to is slipping. Suddenly, he sees some strawberries and eats them. How sweet they taste, he thinks.

There is a story exactly analolgous to it in 'A Barve like that', the story I was looking for to verify the resemblance, when I stumbled on your name. And that's that.

~Maru

I never did figure out where the pig joke in that story came from though.

maru — 15 Feb 2005, 15:26 · in reply to Chris

The way I see it, he is outside your effective universe.

Your effective universe + Laplace's Demon & his abode = Real Universe Now, the Demon can predict the effective universe, because he is omniscient, and we've carefully specified that it is completely deterministic, the only possible perturbing factor is the self-same Demons deeds. However, even if omniscience didn't suffice for the Demon to know what he will do, and what effects that will have, he knows himself! He knows what he wants or will do, and so can factor himself in, and get a final equation to solve, if you will. The problem is how to give data which will have a null effect, or will be self-similar/self-fulfilling.

An entirely different problem from free will.

~Maru

The lesson I draw is that omniscience is impossible.

Chris wrote:

There is a problem with any example that drags in Laplace's demon (well, granted, he's meant to be problematic). Probably more than one. But working with what you've hinted at, start by asking if the demon is inside the universe or apart from it on some higher level? If the latter then either he's not available for your thought problem or your universe isn't deterministic, and if the former you run into the whole drawing-a-scale-map-of-the-universe deal.

Civet

--

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He will also know that you will ask for an updated prediction.
That too will be foreseen by his omniscience right?
Furthermore, he will see you scurrying back to tell me.
But, omniscient being he is, he can see how many times you will be able to
upset the temporary equilibrium of my desires, and indeed, when I will begin to ignore
you (or ask what you are smoking and how can I synthesize suma that?).
That number being finite, he can easily work out what my final desires will be, and give the answer
which will both start the sequence and end it.
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or self-fulfilling.
If this is an argument, seems more like one against omniscience.

~Maru

Chris — 15 Feb 2005, 17:30 · in reply to maru

Even if you carefully specify that it's completely deterministic, the "careless" aspect stipulates just as firmly that it can't be deterministic. Because the demon is outside the system, he can't interact with it if it's a closed system. If he can interact with it, then you have influences outside the universe affecting causality within the universe, and it's not deterministic.

If you extend your system to include the demon's interaction, then you've effectively placed the demon inside the horizon of your system/universe, and thus you get the other problem.

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Your effective universe + Laplace's Demon & his abode = Real Universe
Now, the Demon can predict the effective universe, because he is omniscient, and we've carefully specified that it is completely deterministic, the only possible perturbing factor is the self-same Demons deeds.
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~Maru

maru — 15 Feb 2005, 19:13 · in reply to Nathan Spears

Nathan Spears wrote:

That is entirely your prerogative. Myself, I see people desiring to be happy. So, they act good so others do not harm them, so they can get things they want that less-devious maneuvering wouldn't get them, and in a religious context, to get to the infinite bliss of heaven. Perhaps this strikes you as entirely too cynical.

~Maru

As I've gotten older, I've noticed more and more that I read my own motivations into other people's actions. Not that I *do* it more and more, just that I've noticed how much I do it, because it's very difficult not to when you haven't been exposed to alternate motivations. Would it then be a mistake for me to read that reading of my own actions into your reading of other people's motivation for happiness?

Not at all.

I've long been convinced that my (and everyone's really. They might not go about it very competently, but it seems universal to me) chief desire was to be happy, and all my desires should be subordinated to that goal. Thus far, what seems to satisfy my desires, and also bring me happiness is knowledge, and games & computers, and good literature like Wolfe's. And

good oolong tea, but that is just me :)

~Maru

I am curious what other motivations for happiness there could be, since my own formulation is undoubtedly marred by observer-bias.

Iorwerth Thomas — 16 Feb 2005, 06:21 · in reply to maru

From: maru <marudubshinki at gmail.com>

Not at all. I've long been convinced that my (and everyone's really. They might not go about it very competently, but it seems universal to me) chief desire was to be happy, and all my desires should be subordinated to that goal.

Thus far, what seems to satisfy my desires, and also bring me happiness is knowledge, and games & computers, and good literature like Wolfe's. And good oolong tea, but that is just me :)

Aristotle appears to have started his ethics along similar lines, but his definition of happiness winds up pretty different from the common-or-garden definition. And he'd agree with you on the value of knowledge :)

(<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/> if you really care about how this approach has been recently developed; it's one of the less dry entries. The bit on whether virtue is sufficient or necessary for eudaimonia [flourishing] has some relevance to what I'm about to say.)

'Happiness' in the common sense might have problems being defined as the aim of a prisoner of conscience in a Third-World country who refuses to back down on his or her beliefs in full knowledge of the consequences; while such a person might be described as 'morally fulfilled' - and may even feel so, on occasion - describing someone who is being frequently beaten, in solitary confinement, and/or tortured as 'happy' does feel like an abuse of the term, I'm afraid. Though I may be misunderstanding your intent. (Which is something I'm good at doing, so please forgive me if I have!)

Iorwerth

Iorwerth Thomas — 16 Feb 2005, 07:33 · in reply to maru

I'm going to backtrack a bit on this discussion; I've been a bit out the loop due to a horrible flu/cough thing that had me running a high fever until yesterday...

From: maru <marudubshinki at gmail.com>

Laplace's demon is truly omniscience no?

Only in the sense that if you give him deterministic physical laws and some initial conditions, he can calculate everything that follows from them with arbitrary accuracy.

Then he knows you are going to tell me, and has factored that in.

He will also know that you will ask for an updated prediction.

That too will be foreseen by his omniscience right?

Furthermore, he will see you scurrying back to tell me.

But, omniscient being he is, he can see how many times you will be able to upset the temporary equilibrium of my desires, and indeed, when I will begin to ignore

you (or ask what you are smoking and how can I synthesize sumatra that?).

That number being finite, he can easily work out what my final desires will be, and give the answer which will both start the sequence and end it. Even better, in a deterministic universe like this, to the Demon, the only unknown will be himself. So he can easily choose how he will perturb the universe, and make his predictions on that basis or self-fulfilling.

Ummm. I think I may have botched my presentation of the argument. You are quite right. _But_, the issue isn't what the demon knows, it's what _you_, as the person who has just been given the prediction, are correct in believing; the implication being that there's no determinate plan of your future actions that you'd be correct in believing if only you knew it. Thus, even if your actions are in some sense determined by the laws of physics, this isn't quite the same as metaphysical determinism, where you'd expect there to be a determinate plan of your future actions that would remain correct if you knew it. I think.

I think I've fatally flawed the whole thing by bringing in the demon, though [1]. Originally, it was a large computer, and the result was then generalised by replacing the computer with God in an attempt to short-circuit the free-will vs. predestination debate. Barrow's book gives a better explanation (mostly by quoting Mackay/Mackie).

There may be a small scale analogy of this kind of thing with psychology experiments - I imagine that if you're trying to repeat an experiment and some of the group are aware of the original results it skews things somewhat.

Maybe someone who knows more than me can confirm/deny this.

Iorwerth

[1] It's due to an idea for a 'Black Easter' - style short story I keep thinking of writing, hampered mostly by my lack of talent, time and the unfortunate fact that I've never read 'Black Easter'.

Nathan Spears — 16 Feb 2005, 07:34 · in reply to Iorwerth Thomas

I would say that defining happiness as the pursuit of one's desires is semantically empty, because one can always say, "Of course you're pursuing that which you desire; how else can one act?" Talking about lower desire and higher, base and meta-, will not help avoid this silliness.

In discussions like this I think it would be good to limit our use of the word 'happiness' to that feeling which ranges from emotional euphoria to contentment, which is hard to define but everyone understands: that which is generally meant when people say, "I'm feeling happy."

I can't think of a word that encompasses the state of mind Iorwerth alluded to, of moral fulfillment, when someone is caused pain and suffering because they refuse to compromise themselves. "Morally fulfilled" doesn't seem to describe their mental state in the same way that "happiness" describes someone who is having fun or feeling loved or what have you. Perhaps the word to use, which is difficult to bring up without all kinds of negative connotations in this age, is "righteous." It seems like a condescending jibe to say that someone "feels righteous," but if you can't feel consolation in the fact that you are doing (what you believe is) the right thing even as you die for it, then when is a good time?

Not at all. I've long been convinced that my (and everyone's really. They might not go about it very competently, but it seems universal to me) chief desire was to be

happy, and all
my desires should be subordinated to that goal.

That's why I think this statement is confusing. I don't know whether by "happy" you mean, "sensationally elated," or "loved," or "righteous," or whatever other zillion things. In (the semantically empty) one sense all your desires *must* be subordinated to your desire to be happy; say rather that they *are*. In the case of "sensorial satisfaction as happiness," then you aren't elevating yourself much above animals. I don't think that's what you are saying, but my point is that it's very difficult to know what you are saying.

Thus far, what seems to satisfy my desires, and also bring me happiness is
knowledge,
and games & computers, and good literature like Wolfe's. And good oolong
tea, but that is just me :)

This is a start, but it's more testimonial than anything else. You haven't said why these things make you happy.

I think Wolfe takes aim at this question in The Wizard Knight; it seems that people of worth in his tale are people concerned with "right doing," and not with pursuit of happiness as defined above. I think Wolfe was saying that many times the best way to know how to act rightly (which is to say, more like a knight; I think it was obvious that everyone is called to knighthood) is to act like someone you know is a knight, or is more knightly than you are. So Able acts like Ravd until he is more a knight than Ravd was. Then his model becomes The Valfather's son. The point I think Wolfe was trying to make is that (even in a world of seven tiers with gods and more gods) eventually we are trying to become like The Most High God, but He is so far above us that it can be hard to know what He would do. Wolfe makes this point also in the parable of the angel and the rooster in BotNS.

I'm not trying to say that becoming like the Most High God doesn't involve knowledge, and games and computers, and good oolong tea, and all sorts of other things that make us happy. Sometimes, though, as The Knight illustrates, it involves less immediately (or never) pleasing activities.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 16 Feb 2005, 10:13 · in reply to Iorwerth Thomas

[T]he issue isn't what the demon knows, it's what _you_,
as the person who has just been given the prediction, are correct in
believing; the implication being that there's no determinate plan of your
future actions that you'd be correct in believing if only you knew it.

If I were given a determinate plan of my future actions, the first thing on the list would be "burn this document." And I would.

Obviously, a lot of this kind of speculation is reflected in myths and stories about the working-out of prophecies by those who try to avoid them (Oedipus, the Appointment in Samarra, etc.) - a great deal of effort has been gone to over the ages to show that predestination and free will are not inherently incompatible concepts.

Thus, even if your actions are in some sense determined by the laws
of physics, this isn't quite the same as metaphysical determinism,
where you'd expect there to be a determinate plan of your future
actions that would remain correct if you knew it. I think.

I guess the question is whether the plan takes into account your knowledge of the plan.

Suppose I have been given such a plan and, foolishly, read the first page of it. I would

immediately be tempted to do something other than the first thing it said. If I then returned to the plan, would it say, "Reading the above, he decides to do something else?" Would it have changed to show what I actually did do? Or would it now be an utterly inaccurate plan? Might it self-destruct?

I agree with what I take to be the point - a detailed foreknowledge of one's own actions can be self-defeating.

[1] It's due to an idea for a 'Black Easter' - style short story I keep thinking of writing, hampered mostly by my lack of talent, time and the unfortunate fact that I've never read 'Black Easter'.

You really should, but preferably in context - if you don't know (and I am not assuming you don't, just not assuming you _do_ either), it's part of the second volume of a trilogy - a _true_ trilogy, three thematically linked novels, rather than a three-novel series or a three-volume novels. The theme is the permissibility of secular knowledge in the context of the Christian faith. The novels are

1. _Doctor Mirabilis_ - realistic/historical.
2. _Black Easter_ and _The Day After Judgement_ - contemporary dark fantasies, sometimes published in one volume as _The Devil's Day_.
3. _A Case of Conscience_ - future SF.

--Dan'I

"We're going to sit on Scorsese's head"
-- The Goodfeathers

Iorwerth Thomas — 17 Feb 2005, 07:30 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

From: Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com>

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3. _A Case of Conscience_ - future SF.

I'm afraid that's why I haven't read it yet; at present, I think only 'A Case of Conscience' is actually in print in the UK; I did look quickly on Amazon a few weeks ago and found a compilation of all 3 novels going for something like £150, which is a little beyond my finances. I refuse to read any of them if I can't get hold of all of them, which is probably slightly silly of me.

Iorwerth

Andy Robertson — 17 Feb 2005, 07:48 · in reply to Iorwerth Thomas

Iorwerth Thomas writes:

From: Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com>

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Iorwerth

Amazon.com has them all . . . ?????

Iorwerth Thomas — 17 Feb 2005, 07:50 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

From: Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com>

I guess the question is whether the plan takes into account your knowledge of the plan.

Suppose I have been given such a plan and, foolishly, read the first page of it. I would immediately be tempted to do something other than the first thing it said. If I then returned to the plan, would it say, "Reading the above, he decides to do something else?" Would it have changed to show what I actually did do? Or would it now be an utterly inaccurate plan? Might it self-destruct?

I just remembered - my great disappointment with the film of 'The Minority Report' was that it replaced a philosophical teaser of this kind with a bog standard Hollywood conspiracy and 'free will exists if I make enough stirring speeches about it' type plot. In Dick's original story, the precogs in fact view three different futures - the first being where the protagonist commits murder, the second being where he doesn't commit the murder as a result (in part) of believing the first prediction, and the last being where he commits the murder as a result (in part) of believing the second prediction. Since he chooses to believe the minority report (that he won't commit murder), he winds up doing so.

This was probably considered a little tricky for cinema audiences to understand. And would probably have caused Germaine Grier (who seems to have problems with suspension of disbelief) even more problems with the film than she already had [1] when she was on the reviewing panel of 'Newsnight Review'.

Not a bad film, though.

Iorwerth

[1] They could be summed up as: 'I can't see how precognition could happen, therefore it's impossible, therefore this film is nonsense, as it confuses me. Surely representations of philosophical problems must be literally possible in order to be worthwhile, or I won't be able to understand them.' But I'm being a little cruel, particularly as she's always a good laugh when

she's on the panel unless you're talking sf or fantasy - then she's just painful. The general views of the panel regarding the film were largely positive, if I recall correctly.

Iorwerth Thomas — 17 Feb 2005, 09:18 · in reply to Andy Robertson

From: "Andy Robertson" <andywrobertson at clara.co.uk>

Amazon.com has them all . . . ?????

Yeah, I did a check right now and it does - the compilation is even going for £20; I'm feeling a little silly. In my defense, the previous check was done when it was late and I was tired... (Ah, the most universal of excuses...)

Iorwerth

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 17 Feb 2005, 10:23 · in reply to Iorwerth Thomas

H'mmmm. I rather liked the "Minority Report" film, actually ... I learned long ago that a film isn't a book, and judged by the standards of film, that was a pretty good one. Not up to "Blade Runner," but good.

Of course, in a perfectly Phildickian manner, the best film based on a Phil Dick book is based on one that he never actually wrote, by which I mean, "Being John Malkovich"

--Dan'I

"We're going to sit on Scorsese's head"

-- The Goodfeathers

maru — 17 Feb 2005, 20:29 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Seems fairly foolish: such a document could save you tremendous amounts of trouble. Instance: what if you read that you were going to spend 30 years bouncing around as a penniless bum, deperately unhappy, ill with all sorts of nasty diseases, when, due to sheer chance, you discover that it was your reason on Earth, your raison d'etre, to become an ink artist. And then it says you are slated to die of a heart breaking from joy, which only happened because in your 30 years on the street you had to eat a lot of McDonalds.

Wouldn't a youthful version of you want to skip the hellish 30 years and maybe make something of yourself as an artist before you die?

~Maru

As a rule, I always obey instructions from future versions of me.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

[T]he issue isn't what the demon knows, it's what _you_, as the person who has just been given the prediction, are correct in believing; the implication being that there's no determinate plan of your future actions that you'd be correct in believing if only you knew it.

If I were given a determinate plan of my future actions, the first thing on the list would be "burn this document." And I would.

Obviously, a lot of this kind of speculation is reflected in myths and stories about the working-out of prophecies by those who try to avoid them (Oedipus, the Appointment in Samarra, etc.) - a great deal of effort has been gone to over the ages to show that predestination and free will are not inherently

incompatible concepts.

maru — 17 Feb 2005, 20:29 · in reply to lorwerth Thomas

Hmm.

I'd think there would be some plans that would be correct irregardless of who knew it. What about someone (hypothetically speaking) who didn't mind being predicted, and the prediction (which we will assume is optimum for him) is optimum from vis POV as well. They have no incentive to outdate it by doing something else, in fact, might even work harder to make sure they do what they woulda done anyway. Put that way and it sounds silly, but so much does.

And psychology experiments are an intersting field of ethics: if people know they are being tested on how compassionate they are, or how gullible, or how sheep-like, that would throw off results. Often experiments are fraught with ethical peril, like ones about persauding people against their will, or maybe the infamous Stanford prisoner experiments.

Incidentally, this whole tangent about predictions reminds me ineluctably of the 'Dune' series. I never did figure oput what frank Herbert was saying about predestination and free will in those works.

~Maru

Infinite monkeys would type out this conversation, as well as the unanswerable rebuttals to both our arguments.

lorwerth Thomas wrote:

....

Ummm. I think I may have botched my presentation of the argument. You are quite right. _But_, the issue isn't what the demon knows, it's what _you_, as the person who has just been given the prediction, are correct in believing; the implication being that there's no determinate plan of your future actions that you'd be correct in believing if only you knew it. Thus, even if your actions are in some sense determined by the laws of physics, this isn't quite the same as metaphysical determinism, where you'd expect there to be a determinate plan of your future actions that would remain correct if you knew it. I think.

I think I've fatally flawed the whole thing by bringing in the demon, though [1]. Originally, it was a large computer, and the result was then generalised by replacing the computer with God in an attempt to short-circuit the free-will vs. predestination debate. Barrow's book gives a better explanation (mostly by quoting Mackay/Mackie).

There may a small scale analogy of this knd of thing with psychology experiments - I imagine that if you're trying to repeat an experiment and some of the group are aware of the original results it skews thing somewhat. Maybe someone who knows more than me can confirm/deny this.

lorwerth

[1] It's due to an idea for a 'Black Easter' - style short story I keep thinking of writing, hampered mostly by my lack of talent, time and the unfortunate fact that I've never read 'Black Easter'.

James Wynn — 18 Feb 2005, 05:45 · in reply to maru

Seems fairly foolish: such a document could save you tremendous amounts of trouble.

Instance: what if you read that you were going to spend 30 years bouncing around as a penniless bum, ... you discover that it was your reason on Earth, your *raison d'être*, to become an ink artist. And then it says you are slated to die of a heart breaking from...eat a lot of McDonalds.

Wouldn't a youthful version of you want to skip the hellish 30 years and maybe make something of yourself as an artist before you die?

Having watched plenty of Star Trek episodes, watched the movie "Twelve Monkeys", and read the story of Cassandra, I know that if such a document were authentic, it would end up that way whether one read it or not.

~ Crush

Iorwerth Thomas — 18 Feb 2005, 09:03 · in reply to maru

From: maru <marudubshinki at gmail.com>

Hmm.

I'd think there would be some plans that would be correct irregardless of who knew it.

What about someone (hypothetically speaking) who didn't mind being predicted, and the prediction (which we will assume is optimum for him) is optimum from vis POV as well. They have no incentive to outdate it by doing something else, in fact, might even work harder to make sure they do what they woulda done anyway. Put that way and it sounds silly, but so much does.

Hmm. If my choice is between eating a cheese sandwich or being eaten by a crocodile, the chances are that I'll choose the former, however, in order to confirm that for sure after having seen a prediction (as my mind could now change at the last minute since my brain state has been peturbed [1]), you'd have to make a new prediction. Which you can't show me. I'm starting to think that we're moving in ever decreasing circles here... One of those wonderful philosophical impasse things...

[1] It doesn't have to be a likely possibility that, in a moment of pretentious angst, I suddenly decide on the existentially fulfilling choice of suicide via crocodile over the hunger-satisfying cheese sandwich mandated by the conformist herd and leap headlong into the animal's jaws - just a logical one.

And psychology experiments are an intersting field of ethics: if people know they are being tested on how compassionate they are, or how gullible, or how sheep-like, that would throw off results. Often experiments are fraught with ethical peril, like ones about persaundering people against their will, or maybe the infamous Stanford prisoner experiments.

I think I recall an example of this. Either the BBC or Channel 4 (I forget which) here in the UK attempted to recreate the Stanford experiment. In scientific terms it was pretty worthless due to i) the ah, ethical limitations they had to impose on what could be done (just as well given what happened in the original; ii) the selection criteria for participants were less strict; iii) the de-facto head of the guards had read of the original experiment and expressed a sincere desire not to be caught torturing people on tv.

As it was, this time round the prisoners won out, and adopted stereotyped revolutionary behaviour as a result of their dominance (as opposed to the previous experiment, where the guards adopted stereotyped totalitarian behaviour as a result of their dominance). But it's a bad experiment, because of points i) to iii).

Infinite monkeys would type out this conversation, as well as the unanswerable rebuttals to both >our arguments.

Yep.

Incidentally, this whole tangent about predictions reminds me ineluctably of the 'Dune' series.

I never did figure out what Frank Herbert was saying about predestination and free will in those works.

You don't have free will unless you're part of Leto's breeding program? :)

lorwerth

maru — 18 Feb 2005, 10:25 · in reply to lorwerth Thomas

lorwerth Thomas wrote:

Infinite monkeys would type out this conversation, as well as the unanswerable rebuttals to both >our arguments.

Yep.

Incidentally, this whole tangent about predictions reminds me ineluctably of the 'Dune' series.

I never did figure out what Frank Herbert was saying about predestination and free will in those works.

You don't have free will unless you're part of Leto's breeding program? :)

lorwerth

Maybe only if you were a descendant of Siona?

~Maru

I dumped too much cinnamon on my morning toast!

Now I will be locked by prescient vision into one universe fore'er!

Chris — 18 Feb 2005, 11:05 · in reply to James Wynn

You also have to watch out for time-traveling Nigerian con-artists. "Your future self says that if you get a letter from the daughter of the Minister of Finance on a certain day, you should give her your bank information so that you can become wealthy beyond belief."

Actually when you think about it, the ability to travel in time or predict the future accurately makes pretty much all problems so trivial that pretty soon boredom would set in and there would be nothing left to do but mess with people. Give them a few predictions to prove you know what you're talking about, and then mess with their heads. Given enough time almost

anyone might succumb.

So, moral of this story, never trust anyone who knows the future, even if it's a future version of yourself. (Screwing with past versions of yourself would be the ultimate pastime to put a little danger into your life). Chances are they're a real jerk.

Having watched plenty of Star Trek episodes, watched the movie "Twelve Monkeys", and read the story of Cassandra, I know that if such a document were authentic, it would end up that way whether one read it or not.

~ Crush

maru — 18 Feb 2005, 11:15 · in reply to Chris

I'd dispute the bit about boredom: if you are really messing with the past, then you are changing your future drastically (I will assume here that we are dealing with multi-verse interpretations of timetravel. Single universe time travel involves too many paradoxes.). You'd be hopping though many universes. I fail to see how on earth you could possibly get bored.

~Maru

Chris wrote:

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So, moral of this story, never trust anyone who knows the future, even if it's a future version of yourself. (Screwing with past versions of yourself would be the ultimate pastime to put a little danger into your life). Chances are they're a real jerk.

maru — 20 Feb 2005, 21:05 · in reply to Nathan Spears

Ah! Finally, someone wonders whether I was playing word-games. The answer is: I don't think so.

It is circular to define happiness as sating of desires, and desires as things whose sating leads to happiness, but the redefining does have some benefit.

I think of it like this: We all start seeking some state labelled 'happiness'. We aren't sure what it is, but it is what we are hard-wired to seek. It is the axiom to our logic, the supergoal to our goalseeking behaviour (from an evolutionary perspective, its a positive feedback cycle which causes us to do all the many things required to reproduce and survive, in that order). Occaisionally we stumble on actions which bring us a little closer to that, and we remember and do them again. But of course, we are not islands, and so the happiness of others has direct impacts on our own unhappiness. Do well-adjusted people molest and bully others? The happiness of others becomes necessary to our own, and we will even sacrifice some guaranteed

happiness of our own to increase the happiness of the population (leaving out of course, such explanations as reciprocation, rational selfishness, increased reproductive fitness, memetic drives etc.) And eventually, we even juggle desires, suppressing desires and inducing local minima so as to maximize long run happiness.

And even the best medicine can taste nasty. Exercise is unpleasant but we are happier to be fit than not.

One more thing: I just realized that the Norse conception of worlds involved my favorite number, 9, but Wolfe's involve's 7, which is strewn throughout the Bible. Interesting.

~Maru

\$fortune: Your analyst has you mixed up with another patient. Don't believe a thing he tells you.

that defining happiness as the pursuit of one's desires is semantically empty, because one can always say, "Of course you're pursuing that which you desire; how else can one act?" Talking about lower desire and higher, base and meta-, will not help avoid this silliness.

In discussions like this I think it would be good to limit our use of the word 'happiness' to that feeling which ranges from emotional euphoria to contentment, which is hard to define but everyone understands: that which is generally meant when people say, "I'm feeling happy."

I can't think of a word that encompasses the state of mind lowerth alluded to, of moral fulfillment, when someone is caused pain and suffering because they refuse to compromise themselves. "Morally fulfilled" doesn't seem to describe their mental state in the same way that "happiness" describes someone who is having fun or feeling loved or what have you. Perhaps the word to use, which is difficult to bring up without all kinds of negative connotations in this age, is "righteous." It seems like a condescending jibe to say that someone "feels righteous," but if you can't feel consolation in the fact that you are doing (what you believe is) the right thing even as you die for it, then when is a good time?

Not at all. I've long been convinced that my (and everyone's really. They might not go about it very competently, but it seems universal to me) chief desire was to be happy, and all my desires should be subordinated to that goal.

That's why I think this statement is confusing. I don't know whether by "happy" you mean, "sensationally elated," or "loved," or "righteous," or whatever other zillion things. In (the semantically empty) one sense all your desires *must* be subordinated to your desire to be happy; say rather that they *are*. In the case of "sensorial satisfaction as happiness," then you aren't elevating yourself much above animals. I don't think that's what you are saying, but my point is that it's very difficult to know what you are saying.

Thus far, what seems to satisfy my desires, and also bring me happiness is knowledge, and games & computers, and good literature like Wolfe's. And good oolong tea, but that is just me :)

This is a start, but it's more testimonial than anything else. You haven't said why these things make you happy.

I think Wolfe takes aim at this question in *The Wizard Knight*; it seems that people of worth in his tale are people concerned with "right doing," and not with pursuit

of happiness as defined above. I think Wolfe was saying that many times the best way to know how to act rightly (which is to say, more like a knight; I think it was obvious that everyone is called to knighthood) is to act like someone you know is a knight, or is more knightly than you are. So Able acts like Ravd until he is more a knight than Ravd was. Then his model becomes The Valfather's son. The point I think Wolfe was trying to make is that (even in a world of seven tiers with gods and more gods) eventually we are trying to become like The Most High God, but He is so far above us that it can be hard to know what He would do. Wolfe makes this point also in the parable of the angel and the rooster in BotNS.

I'm not trying to say that becoming like the Most High God doesn't involve knowledge, and games and computers, and good oolong tea, and all sorts of other things that make us happy. Sometimes, though, as The Knight illustrates, it involves less immediately (or never) pleasing activities.

maru — 20 Feb 2005, 21:05 · in reply to lorwerth Thomas

That is interesting; I remember you bringing up virtue ethics earlier, in a more alien context. It seems to fit;) I can't say I really like that philosophy: it seems to boil down to selfishness, and I've always been more of a greater good -guy. I know a few people who can't be really happy while anyone around them is unhappy. Could that be a less-extreme example of what your dissident is doing? More religiously, that seems very much like the bodhisattva idea, but if that's a bad connection, a misreading of intent, please tell me.

~Maru

Your fortune is: I don't know half of you half as well as I should like; and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve.

-- J. R. R. Tolkien

lorwerth Thomas wrote:

Aristotle appears to have started his ethics along similar lines, but his definition of happiness winds up pretty different from the common-or-garden definition. And he'd agree with you on the value of knowledge :)

(<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/> if you really care about how this approach has been recently developed; it's one of the less dry entries. The bit on whether virtue is sufficient or necessary for eudaemonia [flourishing] has some relevance to what I'm about to say.)

'Happiness' in the common sense might have problems being defined as the aim of a prisoner of conscience in a Third-World country who refuses to back down on his or her beliefs in full knowledge of the consequences; while such a person might be described as 'morally fulfilled' - and may even feel so, on occasion - describing someone who is being frequently beaten, in solitary confinement, and/or tortured as 'happy' does feel like an abuse of the term, I'm afraid. Though I may be misunderstanding your intent. (Which is something I'm good at doing, so please forgive me if I have!)

lorwerth

maru — 20 Feb 2005, 21:05 · in reply to Chris

I'm afraid I'm simply not following you here: what do you mean by 'careless'?

Chris wrote:

Even if you carefully specify that it's completely deterministic, the "careless" aspect stipulates just as firmly that it can't be deterministic. Because the demon is outside the system, he can't interact with it if it's a closed system. If he can interact with it, then you have influences outside the universe affecting causality within the universe, and it's not deterministic.

If you extend your system to include the demon's interaction, then you've effectively placed the demon inside the horizon of your system/universe, and thus you get the other problem.

The way I see it, he is outside your effective universe.

Your effective universe + Laplace's Demon & his abode = Real Universe

Now, the Demon can predict the effective universe, because he is omniscient, and we've

carefully specified that it is completely deterministic, the only possible perturbing

factor is the self-same Demons deeds.

However, even if omniscience didn't suffice for the Demon to know what he will do, and

what effects that will have, he knows himself! He knows what he wants or will do, and so

can factor himself in, and get a final equation to solve, if you will.

The problem is how to give data which will have a null effect, or will be self-similar/self-fulfilling.

An entirely different problem from free will.

~Maru

The lesson I draw is that omniscience is impossible.

Chris wrote:

There is a problem with any example that drags in Laplace's demon (well, granted, he's meant to be problematic). Probably more than one. But working with what you've hinted at, start by asking if the demon is inside the universe or apart from it on some higher level? If the latter then either he's not available for your thought problem or your universe isn't deterministic, and if the former you run into the whole drawing-a-scale-map-of-the-universe deal.

Civet

--

"[W]hat everyone does not know, so that it counts as differential knowledge, that is a glorious thing to be concerned with. What everyone knows on the other hand, so that the difference is the trivial one of how it is known, that is a waste of effort to be concerned about - for one cannot possibly become self-important through knowing it."

Laplace's demon is truly omniscience no?

Then he knows you are going to tell me, and has factored that in.

He will also know that you will ask for an updated prediction.

That too will be foreseen by his omniscience right?

Furthermore, he will see you scurrying back to tell me.

But, omniscient being he is, he can see how many times you will be able to

upset the temporary equilibrium of my desires, and indeed, when I

will begin to ignore
you (or ask what you are smoking and how can I synthesize suma that?).
That number being finite, he can easily work out what my final
desires will be, and give the answer
which will both start the sequence and end it.
Even better, in a deterministic universe like this, to the Demon,
the only unknown will be himself.
So he can easily choose how he will perturb the universe, and make
his predictions on that basis
or self-fulfilling.
If this is an argument, seems more like one against omniscience.

~Maru

James Wynn — 21 Feb 2005, 04:06 · in reply to maru

Ah! Finally, someone wonders whether I was playing word-games.
The answer is: I don't think so.
[...]
Do well-adjusted people molest and bully others?

What is your definition of "well-adjusted"? The word implies an objective goal to which one would "adjust". Depending on one's criteria, a well-adjusted person might bully and molest. Saddam seems to have adjusted Uday and Qusay to do that.

It is difficult for me to see how the happiness of tsunami victims on the other side of the planet sharing few of my genes would affect my happiness in an evolutionary sense.

~ Crush

Iorwerth Thomas — 21 Feb 2005, 05:00 · in reply to maru

From: maru <marudubshinki at gmail.com>

That is interesting; I remember you bringing up virtue ethics earlier, in a more alien context. It seems to fit;)
I can't say I really like that philosophy: it seems to boil down to selfishness, and I've always been more of a greater good -guy.

Well - yes and no. It does seem very hard - to me, at least - to talk about 'good' and 'bad' without at least at some point talking about what's good and bad for a particular organism. Hence empathy is a virtue because possession of it to a certain degree (but not so much that it paralyses you) is 'good' for a member of a social species. Is that selfish? Hard to say: if I'm generous, I'm generous because I'm generous, not because of how it contributes to my good or anyone else's. Learning to be generous, on the other hand, is probably motivated by that kind of consideration, but I'm not sure if there's any ethical system that's immune from some sort of consideration (except extreme moral non-naturalism, and that has its own problems [1]) of that kind. 'So, Mr. Kant, why exactly are we motivated to follow the categorical imperative?'

[1] Though I'm sympathetic towards it.

I know a few people who can't be really happy while anyone around them is unhappy. Could that be a less-extreme example of what your dissident is doing? More religiously, that seems very much like the bodhisattva idea, but if that's a bad connection, a misreading of intent, please tell me.

Not at all. In a related sense, it could be argued that a Christian is someone who is willing to go to Hell in order that no one has to. I can see where you're coming from, but I'm not sure happiness is the primary motivator (it's probably a motivation, but not the only one) in this case. But never having been in our dissident's situation - and I hope I never am - I can't say I know for sure (and even then, generalising from one case to all would perhaps be foolish). We may have to agree to disagree...

On second thoughts, if you're correct, I doubt anyone should have a problem with such a motivation, as it's quite clearly unselfish. Much ink has no doubt been spilled on such issues.

Iorwerth

Chris — 21 Feb 2005, 11:45 · in reply to maru

I mean that you unwittingly included factors (demon outside the universe with ability to interact with things inside the universe) that may not **say** in so many words that "the universe is not deterministic", but nonetheless logically entail that it **cannot be** deterministic. Left as is, the problem collapses to nonsense because by its definition it is, but cannot be, deterministic. Remedies (such as they are):

Drop the stipulation that the universe be deterministic. This would remove the demon's means of predicting the future, which is no good for the purposes of the thought problem.

Keep the demon outside the universe but close the system. Now the universe can be deterministic, the demon can predict things in it, but can no longer tell you about those predictions. This too is not useful for the thought problem.

The above two sort of reduce things to where no problem really exists any more. The third brings in a whole new problem:

Bring the demon inside the universe and close the system. Now he can make predictions, and tell them to you. But these predictions require a full knowledge of the state of the universe - which now includes himself. The demon must "know" the disposition of his own brain states - he must know the totality of what he knows. So for each item X in his knowledge, the fact that he knows X requires him to know (that he knows X), and this in turn requires him to know (that he knows (that he knows X)), and so on in an infinite regress. This isn't just a trivial abstraction. The problem is analogous to the problem I mentioned of making a precise map of the universe. If the map is inside the universe, then it must include itself, which must include itself, which must include itself.

[A curious aside... An abstract but almost entirely meaningless possible solution to the map problem is to simply call the universe a scale map of itself. This requires a somewhat... flexible... concept of "representation". If you were George Berkeley you might apply such a solution and say that the universe **is** the demon's mind. But such a demon would no longer be Laplace's, it would not be predicting anything, it would be making the future (and all of being) by thinking it. But in any event, this wanders just a bit off from the purpose of the thought problem.]

Civet

I'm afraid I'm simply not following you here: what do you mean by 'careless'?

Chris wrote:

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If you extend your system to include the demon's interaction, then you've effectively placed the demon inside the horizon of your system/universe, and thus you get the other problem.

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An entirely different problem from free will.

~Maru

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Civet

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upset the temporary equilibrium of my desires, and indeed, when I will begin to ignore

you (or ask what you are smoking and how can I synthesize suma that?).

That number being finite, he can easily work out what my final desires will be, and give the answer which will both start the sequence and end it. Even better, in a deterministic universe like this, to the Demon, the only unknown will be himself. So he can easily choose how he will perturb the universe, and make his predictions on that basis or self-fulfilling. If this is an argument, seems more like one against omniscience.

~Maru

James Wynn — 21 Feb 2005, 12:49 · in reply to Chris

I mean that you unwittingly included factors (demon outside the universe with ability to interact with things inside the universe) that may not **say** in so many words that "the universe is not deterministic", but nonetheless logically entail that it **cannot be** deterministic. Left as is, the problem collapses to nonsense because by its definition it is, but cannot be, deterministic.

Basically, it does not take into account an Einsteinian view of the universe in which time itself is dimension just like space. (and how could Laplace have known about that?)

If the demon is truly outside the universe, then he can see time from its start to its termination as easily as it can see all things operating within the universe. This means that the universe does not have to be deterministic for him to accurately predict the future: he has only to see what happened after the choices are made rather than "predicted" based on any particular "state" of the universe.

This is why I think the "computer" was a better idea than a demon sitting outside the universe. A conventional computer can (theoretically) be equipped with enough back-up monitoring measures to be reliably constantly aware of the "state" of its own processes because it is not as complex as a demon.

The primary point of a computer was merely that if you had all the information at your disposal you could predict any final result. But has not chaos theory suggested this is impossible? Hasn't it accepted that the interactions of 3 or 4 bodies on each other, let alone a cloud of bodies cannot be predicted for any ONE of those bodies -- that you can only predict the actions of the group?

Granted 3 or 4 asteroids orbiting each other do not have free will, but the computer thought-experiment presumes rational creatures ARE deterministic. It presumes that if you had a computer that had all the information on the universe's current state available to it, its predictions would be accurate. But what if it weren't? It might be free will or it might be a demon from outside the universe influencing bodies. So you could annex the demon into the universe (and all things influencing that demon in its own metaverse), but what if the computer's predictions were still inaccurate? This thought experiment doesn't suggest the outcome in any way.

Heck, if vibrating molecules are not deterministic, why should humans be? I have made random choices about big decisions in my life. Perhaps over time you can decide the odds of my

decision for a particular random choice and even the general flow my inclinations in my random choices over time, but I do not see how any computer could reliably determine my particular choices at any time, and so it will not know the state of the universe for future choices (ad infinitum).

~ Crush

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 21 Feb 2005, 15:22 · in reply to James Wynn

Well, the thing is, we seek what would make - no, make it singular:

I seek what would make me-as-I-am-now happy.

But, by the time I achieve it, I will no longer be as-I-am-now.

This has consequences.

For example: I know that I would be happy if I took certain chemicals. But that would be me-as-I-would-be-if-I-took-them, and me-as-I-am-now would not be happy in the semi-mindless state those chemicals would induce, so I do not take them.

For another: If I seek what will make me-as-I-am-now happy, by the time I achieve it, it will not make me happy.

The best hope for happiness, then, is one of two things:

1. To learn to predict what I will become, so that I can work to achieve what will make me at that time happy.
2. To learn to be happy with what I have to be happy with.

I find the latter more probable.

--Dan'l

"We're going to sit on Scorsese's head"
-- The Goodfeathers

maru — 19 Mar 2005, 23:14 · in reply to James Wynn

James Wynn wrote:

Ah! Finally, someone wonders whether I was playing word-games.

The answer is: I don't think so.

[...]

Do well-adjusted people molest and bully others?

What is your definition of "well-adjusted"? The word implies an objective goal to which one would "adjust". Depending on one's criteria, a well-adjusted person might bully and molest. Saddam seems to have adjusted Uday and Qusay to do that.

It is difficult for me to see how the happiness of tsunami victims on the other side of the planet sharing few of my genes would affect my happiness in an evolutionary sense.

~ Crush

You wish an objective goal? Very well, I can supply one.

Consider that happiness has a very strong correlation to the concentrations of certain chemicals in the human species brain, which is objectively measurable; consider further that there are brain wave patterns which have a very strong correlation with happiness, and are equally objectively measurable. These two tests can be concatenated for a measurement of high confidence.

Find out of the set of all physical behaviours which are selectable by a particular human, the action which results in a global maxima of a scalar quantity of happiness, measured dimensionlessly, with every homo sapien weighted equally. This would be the ideal well-adjusted, but undoubtedly is computationally intractable to find, so practically it can be reduced to optimum behaviour findable in a certain finite time. This pseudo-definition give you a decent start for what 'well-adjusted' is? It isn't that it can't be well-defined, its that no one bothers since we all know it intuitively.

~Maru

`$ mount /world /proc | ps -aux | grep *.hs | sort -d >> happiness.txt && more happiness.txt` unix tomfoolery :) probably should grep for last line, and echo as suggested 'well-adjusted' person, but that'd need variables and is no fun.

maru — 19 Mar 2005, 23:22 · in reply to lorwerth Thomas

lorwerth Thomas wrote:

Well - yes and no. It does seem very hard - to me, at least - to talk about 'good' and 'bad' without at least at some point talking about what's good and bad for a particular organism. Hence empathy is a virtue because possession of it to a certain degree (but not so much that it paralyses you) is 'good' for a member of a social species. Is that selfish? Hard to say: if I'm generous, I'm generous because I'm generous, not because of how it contributes to my good or anyone elses. Learning to be generous, on the other hand, is probably motivated by that kind of consideration, but I'm not sure if there's any ethical system that's immune from some sort of consideration (except extreme moral non-naturalism, and that has it's own problems [1]) of that kind. 'So, Mr. Kant, why exactly are we motivated to follow the categorical imperative?'

[1] Though I'm sympathetic towards it.

My own brand of utilitarianism would say that following the categorical imperative will increase happiness at large, and eventually result i large gains for myself in addition. 'Do well by doing good' in a long run sense. That, and it is rationally desirable for one's beliefs to at the very least be consistent.

I know a few people who can't be really happy while anyone around them is unhappy. Could that be a less-extreme example of what your dissident is doing? More religiously, that seems very much like the bodhisattva idea, but if that's a bad connection, a misreading of intent, please tell me.

Not at all. In a related sense, it could be argued that a Christian is someone who is willing to go to Hell in order that no one has to. I can see where you're coming from, but I'm not sure happiness is the primary motivator (it's probably a motivation, but not the only one)

in this case. But never having been in our dissident's situation - and I hope I never am - I can't say I know for sure (and even then, generalising from one case to all would perhaps be foolish). We may have to agree to disagree...

No, you are thinking of Jesus there ;) But that is a curious view of Christians. I should like you to expand on that. I'd have argued that a Christian is someone who doesn't want to suffer the eternal torment of Hell, and so believes in Jesus and does what their church tells'em.

On second thoughts, if you're correct, I doubt anyone should have a problem with such a motivation, as it's quite clearly unselfish. Much ink has no doubt been spilled on such issues.

Iorwerth

Arrgh. The point was that even apparently unselfish, principled actions can be as well, if not better, understood as enlightened selfishness as well. But fortunately no ink need die for our debate. No, 'tis the electrons and phosphors who shall suffer.

~Maru

maru — 19 Mar 2005, 23:30 · in reply to James Wynn

James Wynn wrote:

Basically, it does not take into account an Einsteinian view of the universe in which time itself is dimension just like space. (and how could Laplace have known about that?)

If the demon is truly outside the universe, then he can see time from its start to its termination as easily as it can see all things operating within the universe. This means that the universe does not have to be deterministic for him to accurately predict the future: he has only to see what happened after the choices are made rather than "predicted" based on any particular "state" of the universe.

This is why I think the "computer" was a better idea than a demon sitting outside the universe. A conventional computer can (theoretically) be equipped with enough back-up monitoring measures to be reliably constantly aware of the "state" of its own processes because it is not as complex as a demon.

The primary point of a computer was merely that if you had all the information at your disposal you could predict any final result. But has not chaos theory suggested this is impossible? Hasn't it accepted that the interactions of 3 or 4 bodies on each other, let alone a cloud of bodies cannot be predicted for any ONE of those bodies -- that you can only predict the actions of the group?

Granted 3 or 4 asteroids orbiting each other do not have free will, but the computer thought-experiment presumes rational creatures ARE deterministic. It presumes that if you had a computer that had all the information on the universe's current state available to it, its predictions would be accurate. But what if it weren't? It might be free will or it might be a demon from outside the universe influencing bodies. So you could annex the demon into the universe (and all things influencing that demon in its own metaverse), but what if the computer's predictions were still inaccurate? This thought experiment doesn't suggest the outcome in any way.

Heck, if vibrating molecules are not deterministic, why should humans be? I

have made random choices about big decisions in my life. Perhaps over time you can decide the odds of my decision for a particular random choice and even the general flow my inclinations in my random choices over time, but I do not see how any computer could reliably determine my particular choices at any time, and so it will not know the state of the universe for future choices (ad infinitum).

~ Crush

I think the proofs for the n-body and 3-body orbital mechanics problems actually stated that you'd need infinite processing power to solve them exactly. Which we can postulate a computer sitting outside the universe having. And also one of the primary discoveries of chaos theory was how quickly processes spread out amongst the lagrange space and thusly how sensitive to the precision of initial information. It is more an engineering result, not a true limitative result like Godel, or Schrodinger. But also remember the emulation principle, and remember also the fact that even 'chaotic' systems are deterministic; run the equation with the same seed, get the same answer.

~Maru

maru — 19 Mar 2005, 23:45 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

...

Bring the demon inside the universe and close the system. Now he can make predictions, and tell them to you. But these predictions require a full knowledge of the state of the universe - which now includes himself. The demon must "know" the disposition of his own brain states - he must know the totality of what he knows. So for each item X in his knowledge, the fact that he knows X requires him to know (that he knows X), and this in turn requires him to know (that he knows (that he knows X)), and so on in an infinite regress. This isn't just a trivial abstraction. The problem is analogous to the problem I mentioned of making a precise map of the universe. If the map is inside the universe, then it must include itself, which must include itself, which must include itself.

[A curious aside... An abstract but almost entirely meaningless possible solution to the map problem is to simply call the universe a scale map of itself. This requires a somewhat... flexible... concept of "representation". If you were George Berkeley you might apply such a solution and say that the universe *is* the demon's mind. But such a demon would no longer be Laplace's, it would not be predicting anything, it would be making the future (and all of being) by thinking it. But in any event, this wanders just a bit off from the purpose of the thought problem.]

Civet

Have you ever heard of a replicating von Neumann machine? I mention them because they at first sight to suffer the same reflectivity problem as LaPlace's demon. But the solution is similar to Berkeley's but different: at one time the machines is storing its data, but this data is also simultaneously processed as a program which copies that data (in the software version). No physical ones have been built (the closure problem: getting a machine to derive and develop all its resources and manufacture all its parts and also to be robust enough to actually work.) I

think isomorphisms are the key here.

But if you do not like that explanation, consider a demon equivalent to an angel: it can be any size it wants. And since by default this universe is continuous, the demon can make as many brains as he wants and fit each in an infinitely small space. Now, since the demon has a visible head and presumably brain for me to converse with and receive predictions from, it follows that it possesses infinite amount of brain; I suspect an infinite brain could contain and hold that 'infinite regress'. In fact, an infinite number of infinite regresses.

~Maru

Dat kwazy set theory! So counterintuitive.

Chris — 20 Mar 2005, 01:46 · in reply to maru

Maru said:

Have you ever heard of a replicating von Neumann machine? I mention them because they at first sight to suffer the same reflectivity problem as LaPlace's demon.

No, you misunderstand the problem with the demon. The demon is not "practically impossible", it is logically impossible - any solution to it would require the breaking of the same logical laws that are required for you or I to think about the problem in the first place.

But if you do not like that explanation, consider a demon equivalent to an angel: it can be any size it wants.
And since by default this universe is continuous, the demon can make as many brains as he wants and fit each in an infinitely small space. Now, since the demon has a visible head and presumably brain for me to converse with and receive predictions from, it follows that it possesses infinite amount of brain; I suspect an infinite brain could contain and hold that 'infinite regress'. In fact, an infinite number of infinite regresses.

It can continue to make brains to its heart's content; those brains will all be present *within* the universe and thus require representation. The computational ability of the demon is theoretically infinite, but it is an infinity that is a sort of order of magnitude smaller than the infinity that would be required to calculate itself into the picture (along with the universe, of course). This will always be the case; any addition of "brains" increases the complexity of the universe accordingly.

-- Civet

"1 The world is all that is the case."

Chris — 20 Mar 2005, 02:09 · in reply to maru

James Wynn wrote:

What is your definition of "well-adjusted"? The word implies an objective goal to which one would "adjust". Depending on one's criteria, a well-adjusted person might bully and molest. Saddam seems to have adjusted Uday and Qusay to do that.

Maru said:

You wish an objective goal? Very well, I can supply one.

Consider that happiness has a very strong correlation to

the concentrations of certain chemicals in the human species brain, which is objectively measurable; consider further that there are brain wave patterns which have a very strong correlation with happiness, and are equally objectively measurable. These two tests can be concatenated for a measurement of high confidence.

This amounts to an objective test of a subjective goal.

Another way of putting the matter is this:

There are disconnections at a couple of levels that require certain subjective assumptions to bridge. To start with - and this I think is the essence of the objection Crush was raising, which has not been answered here

- do you really think that what we consider "well-adjusted" is objectively correlated to happiness? Individuals vary as to which stimuli produce "happiness" in their brains, as do (necessarily) societies made up of such individuals. The totality of existent humans, taken as a whole, is no less variable, from moment to moment.

Another is the association of happiness with an objective goal; there is nothing that objectively makes happiness a more worthy goal than any other conceivable goal. And in fact, for any non-trivial definition of happiness, it is evident that even if we accept happiness as a goal, we make numerous exceptions to this rule as a matter of course. This is evident in the common-sense observation that that which makes us happy is not always that which is best for us.

-- Civet

Chris — 20 Mar 2005, 02:41 · in reply to maru

I don't even remember the original message being quoted here.

Quoting Iorwerth

'So, Mr. Kant, why exactly are we motivated to follow the categorical imperative?'

I don't recall Kant having anything to say about how or why anyone **does** follow the categorical imperative. For him the question starts, and after many twists and turns ends, with a matter of why we **ought** to follow the categorical imperative, and this is (he thinks) because it is unavoidably consistent with Reason. [If it weren't, it wouldn't be the Categorical Imperative. No comment on that.]

Maru:

My own brand of utilitarianism would say that following the categorical imperative will increase happiness at large, and eventually result i large gains for myself in addition. 'Do well by doing good' in a long run sense. That, and it is rationally desirable for one's beliefs to at the very least be consistent.

There is a fundamental tension you are missing between **any** kind of view which acknowledges a "categorical imperative" (a system based on a particular **duty**) and **any** system like utilitarianism which relies on **results** as a justification.

With utilitarianism, the ends ultimately justify the means. So if, on any given specific occasion, it will produce a better result to disobey the "categorical imperative", then there is no question -

you disobey the imperative. In such a situation the "rule" is purely superfluous, because you obey it or disobey it as the occasion demands.

There is an attempt to reconcile these two points of view, called "rule utilitarianism", which you could probably google to good effect, and I suspect you would view it favorably. The problem is that rule utilitarianism walks a rather tenuous line, and it tends to collapse completely into either pure act utilitarianism or else pure duty-based ethics if you really start running it through its paces in thought problems.

No, you are thinking of Jesus there ;) But that is a curious view of Christians. I should like you to expand on that. I'd have argued that a Christian is someone who doesn't want to suffer the eternal torment of Hell, and so believes in Jesus and does what their church tells'em.

I suspect that here there is a problem between "Christian" as defined as an actual follower of Christ, as opposed to "Christian" as "your average member of a Christian church". The two are not mutually exclusive, of course, but the first does not require the second, nor does the second require the first.

Arrgh. The point was that even apparently unselfish, principled actions can be as well, if not better, understood as enlightened selfishness as well. But fortunately no ink need die for our debate. No, 'tis the electrons and phosphors who shall suffer.

This really is a debate of its own that is far too long to present here. Yes, there is something to your intuition. But when you think it out, the notion of "selfish" that would be required to absorb **all** altruistic action ends up being trivial to the point where it disappears as a useful category. To really bring this point home I would recommend an article called "Psychological Egoism" by Joel Feinberg. Unfortunately I can't find an electronic version of it, so you'd have to find a tree/ink-killing version.

--Civet

"Now we would have to say that all actions are selfish; but, in addition, we would want to say that there are two different kinds of selfish actions, those which regard the interests of others and those which disregard the interests of others... After a while, we might even invent two new words, perhaps 'selfitic' and 'unselfitic,' to distinguish the two important classes of 'selfish' actions. Then we would be right back where we started..." -- Joel Feinberg

maru — 20 Mar 2005, 08:16 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

James Wynn wrote:

What is your definition of "well-adjusted"? The word implies an objective goal to which one would "adjust". Depending on one's criteria, a well-adjusted person might bully and molest. Saddam seems to have adjusted Uday and Qusay to do that.

Maru said:

You wish an objective goal? Very well, I can supply one.

Consider that happiness has a very strong correlation to the concentrations of certain chemicals in the human species brain, which is objectively measurable; consider further that there are brain wave patterns which have a very strong correlation with happiness, and are equally objectively measurable. These two

tests can be concatenated for a measurement of high confidence.

This amounts to an objective test of a subjective goal.

Another way of putting the matter is this:

There are disconnections at a couple of levels that require certain subjective assumptions to bridge. To start with - and this I think is the essence of the objection Crush was raising, which has not been answered here - do you really think that what we consider "well-adjusted" is objectively correlated to happiness? Individuals vary as to which stimuli produce "happiness" in their brains, as do (necessarily) societies made up of such individuals. The totality of existent humans, taken as a whole, is no less variable, from moment to moment.

Not that much. Just as humans largely disagree on what is beautiful, yet repeatedly show agreements and correlations of $\sim .8$, even when from entirely different cultures and ethnic groups, so too the 'totality' of humanity's happiness can be meaningfully worked with. And I do consider 'well-adjustedness' to be correlated with happiness. Perfectly? No, of course not. We are beings who possess limited data and processing power, and stricken with numerous biases, and just plain wrong heuristics, programmed in by evolution or otherwise.

Another is the association of happiness with an objective goal; there is nothing that objectively makes happiness a more worthy goal than any other conceivable goal. And in fact, for any non-trivial definition of happiness, it is evident that even if we accept happiness as a goal, we make numerous exceptions to this rule as a matter of course. This is evident in the common-sense observation that that which makes us happy is not always that which is best for us.

-- Civet

We must build our ethical systems somewhere; the system of deductions and ethical theorems/facts must rest on some axioms (or be utterly useless). An axiom which we feel with our very minds, which is shared by the overwhelming majority of sentient beings, and humans, which can be objectively measured, seems to me a pretty good axiom, with much more value to it than any merely arbitrary and randomly selected goal. And as I said, we do not act solely on the basis of short-term returns, or even on long-term returns that accrue to only ourselves: we want the best of things for everyone.

~Maru

tho' this is not the best of all possible worlds, perhaps we can steer there.

maru — 20 Mar 2005, 08:49 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

I don't even remember the original message being quoted here.

Yeah... Sorry about that. Sometimes it takes me a while to work up the will to reply.

Maru:

My own brand of utilitarianism would say that following the categorical imperative will increase happiness at large, and eventually result i large gains for myself in addition. 'Do well by doing good' in a long run sense. That, and it is rationally desirable for one's beliefs to at the very least be consistent.

There is a fundamental tension you are missing between *any* kind of view which acknowledges a "categorical imperative" (a system based on

a particular *duty*) and *any* system like utilitarianism which relies on *results* as a justification.

I haven't crossed the line there- notice I justified the imperative as a heuristic, a rule which more often than not will work better than random choices; it is justified as something which will lead to good. Obviously if I have overriding data I'll do something which seems more likely to help. I haven't adopted the 'duty' part of the imperative. I don't like duty systems- not amenable to rational thought, and can lead to results totally diametric to my own desired results ("Recruits! It is your solemn patriotic duty to exterminate all life on this god-forsaken globe! Why? Your duty is to follow orders, not ask why! Fall out!" etc.)

With utilitarianism, the ends ultimately justify the means. So if, on any given specific occasion, it will produce a better result to disobey the "categorical imperative", then there is no question - you disobey the imperative. In such a situation the "rule" is purely superfluous, because you obey it or disobey it as the occasion demands.

There is an attempt to reconcile these two points of view, called "rule utilitarianism", which you could probably google to good effect, and I suspect you would view it favorably. The problem is that rule utilitarianism walks a rather tenuous line, and it tends to collapse completely into either pure act utilitarianism or else pure duty-based ethics if you really start running it through its paces in thought problems.

I know of rule utilitarianism, and while I am deeply sympathetic to its aims of formulating a utilitarianism suitable for fallible or even malicious humans, I do not think it has come up with the right mix of rules, methods and heuristics necessary. But its goal of developing a utilitarianism that only ractchets upward never downward is nevertheless I feel, possible.

This really is a debate of its own that is far too long to present here. Yes, there is something to your intuition. But when you think it out, the notion of "selfish" that would be required to absorb *all* altruistic action ends up being trivial to the point where it disappears as a useful category. To really bring this point home I would recommend an article called "Psychological Egoism" by Joel Feinberg. Unfortunately I can't find an electronic version of it, so you'd have to find a tree/ink-killing version.

That would be in /"Reason and Responsibility: Read?ings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy"/ right?

--Civet

"Now we would have to say that all actions are selfish; but, in addition, we would want to say that there are two different kinds of selfish actions, those which regard the interests of others and those which disregard the intrests of others... After a while, we might even invent two new words, perhaps 'selfitic' and 'unselfitic,' to distinguish the two important classes of 'selfish' actions. Then we would be right back where we started..." -- Joel Feinberg

Not all actions are selfish- people make mistakes sometimes.

~Maru

man, there has got to be a catchier, easier to spell name for utilitarianism

Andy Robertson — 20 Mar 2005, 10:34 · in reply to maru

What is your definition of "well-adjusted"? The word implies an objective goal to which one would "adjust".

The problem of defining good and evil has not been exactly ****unexamined**** through history. Within the context of TWK, "well-adjusted" = "following the pattern of the Overcyns".

We must build our ethical systems somewhere; the system of deductions and ethical theorems/facts must rest on some axioms (or be utterly useless).

Indeed, you can set computer programs playing games against each other and they will evolve morals.

Chris — 20 Mar 2005, 17:13 · in reply to maru

Before getting to the potentially on-topic part of things, a couple points I feel need to be made:

seems more likely to help. I haven't adopted the 'duty' part of the imperative. I don't like duty systems- not amenable to rational thought, and can lead to results totally diametric to my own desired results ("Recruits! It is your solemn patriotic duty to exterminate all life on this god-forsaken globe! Why? Your duty is to follow orders, not ask why! Fall out!" etc.)

This is a mischaracterization of what "duty" means in a duty-based ethical system. Kant's system, for example, was all about rational thought. Most duty-based systems are characterized simply by a deep respect for some kind of "rights" that they (for various reasons) believe an individual to have. Which is just to say that while the results-oriented person is usually out there looking for ways to positively maximize things according to some ideal, the duty-oriented person is usually primarily concerned with the things they should ***not*** do (rules against harming others).

The potential for nastyness you point out is a possibility that arises for any moral system that tries to be "objective" (and both utilitarianism and duty-based ethics do this); the main difference will just be the rhetoric employed. ("Fret not, citizens, sometimes individuals like yourselves must be sacrificed for the good of the state.") It's sort of an inherent risk, because the claim that morals are objective puts them somehow "out there" in the world rather than "in here" with your conscience; it implies that if an authority figure sees a particular action as right, and your culture approves that judgment, then if you see things differently you must simply be mistaken, your dissenting view is not likely to be respected.

I know of rule utilitarianism, and while I am deeply sympathetic to its aims of formulating a utilitarianism suitable for fallible or even malicious humans, I do not think it has come up with the right mix of rules, methods and heuristics necessary. But its goal of developing a utilitarianism that only ratchets upward never downward is nevertheless I feel, possible.

Well from what you've said, the type of rule utilitarianism you would approve of really collapses into a sort of act utilitarianism, augmented by rules of thumb (for situations where you're uncertain, or where quick judgments are required)... so it really loses its intended purpose in that context. But this isn't a problem specific to YOUR perspective - this is just why it's debated whether such a distinct thing as "rule utilitarianism" is even possible.

That would be in /"Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy"/
right?

Or "Ethical Theory" by Pojman, but really you could probably find it in any recent ethics textbook.

Now, to drag this whole deal into something that's slightly more on-topic:

This has been done to death from certain perspectives, but I am interested in the reasons **why** we let Severian off as lightly as we generally do. The guy is a mass-murderer. In bringing the New Sun, he willfully killed more innocent people than Hitler. Yet, even if we're inclined to say that we don't "approve" of Severian or his actions in various ways, we generally don't talk about him in a way that really takes this very seriously.

Looking at it from a results-oriented perspective (utilitarianism, if you like, but any such perspective will do) his actions are not only justified, they are unproblematic. A "moral jury" of utilitarians would, in theory, not just find Severian "not guilty" of any wrongdoing - they would dismiss the case out of hand, Severian need feel no remorse because he did precisely the right thing. And yet most of us would intuitively say that to contemplate killing an entire world without so much as batting an eyelash is deeply psychopathic.

Finding some kind of rule or duty that would justify Severian's action is a little more difficult, but possible. Such a perspective is a little more intuitive... Severian broke an important rule (and should feel bad about that), but only to avoid breaking an even more important rule (which thus excuses him from punishment/sanction). In such a case the moral court might find Severian technically guilty, but pronounce no sentence. And yet, aren't we still taking what Severian did a little too lightly?

Severian's defense is that the old world had to be destroyed to make way for the new; the rebirth of the planet/race unfortunately requires the death of the old. But isn't this precisely the rhetoric used by tyrants and demagogues to justify horrific crimes? The old degenerate society, they say, needs to die in order to bring about a rebirth, a new order. Their vision of a new utopia - perhaps advanced perfectly sincerely - requires a sacrifice, a cleansing of the old ways: blood and fire. Thinking of it this way are we likely to condone a modern-day Severian who comes to us claiming that we all need to die to bring about some future paradise? When we bring it closer to home, without the benefit of hindsight (knowing that it will, after all, work out for the best in the end), what we see is the case of one man who takes the lives of billions in his hands based on his own notion of what needs to be done - and this is a person who freely admits that he's not even sure if he's sane any more.

So a third perspective here is to find Severian guilty and hold him fully accountable; he should be punished for his horrific crimes, and certainly not looked on with approval. Note that this doesn't preclude us for having some sympathy/understanding for the character: Severian was perhaps acting on a deeply felt conviction, a religious or spiritual principle rather than an ethical one. If so then perhaps (if his religious impulse was correct) he will be vindicated in a Higher Court, but as for this world, we can only look upon the man with horror.

I think that variations of these three ways of looking at things probably cover most of the ways we would tend to treat a human being who had done what Severian did. But I don't think that any of them quite match the actual reaction most of us have to Severian's character. I think that we ultimately exempt him from deep judgment because, in some way, we don't feel that he

could have done otherwise. And you can only blame someone for doing something if they actually have a choice.

We get this impression that Severian has no free will in this particular matter, it seems, from the fact that the narrator displays a singular lack of doubt about what he's doing (and yet, does not come off as a fanatic either). The narrator speaks as if under the assumption that the reader

could not possibly even doubt the rightness of this action, it simply can't be questioned. This much may seem trivially obvious, I don't know, but I am leading up to a general question about just how we should take this.

One way to look at it is that Severian, as an author, is deliberately using this literary device to attempt to keep us from asking him to justify his actions (presumably because he can't). Nobody seems to really want to treat the book and the character as if this is all there is to it, though. So what is *Wolfe* trying to do? It would seem uncharacteristic of him to be making a veiled attack on the notion of free will. At least not as it applies to humans. Is the answer just that we intuitively accept that Severian, as the Conciliator, *isn't* human? To a certain extent it is easy for us to see him as a sort of cog in the celestial machine, a sort of angel (like Tzadkiel) with his own destined role to play, and this is prepared for us quite early on, in the passages about Talos's play. But it seems to me that this can't be all there is to it, because in every other way we *do* accept Severian as human. This paints a very strange picture. Are we to think of Severian as a man or not? And if we do think of him as a man, what sort of strange view of free will are we embracing in doing so?

Apologies for the long-windedness, but to make up for it I will try to sit down and be quiet now.
-- Civet

James Wynn — 20 Mar 2005, 21:16 · in reply to Andy Robertson

What is your definition of "well-adjusted"? The word implies an objective goal to which one would "adjust".

The problem of defining good and evil has not been exactly ****unexamined**** through history.

That's true. And I don't think we should jettison all that examination with the idea that all choices are merely the pursuit of "happiness" which is defined as "that which we pursue".

Within the context of TWK, "well-adjusted" = "following the pattern of the Overcyns".

And (ideally) the Overcyns follow the pattern of the beings of Kleos.

Andy Robertson — 20 Mar 2005, 23:46 · in reply to James Wynn

James Wynn writes:

That's true. And I don't think we should jettison all that examination with the idea that all choices are merely the pursuit of "happiness" which is defined as "that which we pursue".

Within the context of TWK, "well-adjusted" = "following the pattern of the Overcyns".

And (ideally) the Overcyns follow the pattern of the beings of Kleos.

But, this isn't even being mentioned in the context of this discussion.

Why hasn't it come up?

I am an Odinist - It's my religion. I have some problems with the pictures of the Overcyns in WTK, and I think I can now define the reason.

Odinism is not actually a supernaturalist religion: it conceives of the gods as human archetypes,

or at least that's what we say nowadays.

I don't know if the original gothis saw Thor as genuinely creating the thunder by throwing his hammer, but in one very real sense they believed the same as us modern Odinists. They ****didn't**** believe in Kleos or Elysium. They didn't think that standards for right and virtue came down from on high. That belief came later (with the development of monotheism).

nastler — 21 Mar 2005, 02:40 · in reply to Chris

This email is just polite applause from the gallery.

After weeks of struggling through discussions on "Ethical Theory", (interesting but not much of a spectator sport for the layman), I feel a sense of pay-off after Civets last post.

"Judging Severian" is a great topic and I'm hoping it sticks around a bit. Your three ethical judgements possible on Sev seem about right.

1. He may be a psycho but he done what had to be done.
2. He took a liberty, but the end justifies the means.
3. He is evil and billions died cause of what he did.

(Footnote)

But, as you say, we readers perceive that Sev is a tool ("the tongs by which we are held?") and judging him may not be valid. The higher powers (whether divine or secular hardly matter to the average Urthling) decide our fate according to their own values and objectives.

From a philosophical Urthlings point of view, it could be argued that maybe Typhon tries to wriggle out of the grips by doing the "right" thing (evacuation) for the "wrong" reason (continued divine monarchy) but he is cast down so Sev can do the "wrong" thing (Global tsunami) for the "right" reason (avoid ice future). And is Sev comparable with one of us "true men" from the "free" world? Well, if "all the world's a stage" then we are ALL cogs in that machine, designed to play our part as directed or (presumably) be replaced if our improvisations get out of hand. As Civet explained to me in a post last year, rebellion is neither possible nor desirable; "the show must go on" I suppose. Whether the director is divine and intelligent or secular and emergent, our "bit-part" position remains the same. Therefore, freewill equals illusion.

Does Wolfe not say something like "best just to copy the higher powers cause they are closer to God", with a PS that we can also hope they are not so corrupting an influence as he believes us to be on our own "If" Well, with no philosophical tools to handle this I don't see how a "monkey see, monkey do" approach leads to either ethical codes or free will. What do I know?

Scientists studying the brain also seem to find reasons to doubt the concept of "free will". So I suppose whatever way we cut it, we are a manipulated species.

Oh well, thanks to Civet for a great post, and all the best for the Vernal equinox celebrations to everyone, Nastler (hoping the Philosopher Kings would get on with it and edict the "few simple rules" for a more ethical world, so the rest of us can all stop having to worry about it.)

Footnote. This reminds me of when people want to discuss war (Iraq or generally) with me. I become paralysed by an inability to predict good outcomes (e.g. global liberal democracy and human rights) coming from bad actions (e.g. bombing a family home). The promised land out of sight as I focus on the valley of death through which we are led. No doubt I'd be an "Ice future" Urth philosopher, learning about thermodynamics from Master Ash as I denounce Abia with t-shirts and street theatre. Michael Ignatieff's "Political ethics in an age of terror" has been put on my read list in an attempt to understand the realpolitik from my position of cosy civil libertarianism. I can't say I'm looking forward to it too much

"Pelagic-dwelling, Mind-controlling, Alien Gods" No thanks!?

Iorwerth Thomas — 21 Mar 2005, 06:13 · in reply to maru

From: maru <marudubshinki at gmail.com>

My own brand of utilitarianism would say that following the categorical imperative will increase happiness at large, and eventually result i large gains for myself in addition. 'Do well by doing good' in a long run sense. That, and it is rationally desirable for one's beliefs to at the very least be consistent.

There's an example from a book of ethical dilemmas [1] on how following Kant's categorical imperative regarding honesty made a female correspondant of his (and probably by extension everyone around her) extremely _unhappy_. Utilitarianism has a place in any well thought out moral philosophy, but it probably shouldn't be the only consideration. Happiness at large tends to mean the happiness of the majority in the eyes of many [2]; this can lead to people suggesting some fairly twisted things.

(At a risk of introducing a political argument into the thread, I'd ask people to examine the position of the leader of the British Opposition towards the travelling minority, and whether it'd be easier for him to make his case were he a utilitarian.)

[1] Alas, I've lent it to a friend. I'll check the title and author if anyone's interested.

[2] Though I have no doubt that you're too sensible to make that leap :)

I know a few people who can't be really happy while anyone around them is unhappy. Could that be a less-extreme example of what your dissident is doing? More religiously, that seems very much like the bodhisattva idea, but if that's a bad connection, a misreading of intent, please tell me.

Not at all. In a related sense, it could be argued that a Christian is someone who is willing to go to Hell in order that no one has to. I can see where you're coming from, but I'm not sure happiness is the primary motivator (it's probably a motivation, but not the only one) in this case. But never having been in our dissident's situation - and I hope I never am - I can't say I know for sure (and even then, generalising from one case to all would perhaps be foolish). We may have to agree to disagree...

No, you are thinking of Jesus there ;) But that is a curious view of Christians. I should like you to expand on that.

It's an observation of some theologian somewhere, passed on to me by my Dad, who's an Anglican minister. I don't claim it to be the be all and end-all of the religion, but it does fit rather well with the idea of living life as an imitation of Christ.

I'd have argued that a Christian is someone who doesn't want to suffer the eternal torment of Hell, and so believes in Jesus and does what their church tells'em.

There's no actual set definition of what a Christian believes (bar the Nician (sp?) creed, and maybe not even that, if you're a liberal Anglican).

There has been, since the inception of the religion, a strand that believes that either

- a) No one is in Hell, since God is merciful
- b) Hell is temporary, intended to reform, for the same reason.

It's called Universalism; there's some textual evidence that Paul was one [3]. It lost steam once most people in the West were Christian, largely because the worry that Uncle Bob, the virtuous worshipper of Zeus, would have somewhat unfairly wound up in Hell became less of an issue.

It's tempting to suggest that someone whose primary motivation for being a Christian was fear of Hell probably wouldn't do a good job of escaping Hell (if indeed, it exists and there's anyone in there) because they have the wrong motivation for what they do.

[3] On the other hand, there's textual evidence for almost any view of Paul that you wish to put forwards.

On second thoughts, if you're correct, I doubt anyone should have a problem with such a motivation, as it's quite clearly unselfish. Much ink has no doubt been spilled on such issues.

Iorwerth

Arrgh. The point was that even apparently unselfish, principled actions can be as well, if not better, understood as enlightened selfishness as well. But fortunately no ink need die for our debate. No, 'tis the electrons and phosphors who shall suffer.

I think my chief problem with this is that they could probably be understood just as well in a Jungian or Freudian outlook, depending taste - they all tend to reduce motivations to one

primary thing, power, sex, happiness, whereas we always have several, including those we aren't aware of. Also, not having access to people's inner thoughts, we can't know.

I'd like to observe that to a certain extent, I'm one of those people you describe; the problem is - my inability to be happy while those around me are unhappy does not imply that, in order to do what I must to make them happy, I'll wind up happy. It just means that if they're unhappy, so am I.

Iorwerth

Iorwerth Thomas — 21 Mar 2005, 06:34 · in reply to Chris

Hmm...

This is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's [1] problem of Abraham in 'Fear and Trembling'.

The problem being:

- 1) Abraham is credited with being moral and the father of the faith.
- 2) He almost sacrificed his son because God told him to.
- 3) If _I_ did that, I'd be regarded as slightly psychotic.
- 4) So why is 1) regarded as true?

He goes through several iterations of 'what was Abraham thinking?', none of which are in fact adequate, and then, in order to illustrate what he thinks was going on, outlines what some see as a rather extreme 'divine command' ethic [2].

We seem to have an analogous (right down to the tricksyness of the authour) Problem of Severian:

- 1) Severian is treated sympathetically.
- 2) He destroyed the world for a higher good.
- 3) If _I_ did that, I'd be regarded as very psychotic.
- 4) So why is 1) regarded as true?

Iorwerth

[1] Slightly miserable Danish theologian and founder of Existensialism. Treating his works is slightly difficult, because he wrote most of them under pseudonyms and in them expressed ideas that he didn't quite agree with, in the hopes that the reader would understand by ironic implication. Hence the vast number of mutually contradictory interpretations of said works.

[2] But only on a literal reading of the text. Which is foolish. See [1].

From: "Chris" <rasputin_ at hotmail.com>

I think that variations of these three ways of looking at things probably cover most of the ways we would tend to treat a human being who had done what Severian did. But I don't think that any of them quite match the

actual reaction most of us have to Severian's character. I think that we ultimately exempt him from deep judgment because, in some way, we don't feel that he *could* have done otherwise. And you can only blame someone for doing something if they actually have a choice.

We get this impression that Severian has no free will in this particular matter, it seems, from the fact that the narrator displays a singular lack of doubt about what he's doing (and yet, does not come off as a fanatic either). The narrator speaks as if under the assumption that the reader could not possibly even doubt the rightness of this action, it simply can't be questioned. This much may seem trivially obvious, I don't know, but I am leading up to a general question about just how we should take this.

One way to look at it is that Severian, as an author, is deliberately using this literary device to attempt to keep us from asking him to justify his actions (presumably because he can't). Nobody seems to really want to treat the book and the character as if this is all there is to it, though. So what is *Wolfe* trying to do? It would seem uncharacteristic of him to be making a veiled attack on the notion of free will. At least not as it applies to humans. Is the answer just that we intuitively accept that Severian, as the Conciliator, *isn't* human? To a certain extent it is easy for us to see him as a sort of cog in the celestial machine, a sort of angel (like Tzadkiel) with his own destined role to play, and this is prepared for us quite early on, in the passages about Talos's play. But it seems to me that this can't be all there is to it, because in every other way we *do* accept Severian as human. This paints a very strange picture. Are we to think of Severian as a man or not? And if we do think of him as a man, what sort of strange view of free will are we embracing in doing so?

Apologies for the long-windedness, but to make up for it I will try to sit down and be quiet now.

-- Civet

Iorwerth Thomas — 21 Mar 2005, 06:39 · in reply to maru

From: maru <marudubshinki at gmail.com>

You wish an objective goal? Very well, I can supply one.

Consider that happiness has a very strong correlation to the concentrations of certain chemicals in the human species brain, which is objectively measurable; consider further that there are brain wave patterns which have a very strong correlation with happiness, and are equally objectively measurable. These two tests can be concatenated for a measurement of high confidence.

Find out of the set of all physical behaviours which are selectable by a particular human, the action which results in a global maxima of a scalar quantity of happiness, measured dimensionlessly, with every homo sapien weighted equally. This would be the ideal well-adjusted, but undoubtedly is computationally intractable to find, so practically it can be reduced to optimum behaviour findable in a certain finite time. This pseudo-definition give you a decent start for what 'well-adjusted' is?

It isn't that it can't be well-defined, its that no one bothers since we all know it intuitively.

Puts on G. E. Moore mask

'And why is maximising that in the majority of the population good?'

Iorwerth

(who really should be getting some work done instead of discussing ethics)

James Wynn — 21 Mar 2005, 09:21 · in reply to nastler

1. He may be a psycho but he done what had to be done.
2. He took a liberty, but the end justifies the means.
3. He is evil and billions died cause of what he did.

There's another way of looking at it. Severian didn't TAKE the power of the New Sun. He was GIVEN that power. Furthermore he was given that power by someone with rightful authority over it (one could argue). And with the granting of that power (authority), was the responsibility of deciding how to use it. He could have chosen not to bring the New Sun and then been responsible for the rubbing out of humanity on Earth and the humanity unborn (the Green Man and his civilization) and the hierodules uncreated (but would he then be made a neutered autarch and the responsibility would have been given to someone else?). Or he could have chosen to use the authority for the reason it was given. In this sense is as senseless to accuse Severian of murder as it is to accuse God of murder (speaking in a Judeo-Christian sense). God gives life, he sustains life, so he cannot "rob" anyone of life; he merely reclaims what is His own. The world of Severian only existed because of the H intercession. If the world were to be eternally dominated by Erebus and the Acians, would we be as concerned that Sev had put an end to it?

So rather than Sev being an unthinking tool, he could be thoughtfully yielding to what he sees as a rightful authority and using the authority they have given him dutifully ("duty" implies that it is justly deserved) on their behalf. Hmmmm....Perhaps there is more overlap between tBotNS and tWK than I realized.

It seemed to me that we were on the verge of comparing Severian to Ozymandias in "The Watchman" graphic novel (a profoundly fascist work). I don't think they are at all similar.

~ Crush

Revelations 6:4-8

And there went out another horse that was red: and authority was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given to him a great sword....And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And authority was given unto them (Death and Hell) over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

Rev 11:3-6 And I will give authority to my two witnesses...These have power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy: and have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will.

Tony Ellis — 21 Mar 2005, 12:22 · follows James Wynn

Crush wrote:

It seemed to me that we were on the verge of comparing Severian to Ozymandias in "The Watchman" graphic novel (a profoundly fascist work).

I

don't think they are at all similar.

True. Ozymandias chose to sacrifice the few to save the many. Severian does it the other way around. :-)

Chris — 21 Mar 2005, 12:52 · in reply to James Wynn

Well, briefly, Iorwerth was astute in bringing up Kierkegaard, and there's another aspect of the case that should be kept in mind for the kind of defenses we are likely to make for Severian.

K. commented that one of the most common excuses that the religious would make for Abraham is that, after all, everything **did** work out in the end, and God **did** ask him to do what he did, etc. This excuse is made from a point of view that's sort of "above the action", and with the benefit of hindsight. But if you put yourself in Abraham's position the situation is much worse than all that, in that: (a) Are you **sure** that that's God's voice you just heard? Couldn't you be mistaken? (b) Is what the voice asked you to do consistent with the God you believe in? (c) If God actually takes away Isaac then, in context, he is a promise-breaker and deceiver. If you are really in the hands of an omnipotent deceiver then (a la Descartes's evil demon) you can't ever know anything, or trust your own rational decisions. But if God doesn't take Isaac away then why would he ask for the sacrifice, and isn't that needlessly cruel?

In that situation most of us would have a real problem carrying through with what Abraham did. And we could supply no real **rational** justification for our actions. As far as we are capable of judging, morally, his actions have to be condemned because there's simply no ground for approving them.

Now, Severian's case. He suspects that he may be mad. He also accepts that a large number of apparently reasonable, sane people do not agree with the decision he is making and will try to stop him given a chance. In his position, is this not a strong indication that you may be mistaken? Further: one thing that Severian does **not** do is engage in rational/moral debate over the issue. He may fight to the death, but does not seem interested in trying to convince people not to oppose him. The implication (to me) seems to be that he knows that he can supply no rational reason that will satisfactorily justify his decision.

There are also many ways in which Sev's position does not parallel Abraham's, and for that reason I don't want to make a discussion of Abraham central to understanding Severian. But what I am getting at is that if we really attempt to judge Severian the way we would judge a real person, then we can't accept "happily every after" endings or appeals to divine guidance as adequate justifications.

But we do, pretty much unanimously, think of Severian's actions as justified. While I am sort of playing the role of the Accuser here, my interest isn't really in convincing people to condemn Sev, what I would like to get at is a deeper understanding of how and why we do accept him as justified in his actions.

Sort of half-related, someone also raised a good point to me about how in a sense our judgments of Severian, or Urth in general, seem only semi-real in the first place (even for a work of fiction) because Severian has a way of talking as if he were half-dreaming. This strikes a

chord with me; Urth never seemed real as a "place" to me but had the sort of geography of a dream, or subconscious realm. In this respect I do think that perhaps a comparison with WK might be in order as you say.

Civet

PS - I'm not sure what you mean by "The Watchmen" being a "fascist work", any more than "1984" is a "totalitarian work" or "Animal Farm" is a "communist work". "V for Vendetta" has a stronger connection with fascism but it is fairly clearly anti-fascist in viewpoint.

1. He may be a psycho but he done what had to be done.
2. He took a liberty, but the end justifies the means.
3. He is evil and billions died cause of what he did.

There's another way of looking at it. Severian didn't TAKE the power of the New Sun. He was GIVEN that power. Furthermore he was given that power by someone with rightful authority over it (one could argue). And with the granting of that power (authority), was the responsibility of deciding how to use it. He could have chosen not to bring the New Sun and then been responsible for the rubbing out of humanity on Earth and the humanity unborn

(the Green Man and his civilization) and the hierodules uncreated (but would

he then be made a neutered autarch and the responsibility would have been given to someone else?). Or he could have chosen to use the authority for the reason it was given. In this sense is as senseless to accuse Severian of

murder as it is to accuse God of murder (speaking in a Judeo-Christian sense). God gives life, he sustains life, so he cannot "rob" anyone of life;

he merely reclaims what is His own. The world of Severian only existed because of the H intercession. If the world were to be eternally dominated by Erebus and the Acians, would we be as concerned that Sev had put an end to it?

So rather than Sev being an unthinking tool, he could be thoughtfully yielding to what he sees as a rightful authority and using the authority they

have given him dutifully ("duty" implies that it is justly deserved) on their behalf. Hmmm....Perhaps there is more overlap between tBotNS and tWK than I realized.

It seemed to me that we were on the verge of comparing Severian to Ozymandias in "The Watchman" graphic novel (a profoundly fascist work). I don't think they are at all similar.

~ Crush

Revelations 6:4-8

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one another: and there was given to him a great sword....And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And authority was given unto them (Death and Hell) over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

Rev 11:3-6 And I will give authority to my two witnesses...These have power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy: and have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 21 Mar 2005, 13:12 · in reply to James Wynn

On Mon, 21 Mar 2005 11:21:49 -0600, James Wynn <thewynns at earthlink.net> wrote:
It seemed to me that we were on the verge of comparing Severian to Ozymandias in "The Watchman" graphic novel (a profoundly fascist work). I don't think they are at all similar.

Uhhnnh?

No. This is not a "profoundly fascist" work. It is a profound work _about_ facism.

Gaaaaah.

--Dan'l

You probably do not want to know what that odor is.

James Wynn — 21 Mar 2005, 15:49 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Blattid said

No. [The Watchmen is] not a "profoundly fascist" work. It is a profound work_about_fascism. Gaaaaah.

I'd be interested in your explanation of how it was "about" fascism rather than founded on it. I'm not sure how you can say Alan Moore did not

****embrace**** the most fascistic elements of the comic book superhero genre in "The Watchmen". Are you suggesting Ozy is presented as anything but a hero?

I'd say it is perfectly fair to view Alan Moore's "The Watchmen" as a suite with Frank Miller's "The Dark Knight Returns" (also knee deep in the most sinister regions of Nietzsche).

In TDKR, Commissioner Gordon defends Batman by comparing him to the myth that FDR knew the Japanese were invading Pearl Harbor and chose to do nothing in order to get the US into WWII. His argument is that Batman is somehow "too big" to be assigned normal human morality (just like FDR in his responsibilities as the fuehrer -oops! I mean "leader" - of the US).

Furthermore, Frank Miller makes a rather obvious play off of term "Superman" as in *Übermensch* (which unrelatedly is the meaning of Overcyn). Batman says to Superman "We must not let [ordinary people] know there are giants among them".

In a shameless rip-off of this theme, Moore has Mr. Manhattan justify Ozymandias' actions for exactly the same reasons that Com. Gordon justified Batman's ("it's too big"). Then M.M. turns the only true common-man hero in the story (Rorschach) to a pile of dust to stop him from undermining O's scheme.

Tony Ellis says:

True. Ozymandias chose to sacrifice the few to save the many. Severian does it the other way around. :-)

When one considers the generations unborn on Urth if the New Sun does not come, then the opposite is true. (I was also unconvinced that Ozy's act saved anything...but then I did not live in fear of nuclear obliteration during the 80s and found it difficult to take seriously that fear in other people during that time.)

~ Crush

P.S. I own all 12 comic books from "The Watchmen" series. I appreciate the landmarks that that series and TDKR represents in graphic arts fiction. But I could say the same for "The Birth of a Nation" for cinema arts.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 21 Mar 2005, 16:55 · in reply to James Wynn

On Mon, 21 Mar 2005 17:48:50 -0600, James Wynn <thewynns at earthlink.net> wrote:

Blattid said

No. [The Watchmen is] not a "profoundly fascist" work. It is a profound work_about_fascism. Gaaaaah.

I'd be interested in your explanation of how it was "about" fascism rather than founded on it. I'm not sure how you can say Alan Moore did not ****embrace**** the most fascistic elements of the comic book superhero genre in "The Watchmen". Are you suggesting Ozy is presented as anything but a hero?

Absolutely, yes. I almost have the feeling that you've read _Watchmen_ with far too much attention to the "superhero" aspect of the story and not enough to what's going on with the other characters.

The only people in _Watchmen_ who are actually portrayed as in any way heroic are some of the people who die on the streetcorner when Veidt's monster materializes - the ones who, in the shadow of Armageddon (though not the Armageddon they are expecting), show compassion and caring. The shrink who _has_ to help the fighting couple (Joey and her girlfriend), the newsbutcher who shares his coat with the kid, etc.

Ozymandias and his actions are portrayed as morally ambiguous - _he_ thinks he's a hero because, inna final analysis, he believes that his plan has worked.

But is he? He kills the Comedian (the _apparent_ facist - who cries his eyes out when he realizes what Veidt is doing) to protect his secrets.

I'd say it is perfectly fair to view Alan Moore's "The Watchmen" as a suite with Frank Miller's "The Dark Knight Returns" (also knee deep in the most sinister regions of Nietzsche).

I wonder if you understand Nietzsche half so well as you think you do. "Beware when you wrestle with monsters..." might stand as the motto to TDKR.

In a shameless rip-off of this theme,

This is simply insulting. Moore had plotted _Watchmen_ LONG before TDKR was published.

Moore has Mr. Manhattan justify

Ozymandias' actions for exactly the same reasons that Com. Gordon justified Batman's ("it's too big"). Then M.M. turns the only true common-man hero in the story (Rorschach) to a pile of dust to stop him from undermining O's scheme.

Yes, Osterman - another character of high moral ambiguity - kills Rorschach, because if Rorschach spills the beans about Veidt, then the people who have already died will have died

for nothing. If not, then the cold war ends without turning into the all-out nuclear heck that has seemed inevitable since Tricky and Gerry went down into their bunker.

This isn't to say (on my part or Moore's) that Manhattan is right to do so: rather, he is, is inhumanly, making a nigh-mathematical calculation about the hedonic/utilitarian value of keeping Veidt's secret as over against revealing it. The Comedian, who is a bit of a prophet in the scheme of Watchmen, says it clearly: he tells Osterman "you're losing it," years earlier, in Vietnam.

P.S. I own all 12 comic books from "The Watchmen" series. I appreciate the landmarks that that series and TDKR represents in graphic arts fiction. But I could say the same for "The Birth of a Nation" for cinema arts.

You want to know a classic that's facistic as all hell?

Read Dune and pay attention to what's actually going on. Master race, fuhrerprinzip, the whole works.

You probably do not want to know what that odor is.

Maru Dubshinki — 21 Mar 2005, 17:15 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Mon, 21 Mar 2005 16:55:05 -0800, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danlido at gmail.com> wrote:
I wonder if you understand Nietzsche half so well as you think you do.
"Beware when you wrestle with monsters..." might stand as the motto to TDKR.

Monsters wrestle with you?

You want to know a classic that's facistic as all hell?

Read Dune and pay attention to what's actually going on.
Master race, fuhrerprinzip, the whole works.

Alright, I find that not a little insulting and downright wrong.

First off, what the hell do you expect? The whole power system in the Duniverse is feudal, practically fascistic by definition. I mean, I've never seen a fictional work which had a feudal power structure and wasn't fascistic. Secondly, while (I'm not saying that is true, but for the sake of argument I'll let it pass) that may be true of "Dune" proper, that is radically not true of the series as a whole- I honestly know of no other way to characterize the Scattering as anything but anti-authoritarian and rather democratic. And thirdly, Herbert specifically claimed that much of the work was a warning; a warning of the bloodbaths, the tragedies, (this is actually relevant to the other discussion about judging Severian; we can similarly judge Paul, but his crimes are far worse, not gigadeaths, but more like tera-deaths. I think the specific quote is in DM; but a commonality is that both are forced into it. Or did you miss all the parts where Paul presciently sought a way out and tried to end the Jihad?) of what happens when blind faith is put in a messianic leader and conquests (hmm, sounds like a decent description of a fascist leader.). Notice also that the "master race" (you mean the Atreides no doubt) dwindle in importance, from a Great House which threaten the emperor, to regular people who flee in the scattering. And also as breeding stock whose jewel (Siona) is scattered to the masses, hardly what one would expect of a neo-fascist ruling race. That said, Watchmen sounds interesting. Think I'll pester my library to acquire it.

~Maru

"In Soviet Russia, monsters wrestle with you!"

David Duffy — 21 Mar 2005, 17:58 · in reply to Maru Dubshinki

On Mon, 21 Mar 2005, Maru Dubshinki wrote:

On Mon, 21 Mar 2005 16:55:05 -0800, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

You want to know a classic that's facistic as all hell?

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Alright, I find that not a little insulting and downright wrong.

First off, what the hell do you expect? The whole power system in the Duniverse is feudal, practically fascistic by definition. I mean, I've never seen a fictional work which had a feudal power structure and wasn't fascistic.

Which can come back around to Wolfe, the Divine Right of rulers, and the natural hierarchy of authority, and the lawfulness of revolution. The Autarch is exactly in the mould of Herbert's ruling family.

With a few exceptions, Wolfe's worlds are feudal or authoritarian in nature, and full of warfare. On Urth, the rebels are in the wrong, as they are against the anointed ruler. In Long Sun series, the revolutionaries are "in the right" in overturning the usurpers. However, they merely want to return to the rulership of a King, the Calde, as set down by the demiurge Pas. In the sublunary world, that is as good as you can get. In the medieval Christian viewpoint, this too is as good as you can get.

WRT Severian's guilt or otherwise, I think his viewpoint is that of a soldier doing his duty -- which inevitably involves harm to others. Similarly, in the world of the (virtuous) Knight, and of the Soldier (of arete). Their duty is something all Wolfe's characters have to work out for themselves, but then have to act on regardless of consequences to themselves or others.

Chris — 21 Mar 2005, 18:27 · in reply to David Duffy

Well this is another piece that plays into the scheme. Severian was raised with a duty/job, like that of a soldier, which did involve harming people. And this background is an important factor in why *he* in particular gets the job of being the Conciliator.

But let's not allow the Torturers to go unexamined here, especially since this job would be morally repugnant to most of us. What makes it OK? Well, the Guild has a sort of credo, a way of banishing personal doubts, and this is revealed to Severian when he joins: Torturers obey.

And here again we return to this apparent lack of free will. Torturers are not to be judged (or are not to be judged themselves), because in their official capacity they are just *instruments* of the Autarch. They make no decisions, it is not for them to question the rightness or wrongness of their actions, they just fulfill their duty. Is this a correct explanation, does this justify Severian and the Torturers? It's an awfully tempting argument from a certain perspective, especially if you were raised with such ideals. But I think we are meant to ultimately consider and *reject* any such argument. Wolfe writes from a context where "we were just following orders" is a tragically misguided excuse.

Given that Severian tries to get rid of the guild altogether when he gets the chance, I would expect him to reject such a notion as well.

WRT Severian's guilt or otherwise, I think his viewpoint is that of a soldier doing his duty -- which inevitably involves harm to others. Similarly, in the world of the (virtuous) Knight, and of the Soldier (of arete). Their duty is something all Wolfe's characters have to work out for themselves, but then have to act on regardless of consequences to

themselves or others.

Thomas Bitterman — 21 Mar 2005, 18:58 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

This has been done to death from certain perspectives, but I am interested in the reasons *why* we let Severian off as lightly as we generally do.

Because we've all heard the story before. All 3 major Western religions are built on events in which either God Himself, or members of the religion with God's approval and help, kill bunches of other people. The holy books which are taught to us since childhood and inform our culture approve of the killing. So of course when somebody else comes along and says he had to kill a bunch of people for a supreme being we find nothing unusual.

Was Wolfe thinking of this? It makes some sense if we view Urth as stuck in a sort of pre-Old Testament mode, when things were done that way.

Enamel

Maru Dubshinki — 21 Mar 2005, 19:24 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

On Mon, 21 Mar 2005 21:58:38 -0500, Thomas Bitterman <tom at bitterman.net> wrote:

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Was Wolfe thinking of this? It makes some sense if we view Urth as stuck in a sort of pre-Old Testament mode, when things were done that way.

Or a pagan mode. I cannot help but be reminded everytime I hear 'New Sun' that that is a title that could very well have been used by the Roman soldiers in their solar cults, or possible Zoroastrianism, or really, any of a grab bag (Egyptian too probably) of religions and cults that had the basic myth/archetype of resurrection and rebirth, and also liked the sun.

And let us not forget the play in TBotNS; I once was told that the play was like a skeleton key to the whole cycle. It makes a certain sense that there would be a parallel between the old people in the play being hunted and killed (I'm not sure about the killing bit- its been a while since I read the play) and actual 'Old Sun'ers being killed. The whole eschatological cleansing of the world, Apocalypse now, Jerusalem being made anew, and a third of the population shall be struck down etc. etc.

~Maru

Thomas Bitterman — 21 Mar 2005, 19:37 · in reply to Maru Dubshinki

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Maru Dubshinki — 21 Mar 2005, 20:02 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

On Mon, 21 Mar 2005 22:37:15 -0500, Thomas Bitterman <tom at bitterman.net> wrote:
Maru Dubshinki wrote:

On Mon, 21 Mar 2005 16:55:05 -0800, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

Hierarchy, loyalty, military service, land/economic concessions under it all. Fascist - not so much.

No deification of nation, no identification of national and corporate interests. The Fremen, on the other hand - fascist as all get out.

Meh- I am not certain how much of that is fascist and how much simply xenophobic paranoid superstitious tribal characteristics, nor do I really see any identification of 'national and corporate interests' :)

Secondly, while (I'm not saying that is true, but for the sake of argument I'll let it pass) that may be true of "Dune" proper, that is radically not true of the series as a whole- I honestly know of no other way to characterize the Scattering as anything but anti-authoritarian and rather democratic.

As a last gasp of a dying society? The Worm had to drag humanity kicking and screaming to it.

The desert Fremen certainly think of themselves as a "master race", and the book encourages that view.

Wait, pause, which Fremen was that? The Fremen who: A) got raped up da butt by the Old Empire in countless ways, B) Had their culture and way of life not just destroyed by the Worm, but reduced to an utter mockery, C) Had their religion perverted by master manipulators, and were themselves manipulated by Muad'Dib and the BG and others, who essentially used'em as cannonfodder D) Had their planet reduced to worse than burnt ash by the HMs, or E) None of the Above? Yes, I was certainly encouraged to view the superstitious, gullible, corruptible Fremen as a master race. Heil Stilgar!

~Maru

Andy Robertson — 22 Mar 2005, 00:34 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

Thomas Bitterman writes:

All 3 major Western religions are built on events in which either God Himself, or members of the religion with God's approval and help, kill bunches of other people.

The physical and (especially) the biological Universe is also built on this, irrespective of any hypotheses about the divine

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 22 Mar 2005, 04:01 · follows Maru Dubshinki

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Crush wrote:
"Superman"

as in Ubermensch (which unrelatedly is the meaning of Overcyn).

Is that really the best reading of "Overcyn"? AFK, "cyn" = "kin", and you could just read it as "the folks who live up there". Or maybe even, "our kin up above". (I get the sense that the Overcyns are somehow "kin" to humans - Art seems to make a point of it from time to time - though I don't know how that fits with humans having been raised from animals.)

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James Wynn — 22 Mar 2005, 06:14 · in reply to thalassocrat at nym.hush.com

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"cyn" is Icelandic for people, race, and yes "kin" as in people related to each other and by extrapolation "my kin" or relatives.

Over is from Indoeuropean, so AFAIK there is no old word "overcyn". Wolfe made it up. One could translate it merely as "the people above us" as well I suppose but I think the connection to "Uber=over or super (as in ubermensch) as opposed to Under = inferior, sub, below (as in undermensch) is also reasonable and likely intended.

~ Crush

James Wynn — 22 Mar 2005, 07:15 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Mon, 21 Mar 2005 17:48:50 -0600, James Wynn <thewynns at earthlink.net> wrote:

Blattid said

No. [The Watchmen is] not a "profoundly fascist" work. It is a profound work_about_fascism. Gaaaaah.

I'd be interested in your explanation of how it was "about" fascism rather than founded on it. I'm not sure how you can say Alan Moore did not **embrace** the most fascistic elements of the comic book superhero genre in "The Watchmen". Are you suggesting Ozy is presented as anything but a hero?

And then Blattid posted a spirited and thoughtful defense of "The Watchmen" graphic novel although I must say I'm far from convinced.

The only people in _Watchmen_ who are actually portrayed as in any way heroic are some of the people who die on the streetcorner when

Veidt's monster materializes...Ozymandias and his actions are portrayed as morally ambiguous - _he_ thinks he's a hero because, in a final analysis, he believes that his plan has worked. But is he? He kills the Comedian (the _apparent_ fascist - who cries his eyes out when he realizes what Veidt is doing) to protect his secrets...Yes, Osterman - another character of high moral ambiguity

The Comedian is not a fascist. He's a misandrist nihilist. He's painted as nothing less than a villain. Ozy is an anti-hero, but a hero nonetheless. His manner in killing the Comedian (in much the way Severian kills Typhon) is an archetypal heroic act. Mr. Manhattan is a melancholy character who is somewhat deterministic (to an extent that is difficult to separate from fatalistic). But he is painted as nothing if not enlightened. His bestowal of his blessing on Ozy's plan cannot be labeled merely ambiguous.

I wonder if you understand Nietzsche half so well as you think you do. "Beware when you wrestle with monsters..." might stand as the motto to TDKR.

I probably do not, however, I recommend to you "The Closing of the American Mind" by Nietzsche scholar Allan Bloom in the 80s. He devotes a significant portion of the book to Nietzsche's philosophy and an entire chapter to the political Left's reconstruction and embracing of that philosopher. I found that book illuminating as to how leftist writers like Miller and Moore could adopt the stances they take in TDKR and TW.

In a shameless rip-off of this theme,

This is simply insulting. Moore had plotted _Watchmen_ LONG before TDKR was published.

Plotted is not written, and Manhattan's justification of Ozy's plan almost word-for-word mirroring Com. Gordon's justification of Batman simply cannot be ignored.

You want to know a classic that's fascist as all hell? Read _Dune_ and pay attention to what's actually going on. Master race, fuhrerprinzip, the whole works.

I'll check that out next time I read it. I don't recall any mention of a "master race". But the connections some are making between feudalism and Wolfe's governments and fascism I do not believe are warranted. The view of the King in Christendom cannot be separated from the view of God having a theologically rightful place of authority in Heaven. The King is not a "leader", he is God's executive. The Roman Empire could be seen possibly as proto-fascistic but Egypt and most of Asia (with their god-kings) could not IMO. It is hard for me to imagine true fascism (except by analogy) being at all related to a religion in which the Leader acts as a ****servant**** of God.

So the Autarch IMO is not a fascist ruler and neither was King Arthur or Silk or Fidel Casto or any other "liberator" or defender of his people against powerful aggressors.

~ Crush

James Wynn — 22 Mar 2005, 08:10 · in reply to Andy Robertson

And (ideally) the Overcyns follow the pattern of the beings of Kleos.

But, this isn't even being mentioned in the context of this discussion. Why hasn't it come up? I am an Odinist - It's my religion. I have some problems with the pictures of the Overcyns in WTK, and I think I can now define the reason.

Odinism is not actually a supernaturalist religion: it conceives of the gods as human archetypes, or at least that's what we say nowadays. I don't know if the original gothis saw Thor as genuinely creating the thunder by throwing his hammer, but in one very real sense they believed the same as us modern Odinists. They ****didn't**** believe in Kleos or Elysium. They didn't think that standards for right and virtue came down from on high. That belief came later (with the development of monotheism).

I don't think TWK is centrally about Nordic mythology. It is about knighthood: a concept that developed under Christianity. I don't think "knighthood" can be dealt with separate from a Medieval Western European Christian worldview. Wolfe has pulled a slight of hand. He has borrowed liberally from Nordic mythology and terminology but is actually writing a Christian story -- in the vein of "The Chronicles of Narnia". When Allfather kneels before St. Michael the Archangel (who is **directly** associated with Jesus in the Icelandic "Njal's Saga") that becomes obvious.

~ Crush

Iorwerth Thomas — 22 Mar 2005, 08:56 · in reply to James Wynn

From: "James Wynn" <thewynns at earthlink.net>

Plotted is not written, and Manhattan's justification of Ozy's plan almost word-for-word mirroring Com. Gordon's justification of Batman simply cannot be ignored.

Regarding TDK, I think the British sf magazine SFX had a feature on it in which Miller was of the opinion that most of Gotham's villains were as they were due to the presence of Batman; the theory put forwards by the tv psychologist that Batman is the locus of the chaos (since criminals define themselves against him) is in fact what is going on. This suggests a reading in which the events of the graphic novel are nothing but a psychotic wish fulfillment fantasy for Bruce Wayne; a nice comment on some undercurrents of the superhero genre. On that reading, it's no more facist than Spinrad's 'The Iron Dream'.

You want to know a classic that's facistic as all hell?
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I don't find these as obvious in Dune [1] as I do in, say, Robert Jordan's 'Wheel of Time' (content digested via the RPG rulebook; Jordan's prose gives me indigestion) - where a couple of obvious borrowings from Dune (fearsome tribesmen who'd be Fremen if not for the lack of sandworms, a manipulative order of women who're the Bene Gesserit in all but name) meet with some dubious subtexts - purity of 'old blood', anyone? - in fashion I find slightly disturbing. Thing is, I'm not sure this is deliberate on Jordan's part, as a lot of these subtexts have always lurked around fantasy (which doesn't make their inclusion a good thing); probably as a holdover from the pulps.

[1] I suspect, if they're there, Herbet either is commenting on them in a negative way, or they're space opera tropes that have snuck in without anyone noticing, which can happen if no one's careful.

I'll check that out next time I read it. I don't recall any mention of a "master race". But the connections some are making between feudalism and Wolfe's governments and fascism I do not believe are warranted. The view of the King in Christendom cannot be separated from the view of God having a theologically rightful place of authority in Heaven. The King is not a "leader", he is God's executive.

This seems right. In British history, the Divine Right of Kings (as per most peoples conceptions of a monarchy) seems to be a fairly late invention due to James I (who may have needed it as a coping device following many assassination attempts). It did not go down well, as his son discovered.

The Roman Empire could be seen possibly as proto-fascistic but Egypt and most of Asia (with their god-kings) could not IMO. It is hard for me to imagine true fascism (except by analogy) being at all related to a religion in which the Leader acts as a ****servant**** of God.

Quite. It's when they delude themselves into thinking they speak for God or are God that I imagine problems arise. Though I don't think a monarchy would be the ideal system I'd choose if I were God. :)

So the Autarch IMO is not a fascist ruler and neither was King Arthur or Silk or Fidel Casto or any other "liberator" or defender of his people against powerful aggressors.

I agree, but I think quick definitions of what is meant by 'fascism' now, rather than later, may also save everyone a lot of hassle and strained typing fingers. It's one of those words that everyone is sure they know what it means, but...

We might also have to draw a distinction between the political structure in the various novels and what moral point is being conveyed through the structures. The tendency towards monarchy may be a convenient metaphor; it substitutes most easily for 'rightful authority' in the fantasy genre simply because most readers view fantasy worlds that way (this is lazy on their part, but a clever authour can easily exploit it to profitable end). I doubt Wolfe is seriously suggesting that he'd like to live in the Autarchy.

Iorwerth

Chris — 22 Mar 2005, 11:14 · in reply to James Wynn

The defenses other people here have made as far as the theme of the Watchmen go are, I think, adequate; but I think that part of the difficulty here is that you take a very different view of the characters, and some of the scenes they appear in have radically different overtones.

Ozy's killing of the Comedian is not in any way a heroic act, it's something out a spy drama or murder thriller. It occurs in the dark, in terror, and it's not a matter of stopping the Comedian for being such a bad man (which he was, as you say), it's a matter of keeping him silent because, ironically, he does have just a bit more conscience left than Ozymandias does. It's a crime, a murder, and is treated as such from the beginning and on through the rest of the story.

Manhattan certainly did not seem to be enlightened, unless you equate enlightenment with the loss of his humanity. Judging him as a human (which he eventually comes to accept, he is not) there's no way to look at him but as a sad, screwed up creature. This is highlighted by his interactions with Silk Spectre.

Speaking of which, it always seemed to me that she, and the arguable protagonist (which nobody mentions because of his utter normality - part of what makes him the protagonist) the Night Owl, have the only "happy ending" there is in this story. A fairly obvious rejection of the ubermensch ideal, since both turn their backs on the superhero world.

Re: Severian it is hard to place the Autarchy amongst other, real forms of government. From where does the power of the Autarchy derive? Most don't even know who the Autarch is or what he looks like, how power is passed down, etc. The Autarch is almost a ***fact*** more than he is a

particular person.

The Comedian is not a fascist. He's a misandrist nihilist. He's painted as nothing less than a villain. Ozy is an anti-hero, but a hero nonetheless. His manner in killing the Comedian (in much the way Severian kills Typhon) is an archetypal heroic act. Mr. Manhattan is a melancholy character who is somewhat deterministic (to an extent that is difficult to separate from fatalistic). But he is painted as nothing if not enlightened. His bestowal of his blessing on Ozy's plan cannot be labeled merely ambiguous.

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~ Crush

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 22 Mar 2005, 12:38 · in reply to Chris

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Furthermore, that isn't even why he does it. Oh, yeah, it's "necessary," but reading the book closely, you realize that it's basically a petty act of revenge. I believe it's only in the "text features" that we learn that Ozymandias and the Comedian met in a dark warehouse once and, in the classic superhero comic mistaken identity riff, fought.

The Comedian beat the pulp out of Ozymandias.

(The seeds may have been planted, though, when the Comedian burned Ozzy's map at the one meeting of the pseudo-Justice League in the '60s.)

Speaking of which, it always seemed to me that [Silk Spectre], and the arguable protagonist (which nobody mentions because of his utter normality - part of what makes him the protagonist) the Night Owl, have the only "happy ending" there is in this story.

Ummm ... utter normality? Have you forgotten that he can't get it up except in superhero costume?

A fairly obvious rejection of the ubermensch ideal, since both turn their backs on the superhero world.

Not at all clear. We know that they've taken new civilian identities, but we don't know that they aren't fighting crime under new names. (I'd have to reread the last issue to be sure but I have the vague impression that they hint to Laurie's mom - Silk Spectre 1 - that they _are_.)

--Dan'l

who has spent waaay too much time thinking about funnybooks

You probably do not want to know what that odor is.

Tony Ellis — 22 Mar 2005, 13:17 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Crush wrote:

Tony Ellis says:

True. Ozymandias chose to sacrifice the few to save the many. Severian does it the other way around. :-)

When one considers the generations unborn on Urth if the New Sun does not come, then the opposite is true.

If what counts is the number of descendants the survivors of a mass slaughter might one day have, then mass slaughter on any scale, no matter how horrifically vast, can always be justified as the killing of the few. We tend to measure these things in terms of actual people killed.

And what about all the generations who *will* be born on Urth if the New Sun doesn't come? Not to mention all those born on all the other worlds to which humanity is transplanted after Urth dies. Don't they count?

Both Ozymandias' and Severian's mass-murders of innocents will in theory ensure the preservation of future generations. But if you're going to differentiate between their achievements - especially in the same breath as you use the word 'fascist' - then the ratio of those saved to those slaughtered seems significant.

maru — 22 Mar 2005, 16:48 · in reply to lorwerth Thomas

lorwerth Thomas wrote:

Puts on G. E. Moore mask

'And why is maximising that in the majority of the population good?'

Iorwerth

(who really should be getting some work done instead of discussing ethics)

Because it is the only feedback that seems reliably correlated with 'the good', is universal and unambiguous, and is also objectively measurable?

~Maru

maru — 22 Mar 2005, 17:22 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

The potential for nastyness you point out is a possibility that arises for any moral system that tries to be "objective" (and both utilitarianism and duty-based ethics do this); the main difference will just be the rhetoric employed. ("Fret not, citizens, sometimes individuals like yourselves must be sacrificed for the good of the state.") It's sort of an inherent risk, because the claim that morals are objective puts them somehow "out there" in the world rather than "in here" with your conscience; it implies that if an authority figure sees a particular action as right, and your culture approves that judgment, then if you see things differently you must simply be mistaken, your dissenting view is not likely to be respected.

Yes, but if you are using an objective system, you can fight back easily; science strives for objectivity, and generally bows to who has better data and explanations, not who is spouting the rhetoric. What about when you have subjective systems? There you are denied even that bare chance of making a rational case against the current sub-goals.

...

Now, to drag this whole deal into something that's slightly more on-topic:

This has been done to death from certain perspectives, but I am interested in the reasons *why* we let Severian off as lightly as we generally do. The guy is a mass-murderer. In bringing the New Sun, he willfully killed more innocent people than Hitler. Yet, even if we're inclined to say that we don't "approve" of Severian or his actions in various ways, we generally don't talk about him in a way that really takes this very seriously.

Looking at it from a results-oriented perspective (utilitarianism, if you like, but any such perspective will do) his actions are not only justified, they are unproblematic. A "moral jury" of utilitarians would, in theory, not just find Severian "not guilty" of any wrongdoing - they would dismiss the case out of hand, Severian need feel no remorse because he did precisely the right thing. And yet most of us would intuitively say that to contemplate killing an entire world without so much as batting an eyelash is deeply psychopathic.

Not just unproblematic, but commendable. Severian could have refused, and doomed the Urthians to their previous doom, but he did not, he took that cross on himself. The situation is analogous to a doomed terminal dying patient (say, a 110 year old man), who somehow has multiple livers in perfect shape (bear with me), and if you, the doctor will take that burden on yourself, you can slice out those livers and give them to a bunch of other people who are about

to perish of not-having-liver-ness, thus saving say a dozen lives while hastening another out the door.

Finding some kind of rule or duty that would justify Severian's action is a little more difficult, but possible. Such a perspective is a little more intuitive... Severian broke an important rule (and should feel bad about that), but only to avoid breaking an even more important rule (which thus excuses him from punishment/sanction). In such a case the moral court might find Severian technically guilty, but pronounce no sentence. And yet, aren't we still taking what Severian did a little too lightly?

Well, we could take as a duty 'maximize life and happiness', but I don't think that's what you are getting at.

Severian's defense is that the old world had to be destroyed to make way for the new; the rebirth of the planet/race unfortunately requires the death of the old. But isn't this precisely the rhetoric used by tyrants and demagogues to justify horrific crimes? The old degenerate society, they say, needs to die in order to bring about a rebirth, a new order. Their vision of a new utopia - perhaps advanced perfectly sincerely - requires a sacrifice, a cleansing of the old ways: blood and fire. Thinking of it this way are we likely to condone a modern-day Severian who comes to us claiming that we all need to die to bring about some future paradise? When we bring it closer to home, without the benefit of hindsight (knowing that it will, after all, work out for the best in the end), what we see is the case of one man who takes the lives of billions in his hands based on his own notion of what needs to be done - and this is a person who freely admits that he's not even sure if he's sane any more.

The difference is: Severian's plan /worked/. All the credit, all the blame... Another thing: Severian is the rightful autarch of Urth; as a feudal/fascist ruler, he claims ultimate authority over his subjects. No wonder he wouldn't worry whether he should do it or not.

So a third perspective here is to find Severian guilty and hold him fully accountable; he should be punished for his horrific crimes, and certainly not looked on with approval. Note that this doesn't preclude us for having some sympathy/understanding for the character: Severian was perhaps acting on a deeply felt conviction, a religious or spiritual principle rather than an ethical one. If so then perhaps (if his religious impulse was correct) he will be vindicated in a Higher Court, but as for this world, we can only look upon the man with horror.

I think that variations of these three ways of looking at things probably cover most of the ways we would tend to treat a human being who had done what Severian did. But I don't think that any of them quite match the actual reaction most of us have to Severian's character. I think that we ultimately exempt him from deep judgment because, in some way, we don't feel that he *could* have done otherwise. And you can only blame someone for doing something if they actually have a choice.

We get this impression that Severian has no free will in this particular matter, it seems, from the fact that the narrator displays a singular lack of doubt about what he's doing (and yet, does not come off as a fanatic either). The narrator speaks as if under the assumption that the reader could not possibly even doubt the rightness of this action, it simply can't be questioned. This much may seem trivially obvious, I don't know, but I am leading up to a general

question about just how we should take this.

Or as if in a dream, or drugged. It could be that as Autarch, he has already been judged or advised so many times, by people so far above the norm in intelligence, knowledge, and experience that he doesn't give a flip about what the reader may think, he stands with the giants, and their appraisal is what matters.

One way to look at it is that Severian, as an author, is deliberately using this literary device to attempt to keep us from asking him to justify his actions (presumably because he can't). Nobody seems to really want to treat the book and the character as if this is all there is to it, though. So what is *Wolfe* trying to do? It would seem uncharacteristic of him to be making a veiled attack on the notion of free will. At least not as it applies to humans. Is the answer just that we intuitively accept that Severian, as the Conciliator, *isn't* human? To a certain extent it is easy for us to see him as a sort of cog in the celestial machine, a sort of angel (like Tzadkiel) with his own destined role to play, and this is prepared for us quite early on, in the passages about Talos's play. But it seems to me that this can't be all there is to it, because in every other way we *do* accept Severian as human. This paints a very strange picture. Are we to think of Severian as a man or not? And if we do think of him as a man, what sort of strange view of free will are we embracing in doing so?

I do not think the dual 'heavenly-New-Sun-with-no-real-free-will' and 'human-Severian' is much of a problem; at least it wasn't for most of Christinaity, and their human portion was not even a torturer but a tortured.

Apologies for the long-windedness, but to make up for it I will try to sit down and be quiet now.

-- Civet

~Maru

Perhaps I should follow the cat's xample..

maru — 22 Mar 2005, 18:05 · in reply to nastler

nastler wrote:

This email is just polite applause from the gallery.

After weeks of struggling through discussions on

?Ethical Theory?, (interesting but not much of a spectator sport for the layman), I feel a sense of pay-off after Civets last post.

?Judging Severian? is a great topic and I'm hoping it sticks around a bit. Your three ethical judgements possible on Sev seem about right.

1. He may be a psycho but he done what had to be done.

2. He took a liberty, but the end justifies the means.

3. He is evil and billions died cause of what he did.

(Footnote)

But, as you say, we readers perceive that Sev is a tool ("the tongs by which we are held?") and judging him may not be valid. The higher powers (whether divine or secular hardly matter to the average Urthling) decide our fate according to their own values and objectives.

Of course it can be wondered where they get the right to do so; revenge hardly seems a good reason to.

From a philosophical Urthlings point of view, it could be argued that maybe Typhon tries to wriggle out of the grips by doing the "right" thing (evacuation) for the "wrong" reason (continued divine monarchy) but he is cast down so Sev can do the "wrong" thing (Global tsunami) for the "right" reason (avoid ice future).

I'd read Typhon's downfall as due to his attempted usurpation- he starts too late, and in a bungled manner, and attempts to kill the rightful New Sun once (or twice, I am not sure whether he did in the 'past' New Sun's life.)

And is Sev comparable with one of us "true men" from the "free" world? Well, if "all the world's a stage" then we are ALL cogs in that machine, designed to play our part as directed or (presumably) be replaced if our improvisations get out of hand. As Civet explained to me in a post last year, rebellion is neither possible nor desirable; "the show must go on" I suppose. Whether the director is divine and intelligent or secular and emergent, our "bit-part" position remains the same. Therefore, freewill equals illusion.

Does Wolfe not say something like "best just to copy the higher powers cause they are closer to God", with a PS that we can also hope they are not so corrupting an influence as he believes us to be on our own "If"

And in the tale of the proud Cock, did he not have an angel say that they were one and all equally distant from God?

Well, with no philosophical tools to handle this I don't see how a "monkey see, monkey do" approach leads to either ethical codes or free will. What do I know? Scientists studying the brain also seem to find reasons to doubt the concept of "free will". So I suppose whatever way we cut it, we are a manipulated species.

Oh well, thanks to Civet for a great post, and all the best for the Vernal equinox celebrations to everyone, Nastler (hoping the Philosopher Kings would get on with it and edict the "few simple rules" for a more ethical world, so the rest of us can all stop having to worry about it.)

Footnote. This reminds me of when people want to discuss war (Iraq or generally) with me. I become paralysed by an inability to predict good outcomes (e.g. global liberal democracy and human rights) coming from bad actions (e.g. bombing a family home). The promised land out of sight as I focus on the valley of death through which we are led. No doubt I'd be an "Ice future" Urth philosopher, learning about

thermodynamics from Master Ash as I denounce Abia with t-shirts and street theatre. Michael Ignatieff's ?Political ethics in an age of terror? has been put on my read list in an attempt to understand the realpolitik from my position of cosy civil libertarianism. I can't say I'm looking forward to it too much?

?Pelagic-dwelling, Mind-controlling, Alien Gods? No thanks!?

~Maru

maru — 22 Mar 2005, 18:21 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

Well, briefly, Iorwerth was astute in bringing up Kierkegaard, and there's another aspect of the case that should be kept in mind for the kind of defenses we are likely to make for Severian.

K. commented that one of the most common excuses that the religious would make for Abraham is that, after all, everything **did** work out in the end, and God **did** ask him to do what he did, etc. This excuse is made from a point of view that's sort of "above the action", and with the benefit of hindsight. But if you put yourself in Abraham's position the situation is much worse than all that, in that:

(a) Are you **sure** that that's God's voice you just heard? Couldn't you be mistaken?

(b) Is what the voice asked you to do consistent with the God you believe in?

(c) If God actually takes away Isaac then, in context, he is a promise-breaker and deceiver. If you are really in the hands of an omnipotent deceiver then (a la Descartes's evil demon) you can't ever know anything, or trust your own rational decisions. But if God doesn't take Isaac away then why would he ask for the sacrifice, and isn't that needlessly cruel?

In that situation most of us would have a real problem carrying through with what Abraham did. And we could supply no real **rational** justification for our actions. As far as we are capable of judging, morally, his actions have to be condemned because there's simply no ground for approving them.

Now, Severian's case. He suspects that he may be mad. He also accepts that a large number of apparently reasonable, sane people do not agree with the decision he is making and will try to stop him given a chance. In his position, is this not a strong indication that you may be mistaken? Further: one thing that Severian does **not** do is engage in rational/moral debate over the issue. He may fight to the death, but does not seem interested in trying to convince people not to oppose him. The implication (to me) seems to be that he knows that he can supply no rational reason that will satisfactorily justify his decision.

There are also many ways in which Sev's position does not parallel Abraham's, and for that reason I don't want to make a discussion of Abraham central to understanding Severian. But what I am getting at is

that if we really attempt to judge Severian the way we would judge a real person, then we can't accept "happily every after" endings or appeals to divine guidance as adequate justifications.

But we do, pretty much unanimously, think of Severian's actions as justified. While I am sort of playing the role of the Accuser here, my interest isn't really in convincing people to condemn Sev, what I would like to get at is a deeper understanding of how and why we do accept him as justified in his actions.

Sort of half-related, someone also raised a good point to me about how in a sense our judgments of Severian, or Urth in general, seem only semi-real in the first place (even for a work of fiction) because Severian has a way of talking as if he were half-dreaming. This strikes a chord with me; Urth never seemed real as a "place" to me but had the sort of geography of a dream, or subconscious realm. In this respect I do think that perhaps a comparison with WK might be in order as you say.

Civet

PS - I'm not sure what you mean by "The Watchmen" being a "fascist work", any more than "1984" is a "totalitarian work" or "Animal Farm" is a "communist work". "V for Vendetta" has a stronger connection with fascism but it is fairly clearly anti-fascist in viewpoint.

Allow me to draw a parallel with WK; does it not seem to you that Urth, dying Urth, is more than a little uncanny and bizaare? What logic is there to it, what substantial reality? it seems almost a dream of madness, or a warped parody of what should be (everything decaying and in ruins.) We pass from place to place with little propelling plot, in picaresque manner, though it feels intuitively that there is a vast hidden logic webs of meaning (I thinking of the ambience of "Foucault's Pendulum" here, but less factual and explicit). Does not Old Urth seem unreal, as unreal as the angel in the Knight would have seemed in Muspell? Urth in TBOTNS is lit by an old sun; its inhabitants seem unreal- we know this by how many of them turn out to not be- even Agilus, a basic scammer is suspected of otherworldly origins- and it doesnot seem unreasonable! When a New Sun comes, and everything is brought to a higher reality, when we move up a cabalic tree, (like a day of judgement) is it unreasonable to expect some shadows of the old world to pass away?

I say we see the unreality of Urth and do not condemn the slaying of shadows.

~Maru

Alan Lewis — 22 Mar 2005, 18:30 · in reply to maru

Personally I agree with some of the points already raised defending both The Watchman, and Severian, so I'll try to add my own views without repeating theirs unduly.

I disagree with the premise some have advanced that because something happens in a work of fiction -- like fascism succeeding -- should somehow equate to the writer endorsing such things. Did anyone think Orwell believed in authoritarian societies because he wrote 1984? There clearly we realize the reverse is true. Watchman is problematic perhaps because it lacks a perfect protagonist that we know we're supposed to identify with. Rorschach is tempting in this way, but let's face it, he's basically a ruthless psycho. But this is part of the point, not one of these main characters is really correct, certainly not Dr Manhattan or Ozy, so just because they

'win' I think it is very wrong to see that as saying they were right. Nor does a writer have to agree with everything he has his characters say. To make interesting dramatic conflict, he should just make them internally consistent and three dimensional, and on those grounds I think Moore succeeds in Watchman.

But if people really want to know what Moore thinks of fascism, you should read the (I think) vastly superior though less famous V is For Vendetta. Soon to be ruined by Hollywood no doubt as they adapt it. So far poor Alan Moore is 0 for 2 with From Hell, and League of Extraordinary Gentlemen. Maybe someday they'll make a movie from one of his works, and actually use something he, you know, wrote in the process.

As for Severian and his choice, we have to remember again that Severian was chosen to make the choice he makes, that indeed, his life is tampered with to produce the individual he becomes, in order to make the choice he makes. Can we really say then he had any true choice in bringing the New Sun? The fact that he can feel guilty about it and aware of the repercussions and feel sympathy for those that oppose him attest to his humanity, such as it is.

And I think the worthy Dan'I is being disingenuous in calling Dune fascist, then seeming surprised that the lovers of the book feel offended. Let's keep the term fascist for books that more clearly deserve it, like Starship Troopers <g>.

Alan

maru — 22 Mar 2005, 18:54 · in reply to lorwerth Thomas

lorwerth Thomas wrote:

There's an example from a book of ethical dilemmas [1] on how following Kant's categorical imperative regarding honesty made a female correspondent of his (and probably by extension everyone around her) extremely _unhappy_. Utilitarianism has a place in any well thought out moral philosophy, but it probably shouldn't be the only consideration. Happiness at large tends to mean the happiness of the majority in the eyes of many [2]; this can lead to people suggesting some fairly twisted things.

'And ye shall know them by their fruit'?

(At a risk of introducing a political argument into the thread, I'd ask people to examine the position of the leader of the British Opposition towards the travelling minority, and whether it'd be easier for him to make his case were he a utilitarian.)

Well, I'm visiting England tomorrow. I'll pick up some papers and see if I can.

I'd have argued that a Christian is someone who doesn't want to suffer the eternal torment of Hell, and so believes in Jesus and does what their church tells'em.

There's no actual set definition of what a Christian believes (bar the Nician (sp?) creed, and maybe not even that, if you're a liberal Anglican). There has been, since the inception of the religion, a strand that believes that either

- a) No one is in Hell, since God is merciful
- b) Hell is temporary, intended to reform, for the same reason.

It's called Universalism; there's some textual evidence that Paul was one [3]. It lost steam once most people in the West were Christian, largely because the worry that Uncle Bob, the virtuous worshipper of

Zeus, would have somewhat unfairly wound up in Hell became less of an issue.

Too bad; the idea that one should suffer infinitely for merely finitely crimes is a really lousy one, which has caused untold mental torment.

It's tempting to suggest that someone whose primary motivation for being a Christian was fear of Hell probably wouldn't do a good job of escaping Hell (if indeed, it exists and there's anyone in there) because they have the wrong motivation for what they do.

[3] On the other hand, there's textual evidence for almost any view of Paul that you wish to put forwards.

On second thoughts, if you're correct, I doubt anyone should have a problem with such a motivation, as it's quite clearly unselfish. Mich ink has no doubt been spilled on such issues.

Iorwerth

Arrgh. The point was that even apparently unselfish, principled actions can be as well, if not better, understood as enlightened selfishness as well. But fortunately no ink need die for our debate. No, 'tis the electrons and phospors who shall suffer.

I think my chief problem with this is that they could probably be understood just as well in a Jungian or Freudian outlook, depending taste - they all tend to reduce motivations to one primary thing, power, sex, happiness, whereas we always have several, including those we aren't aware of. Also, not having access to people's inner thoughts, we can't know.

I'd like to observe that to a certain extent, I'm one of those people you describe; the problem is - my inability to be happy while those around me are unhappy does not imply that, in order to do what I must to make them happy, I'll wind up happy. It just means that if they're unhappy, so am I.

Iorwerth

Wait- I must be misunderstanding you here; if truly they being unhappy means you too are unhappy, then their being happy is a **necessary** pre-requisite, thusly for you to be happy you must previously had helped them become happy (if necessary). If the link only works as a downer, well that just sucks.

~Maru

James Wynn — 22 Mar 2005, 21:59 · in reply to Tony Ellis

Tony Ellis wrote:

True. Ozymandias chose to sacrifice the few to save the many. Severian does it the other way around. :-)

Crush responded:

When one considers the generations unborn on Urth if the New Sun does not come, then the opposite is true.

To which Tony Ellis counters:

If what counts is the number of descendants the survivors of a mass slaughter might one day have, then mass slaughter on any scale, no matter how horrifically vast, can always be justified as the killing of

the few. We tend to measure these things in terms of actual people killed.

Hm. You are aware that for the Hierodules those unborn numbers have actually lived, right? It is not supposition for them as it would be for you and me and Hitler and Stalin and Ozymandias. There is simply no comparison.

And what about all the generations who **will** be born on Urth if the New Sun doesn't come? Not to mention all those born on all the other worlds to which humanity is transplanted after Urth dies. Don't they count?

Who's to say humanity would have been transplanted? There is only one ship off the planet and no one else has interstellar capabilities. As The Short Sun shows, transplanting humanity into the stars is no simple task. I'd say many fewer generations are available to humanity without the New Sun.

Both Ozymandias' and Severian's mass-murders of innocents will in theory ensure the preservation of future generations. But if you're going to differentiate between their achievements - especially in the same breath as you use the word 'fascist' - then the ratio of those saved to those slaughtered seems significant.

All fascists are not mass murderers. In fact, the fascists are probably not among the top 2 or 3 mass murderers. So I don't know why the use of the term fascist in this case is anymore jarring than using more mundane terms like "socialist", "atheist", or "collectivist". But since you believe the ratios are significant, I hope I have shown that Severian does okay against Ozymandias...especially since Ozy could not be assured that his plan would save a single life while Severian could know the benefits of his actions and the costs of his inactions into the distant mists of Time.

~ Crush

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 22 Mar 2005, 22:47 · in reply to Alan Lewis

On Tue, 22 Mar 2005 21:30:39 -0500, Alan Lewis <alanarc at frontiernet.net> wrote:
Watchman is problematic perhaps because it lacks a perfect protagonist that we know we're supposed to identify with.

I disagree: I think we are to identify with both Nite Owls, possibly both Silk Spectres, and definitely the folks on the street corner.

But if people really want to know what Moore thinks of fascism, you should read the (I think) vastly superior though less famous V is For Vendetta.

AMEN! And also Miracleman - the three together form a sort of trilogy about heroes and what they do to us.

And I think the worthy Dan'l is being disingenuous in calling Dune fascist, then seeming surprised that the lovers of the book feel offended. Let's keep the term fascist for books that more clearly deserve it, like Starship Troopers <g>.

Yeah, I'm being disingenuous.

But ST facist? A book that clearly opposes racism among humans? That takes a stand against military conscription?

--Dan'l

You probably do not want to know what that odor is.
<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

Andy Robertson — 23 Mar 2005, 00:30 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Yeah, I'm being disingenuous.

But ST fascist? A book that clearly opposes racism among humans? That takes a stand against military conscription?

You are still joking, I take it, but in case you are not, I will point out Fascism is clearly definable as an evolutionary strategy.

Fascism = the good of the genetic collective must supercede that of the individual within it, ((in order that that collective may have victory over other groups or at least survive)).

TDKR is a comic book

WATCHMEN is focussed on the rueful observation that fascism is ****necessary**** for group survival even if it is horrible and the people who are the active levers of it are not nice. There are plenty of not nice people there who are not fascists, incidentally - Rorschach being one.

V FOR VENDETTA is a much nicer but much inferior work, for the simple reason that it does not acknowledge that fascism is necessary. The fascists are simply nasty, bad, people.

ST is very simply fascist, on the level of the collective human race vs the other nonhuman races. It has no doubts about its message which is why it is not much fun to read.

All classical societies were fascist. All the classical virtues were fascist. Fascism was merely necessary morality.

Fascism is not necessarily bad: all pagan religions (and Judaism, but not Christianity or Islam) were fascist. The real worldwide (or universewide) genocides come from group centered fascists but from those who want to impose some Universal Plan on humanity for its Good: and the DUNE sequence is about this, the metamorphosis of a group from the dull normality of believing they are the Chosen People to one of believing that they have a mission to transform all of humanity to the Golden Path.

Wolfe is not fascist in any of his stories, because as a Christian he believes in a collective of the spirit not of the genes.

Unsurprisingly there is a lot of genocide in his books ;-)

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nastler — 23 Mar 2005, 02:16 · in reply to maru

Maru said:

"I say we see the unreality of Urth and do not condemn the slaying of shadows."

I disagree.

Urth only seems unreal because we see it through Sev, and he is not well in his head. Compare with the Urth

sections related for us in SS.

"Urth IS real (and I, unfortunately, am nastler)."

Maru said:

"let us not forget the play in TBotNS; I once was told that the play was like a skeleton key to the whole cycle. It makes a certain sense that there would be a parallel between the old people in the play being hunted and killed (I'm not sure about the killing bit- its been a while since I read the play) and actual 'Old Sun'ers being killed. The whole eschatological cleansing of the world, Apocalypse now, Jerusalem being made anew, and a third of the population shall be struck down etc. etc."

MESCHIA: "Do you think you are more than a corpse? You are less"

This line of the play, spoken by Sev, is his opinion of his fellow Urthers. It is what allows him to do what he does.

nastler — 23 Mar 2005, 02:31 · in reply to lorwerth Thomas

Batman is a stern father figure (in reality a middle-aged bachelor) and all his enemies are his "sons" who act outrageously (gay?) to attract his attention. He therefore creates and shapes his enemies actions and attributes.

cf. Spiderman who is a(n outrageous) son to all his most famous enemies (Osbourne, Connors, Octavius, etc.)

nastler

--- lorwerth Thomas <lorweththomas at hotmail.com> skrev:

Regarding TDK, I think the British sf magazine SFX had a feature on it in which Miller was of the opinion that most of Gotham's villains were as they were due to the presence of Batman; the theory put forwards by the tv psychologist that Batman is the locus of the chaos (since criminals define themselves against him) is in fact what is going on. This suggests a reading in which the events of the graphic novel are nothing but a psychotic wish fulfillment fantasy for Bruce Wayne; a nice

comment on some undercurrents of the superhero genre. On that reading, it's no more fascist than Spinrad's 'The Iron Dream'.

David Lebling — 23 Mar 2005, 05:44 · in reply to Andy Robertson

All classical societies were fascist. All the classical virtues were fascist. Fascism was merely necessary morality.

Umm, I don't think that word means what you think it means. It is not a synonym for "authoritarian" or "imperialist" or "social-system-I-don't-like" any more than "communist" is.

Just for starters, fascism requires a capitalist underpinning, which didn't exist in any classical society. If you wish to say that the fascists claimed to believe in the classical virtues, then there's a possibility of discussion, but you have the causal relationship reversed here.

There hasn't been much discussion of the economic basis of the Commonwealth, which seems at first glance to be not unlike the late Byzantine Empire on which it is loosely based. There are clearly merchants, there are clearly stout yeoman farmers, there is a nobility, etc.

However, there is also totally unbelievable prohibition of land-based trade (why do the inhabitants of Saltus delve in the ruins if there is no trade that would allow them to sell off the things they discover, for example?). It's clear that there is some sort of latifundia system (run by the nobility) going on in the areas relatively near Nessus, and that the peasantry (and the urban poor) flee to the wild lands to establish farms, but who buys the produce of those farms and how is it transported? Apparently river travel is permitted, but there aren't rivers everywhere. How is Nessus fed?

Where are the factories that produce the energy weapons used in the battles with Ascia? Are all those weapons leftover from a previous industrial civilization? I doubt it.

Where is the Detroit or Pittsburgh (or Shanghai, for that matter) to correspond to Nessus's New York or Washington?

(It's clear there is some level of trade with the cacogens, but apparently not a lot as their devices are extremely rare and expensive.)

-- Dave Lebling, aka vizcacha

James Wynn — 23 Mar 2005, 05:47 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

But if people really want to know what Moore thinks of fascism, you should read the (I think) vastly superior though less famous *V is For Vendetta*.

I hope I didn't say I thought Moore is/was a fascist. I said I believe *THE WATCHMEN* is fascist. The interpretations that ameliorate its most straightforward reading have made me see that Moore *might* have not intended it: *THE WATCHMEN* *might* be flawed in that the author's intended drift is so nuanced that the work actually conveys a theme that is the opposite of what Moore wanted.

Fascism = the good of the genetic collective must supercede that of the individual within it, ((in order that that collective may have victory over other groups or at least survive)).

I remember lorwerth said we should establish a definition for "fascism" before continuing. I'd say this declaration of terms from Andy bears out that admonition. IMO this definition is both too narrow and far far too broad.

Personally, I don't think I use the term "fascism" lightly, and while I do consider TDKR and WATCHMEN to be uniquely fascist among the most popular fan fiction in my experience (partly because one influenced the other IMO), I don't yet see the same thing in DUNE or STARSHIP TROOPERS or SF generally -- certainly not to the same extent. Fascism is not merely the opposite of Libertarianism.

But since I don't think refining a definition of fascism to be useful to this list, and I don't think this subject can progress without one, I regret my original superfluous interjection regarding THE WATCHMEN.

~ Crush

maru — 23 Mar 2005, 05:51 · in reply to David Lebling

David Lebling wrote:

Where are the factories that produce the energy weapons used in the battles with Ascia? Are all those weapons leftover from a previous industrial civilization? I doubt it.

Where is the Detroit or Pittsburgh (or Shanghai, for that matter) to correspond to Nessus's New York or Washington?

(It's clear there is some level of trade with the cacogens, but apparently not a lot as their devices are extremely rare and expensive.)

-- Dave Lebling, aka vizcacha

I do not know the answer to the other questions, but for those, remember, we are talking distant aeons into the future, and they are in the southern hemisphere anyway, so we wouldn't hear of most of those cities..

~Maru

That is Not Dead Which Can Eternal Lie,
And With Strange Aeons, Even Death May Die.

maru — 23 Mar 2005, 05:57 · in reply to nastler

nastler wrote:

Maru said:

"I say we see the unreality of Urth and do not condemn the slaying of shadows."

I disagree.

Urth only seems unreal because we see it through Sev, and he is not well in his head. Compare with the Urth sections related for us in SS.

"Urth IS real (and I, unfortunately, am nastler)."

Are you so sure? Certainly Urth seems unreal through Severian's eyes, but considering the actual events he narrates, I'd call it dreamlike & unreal no matter who narrates them. Who could put the stamp of sanity onto Talos' play? on the Green Man? on the House Absolute or the tale Thecla recounts about Father Inire, or for that matter Thecla herself? Did not the vignette of the librarian seem a shred stolen from a Borgesian world of un-possibility? /hasn't read the Short Sun books. /me hangs head in shame.

Maru said:

"let us not forget the play in TBotNS; I once was told that the play was like a skeleton key to the whole cycle. It makes a certain sense that there would be a parallel between the old people in the play being hunted and killed (I'm not sure about the killing bit- its been a while since I read the play) and actual 'Old Sun'ers being killed. The whole eschatological cleansing of the world, Apocalypse now, Jerusalem being made anew, and a third of the population shall be struck down etc. etc."

MESCHIA: "Do you think you are more than a corpse? You are less"

This line of the play, spoken by Sev, is his opinion of his fellow Urthers. It is what allows him to do what he does.

Ya nailed it. That was practically the exact line I was thinking of.

~Maru

That's impossible~

Andy Robertson — 23 Mar 2005, 08:03 · in reply to David Lebling

David Lebling writes:

All classical societies were fascist. All the classical virtues were fascist. Fascism was merely necessary morality.

Umm, I don't think that word means what you think it means.

fascies = bundle of sticks, is what it means: a group that cannot be broken, because it is a collective.

I am not under the illusion that it's a synonym for "nasty", in fact that was very much the point of my last post.

Tony Ellis — 23 Mar 2005, 11:45 · follows James Wynn

I wrote:

And what about all the generations who *will* be born on Urth if the New Sun doesn't come? Not to mention all those born on all the other worlds to which humanity is transplanted after Urth dies. Don't they count?

Crush countered:

Who's to say humanity would have been transplanted?

Master Ashe says.

"At this time, many of your people are already gone," Master Ashe continued. "Those you call the cagogens have mercifully carried them to fairer worlds. Many more will leave before the final victory of the ice. I am myself, you see, descended from those refugees." TCOTA. Chapter XVII

Humanity does not die if Severian fails to bring the New Sun. It is taken to better worlds, where it continues.

Severian's murder of millions can't be said to preserve any more unborn generations than Ozymandias' murder of thousands.

since you believe the ratios are significant, I hope I have shown that Severian does okay against Ozymandias...

Well, no. See above.

James Wynn — 23 Mar 2005, 15:06 · in reply to Tony Ellis

Tony Ellis wrote:

And what about all the generations who *will* be born on Urth if the New Sun doesn't come? Not to mention all those born on all the other worlds to which humanity is transplanted after Urth dies. Don't they count?

Crush countered:

Who's to say humanity would have been transplanted?

Master Ashe says.

"At this time, many of your people are already gone," Master Ashe continued. "Those you call the cagogens have mercifully carried them to fairer worlds. Many more will leave before the final victory of the ice. I am myself, you see, descended from those refugees." TCOTA. Chapter XVII

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Very good point, excellent reference. I can see how you can read it that way if you choose to. However, I understood "many of your people" to be a fraction of a small remnant of humanity surviving at the end of Old Sun's lifecycle, and I understood "better worlds" to mean "better than Urth is at the end of the Old Sun's life cycle." Green and Blue in "The Short Sun" are undoubtedly better than Master Ashe's world, but they are hardly paradises for the colonists. It seems to me that in Ashe's stream of time, many will die early and unfruitful as the Old Sun dies out, and humanity is finished as far as being a species with a significant future -- and the Hierodules are seeking a significant future for humanity. They'll hold on on the Typhon's and Tzadkiel's starcrossers and on a few scattered systems. Severian has seen both outcomes. He

can examine them at any time. The New Sun is the outcome he chose. In "UotNS" he appreciates that others could see it differently. Perhaps if you were on Severian's ship, you would be among those trying to assassinate him like someone going back in Time to assassinate Hitler when he was a failed Art student.

But Sev CAN objectively analyze both outcomes. He's not a Stalin, Hitler, or Ozymandias killing multitudes to remake the world according to some vision in their own minds. He's a surgeon performing triage on a dying world.

~ Crush

Jason Willard — 23 Mar 2005, 18:25 · in reply to James Wynn

Hope this isn't too long!

Robert O. Paxton in his book *The Anatomy of Fascism* says: "Fascism may be defined as a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion."

Roger Griffin defines fascism as "a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism."

Umberto Eco lists the following 14 traits of 'ur-fascism':

"...But in spite of this fuzziness, I think it is possible to outline a list of features that are typical of what I would like to call Ur-Fascism, or Eternal Fascism. These features cannot be organized into a system; many of them contradict each other, and are also typical of other kinds of despotism or fanaticism. But it is enough that one of them be present to allow fascism to coagulate around it.

1. The first feature of Ur-Fascism is the cult of tradition. Traditionalism is of course much older than fascism. Not only was it typical of counter-revolutionary Catholic thought after the French revolution, but it was born in the late Hellenistic era, as a reaction to classical Greek rationalism. In the Mediterranean basin, people of different religions (most of them indulgently accepted by the Roman Pantheon) started dreaming of a revelation received at the dawn of human history. This revelation, according to the traditionalist mystique, had remained for a long time concealed under the veil of forgotten languages—in Egyptian hieroglyphs, in the Celtic runes, in the scrolls of the little known religions of Asia.

This new culture had to be syncretistic. Syncretism is not only, as the dictionary says, "the combination of different forms of belief or practice"; such a combination must tolerate contradictions. Each of the original messages contains a silver of wisdom, and whenever they seem to say different or incompatible things it is only because all are alluding, allegorically, to the same primeval truth.

As a consequence, there can be no advancement of learning. Truth has been already spelled out once and for all, and we can only keep interpreting its obscure message.

One has only to look at the syllabus of every fascist movement to find the major traditionalist thinkers. The Nazi gnosis was nourished by traditionalist, syncretistic, occult elements. The most influential theoretical source of the theories of the new Italian right, Julius Evola, merged the Holy Grail with The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, alchemy with the Holy Roman and Germanic Empire. The very fact that the Italian right, in order to show its open-mindedness,

recently broadened its syllabus to include works by De Maistre, Guenon, and Gramsci, is a blatant proof of syncretism.

If you browse in the shelves that, in American bookstores, are labeled as New Age, you can find there even Saint Augustine who, as far as I know, was not a fascist. But combining Saint Augustine and Stonehenge-that is a symptom of Ur-Fascism.

2. Traditionalism implies the rejection of modernism. Both Fascists and Nazis worshiped technology, while traditionalist thinkers usually reject it as a negation of traditional spiritual values. However, even though Nazism was proud of its industrial achievements, its praise of modernism was only the surface of an ideology based upon Blood and Earth (Blut und Boden). The rejection of the modern world was disguised as a rebuttal of the capitalistic way of life, but it mainly concerned the rejection of the Spirit of 1789 (and of 1776, of course). The Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, is seen as the beginning of modern depravity. In this sense Ur-Fascism can be defined as irrationalism.

3. Irrationalism also depends on the cult of action for action's sake. Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation. Therefore culture is suspect insofar as it is identified with critical attitudes. Distrust of the intellectual world has always been a symptom of Ur-Fascism, from Goering's alleged statement ("When I hear talk of culture I reach for my gun") to the frequent use of such expressions as "degenerate intellectuals," "eggheads," "effete snobs," "universities are a nest of reds." The official Fascist intellectuals were mainly engaged in attacking modern culture and the liberal intelligentsia for having betrayed traditional values.

4. No syncretistic faith can withstand analytical criticism. The critical spirit makes distinctions, and to distinguish is a sign of modernism. In modern culture the scientific community praises disagreement as a way to improve knowledge. For Ur-Fascism, disagreement is treason.

5. Besides, disagreement is a sign of diversity. Ur-Fascism grows up and seeks for consensus by exploiting and exacerbating the natural fear of difference. The first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist movement is an appeal against the intruders. Thus Ur-Fascism is racist by definition.

6. Ur-Fascism derives from individual or social frustration. That is why one of the most typical features of the historical fascism was the appeal to a frustrated middle class, a class suffering from an economic crisis or feelings of political humiliation, and frightened by the pressure of lower social groups. In our time, when the old "proletarians" are becoming petty bourgeois (and the lumpen are largely excluded from the political scene), the fascism of tomorrow will find its audience in this new majority.

7. To people who feel deprived of a clear social identity, Ur-Fascism says that their only privilege is the most common one, to be born in the same country. This is the origin of nationalism. Besides, the only ones who can provide an identity to the nation are its enemies. Thus at the root of the Ur-Fascist psychology there is the obsession with a plot, possibly an international one. The followers must feel besieged. The easiest way to solve the plot is the appeal to xenophobia. But the plot must also come from the inside: Jews are usually the best target because they have the advantage of being at the same time inside and outside. In the US, a prominent instance of the plot obsession is to be found in Pat Robertson's The New World Order, but, as we have recently seen, there are many others.

8. The followers must feel humiliated by the ostentatious wealth and force of their enemies. When I was a boy I was taught to think of Englishmen as the five-meal people. They ate more

frequently than the poor but sober Italians. Jews are rich and help each other through a secret web of mutual assistance. However, the followers must be convinced that they can overwhelm the enemies. Thus, by a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak. Fascist governments are condemned to lose wars because they are constitutionally incapable of objectively evaluating the force of the enemy.

9. For Ur-Fascism there is no struggle for life but, rather, life is lived for struggle. Thus pacifism is trafficking with the enemy. It is bad because life is permanent warfare. This, however, brings about an Armageddon complex. Since enemies have to be defeated, there must be a final battle, after which the movement will have control of the world. But such a "final solution" implies a further era of peace, a Golden Age, which contradicts the principle of permanent war. No fascist leader has ever succeeded in solving this predicament.

10. Elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology, insofar as it is fundamentally aristocratic, and aristocratic and militaristic elitism cruelly implies contempt for the weak. Ur-Fascism can only advocate a popular elitism. Every citizen belongs to the best people of the world, the members of the party are the best among the citizens, every citizen can (or ought to) become a member of the party. But there cannot be patricians without plebeians. In fact, the Leader, knowing that his power was not delegated to him democratically but was conquered by force, also knows that his force is based upon the weakness of the masses; they are so weak as to need and deserve a ruler. Since the group is hierarchically organized (according to a military model), every subordinate leader despises his own underlings, and each of them despises his inferiors. This reinforces the sense of mass elitism.

11. In such a perspective everybody is educated to become a hero. In every mythology the hero is an exceptional being, but in Ur-Fascist ideology, heroism is the norm. This cult of heroism is strictly linked with the cult of death. It is not by chance that a motto of the Falangists was *Viva la Muerte* (in English it should be translated as "Long Live Death!"). In non-fascist societies, the lay public is told that death is unpleasant but must be faced with dignity; believers are told that it is the painful way to reach a supernatural happiness. By contrast, the Ur-Fascist hero craves heroic death, advertised as the best reward for a heroic life. The Ur-Fascist hero is impatient to die. In his impatience, he more frequently sends other people to death.

12. Since both permanent war and heroism are difficult games to play, the Ur-Fascist transfers his will to power to sexual matters. This is the origin of machismo (which implies both disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality). Since even sex is a difficult game to play, the Ur-Fascist hero tends to play with weapons-doing so becomes an ersatz phallic exercise.

13. Ur-Fascism is based upon a selective populism, a qualitative populism, one might say. In a democracy, the citizens have individual rights, but the citizens in their entirety have a political impact only from a quantitative point of view-one follows the decisions of the majority. For Ur-Fascism, however, individuals as individuals have no rights, and the People is conceived as a quality, a monolithic entity expressing the Common Will. Since no large quantity of human beings can have a common will, the Leader pretends to be their interpreter. Having lost their power of delegation, citizens do not act; they are only called on to play the role of the People. Thus the People is only a theatrical fiction. To have a good instance of qualitative populism we no longer need the Piazza Venezia in Rome or the Nuremberg Stadium. There is in our future a TV or Internet populism, in which the emotional response of a selected group of citizens can be presented and accepted as the Voice of the People.

Because of its qualitative populism Ur-Fascism must be against "rotten" parliamentary governments. One of the first sentences uttered by Mussolini in the Italian parliament was "I

could have transformed this deaf and gloomy place into a bivouac for my maniples"- "maniples" being a subdivision of the traditional Roman legion. As a matter of fact, he immediately found better housing for his maniples, but a little later he liquidated the parliament. Wherever a politician casts doubt on the legitimacy of a parliament because it no longer represents the Voice of the People, we can smell Ur-Fascism.

14. Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak. Newspeak was invented by Orwell, in 1984, as the official language of Ingsoc, English Socialism. But elements of Ur-Fascism are common to different forms of dictatorship. All the Nazi or Fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning. But we must be ready to identify other kinds of Newspeak, even if they take the apparently innocent form of a popular talk show..."

So, I don't know if this particular word, 'fascism', is the one we want to be using so frequently... or we should at least be more aware of its subtleties.

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

From: James Wynn<mailto:thewynns at earthlink.net>

Chris — 23 Mar 2005, 22:08 · in reply to James Wynn

I too thought that was a great reference, and brings into even sharper contrast Severian's choice. And I think Crush's words here are revealing of something, though I am hesitant to assert exactly what it means. Sev is a surgeon for Urth, for his "world". This "world" is not equatable with the people on it (almost all of them die) or their future generations (because they could just as easily be born on another world, though the proportion may or may not be exactly the same). He is not saving his "race", because humans already exist elsewhere in the universe and, ultimately, the form of life that comes to dominate the rejuvenated world may be human-descended but is not necessarily "human" as we'd understand the term. What is Severian saving? We could try to answer with a name, "Urth", but even the *name* changes (and if name-changes are suggestive of anything, they are suggestions that the named entity being referred to has changed).

The fact that the answer to this question ("What is Severian saving?") seemed so clear, and yet becomes so murky when we try to focus on it, to me indicates that there is more to our intuitive understanding of BotNS than we are commonly aware of.

In a side note, I've had a bizarre afternoon. Out of 4 papers I saw presented today, all four mentioned torture and 3 of them explicitly used the term "torturer" - despite there being little to no reason for that subject to even come up. (2 were on abortion, 1 on character issues, and 1 on addiction). Synchronicity...

-- Civet

But Sev CAN objectively analyze both outcomes. He's not a Stalin, Hitler, or Ozymandias killing multitudes to remake the world according to some vision in their own minds. He's a surgeon performing triage on a dying world.

~ Crush

Roy C. Lackey — 23 Mar 2005, 23:07 · follows Chris

Crush, arguing with Tony:

Tony Ellis wrote:

And what about all the generations who *will* be born on Urth if the New Sun doesn't come? Not to mention all those born on all the other worlds to which humanity is transplanted after Urth dies. Don't they count?

Crush countered:

Who's to say humanity would have been transplanted?

Master Ashe says.

"At this time, many of your people are already gone," Master Ashe continued. "Those you call the cagogens have mercifully carried them to fairer worlds. Many more will leave before the final victory of the ice. I am myself, you see, descended from those refugees." TCOTA. Chapter XVII

Humanity does not die if Severian fails to bring the New Sun. It is taken to better worlds, where it continues. Severian's murder of millions can't be said to preserve any more unborn generations than Ozymandias' murder of thousands.

Very good point, excellent reference. I can see how you can read it that way

if you choose to. However, I understood "many of your people" to be a fraction of a small remnant of humanity surviving at the end of Old Sun's lifecycle, and I understood "better worlds" to mean "better than Urth is at the end of the Old Sun's life cycle." Green and Blue in "The Short Sun" are undoubtedly better than Master Ashe's world, but they are hardly paradises for the colonists. It seems to me that in Ashe's stream of time, many will die early and unfruitful as the Old Sun dies out, and humanity is finished as far as being a species with a significant future -- and the Hierodules are seeking a significant future for humanity. They'll hold on on the Typhon's and Tzadkiel's starcrossers and on a few scattered systems.

You forget that Typhon "once ruled this planet, and many more." (SWORD, p.-188) The survival of humanity does not depend on what happens on Urth, as I've said before. To remove any reasonable doubt, I submit the following quote:

Severian to Apheta: URTH, p.-135, both hb & pb

"Is Urth really so important to you?"

She shook her head.

"Then why bother with it or me?"

"Because your race is important to us. It would be far less laborious if we could deal with it all at once, but you are sown over tens of thousands of worlds, and we cannot."

Severian has seen both outcomes. He can examine them at any time. The New Sun is the outcome he chose. In "UotNS" he appreciates that others could see

it differently. Perhaps if you were on Severian's ship, you would be among those trying to assassinate him like someone going back in Time to assassinate Hitler when he was a failed Art student.

But Sev CAN objectively analyze both outcomes. He's not a Stalin, Hitler, or

Ozymandias killing multitudes to remake the world according to some vision in their own minds. He's a surgeon performing triage on a dying world.

The "ice future" was a contrived consequence of Man's uppity behavior. The coming of the New Sun, and the death and destruction it entailed for Man's ancestral home, was a symbolic sacrifice to appease a vengeful Increate. This is not merely my opinion; it is what the text says:

Tzadkiel to Sev: URTH, p.-153

"Or if you wish it put in another way, you have already passed our testing, which was an examination of the future you will create. You are the New Sun. You will be returned to your Urth, and the White Fountain will go with you. The death agonies of the world you know will be offered to the Increate. And they will be indescribable--continents will founder, as has been said. Much that is beautiful will perish, and with it most of your race; but your home will be reborn."

This isn't the first time I've posted this quote, but the sweetness-and-light variety of Christians seem to find it disturbing. I can't help that; I didn't write it, but there it is.

-Roy

James Wynn — 24 Mar 2005, 11:32 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

It seems to me that in Ashe's stream of time, many will die early and unfruitful as the Old Sun dies out, and humanity is finished as far as being a species with a significant future -- and the Hierodules are seeking a significant future for humanity. They'll hold on on the Typhon's and Tzadkiel's starcrossers and on a few scattered systems.

You forget that Typhon "once ruled this planet, and many more." (SWORD, p.-188)

Okay. But for all we know, he may be referring to Blue and Green and other such colonies founded by the Whorl. In that case, it is hardly a thriving empire.

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"Because your race is important to us. It would be far less laborious if we could deal with it all at once, but you are sown over tens of thousands of worlds, and we cannot."

Doesn't this quote suggest that the opposite is true? That the future of humanity hinges largely on the fate of Urth? Humanity may survive if Urth goes cold...heck, it most certainly will survive on the Tzadikel since the travel beyond Time itself...they might survive for millenia on other planets and on ships like the Whorl like pigmy woolly mammoths on isolated islands, but there will be no significant human civilization, no Green Man, and no Hierodules.

But Sev CAN objectively analyze both outcomes...He's a surgeon performing triage on a dying world.

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perish, and with it most of your race; but your home will
be reborn."

This isn't the first time I've posted this quote, but the
sweetness-and-light variety of Christians seem to find it disturbing. I
can't help that; I didn't write it, but there it is.

At risk of being identified for the first time in my life with some "sweetness-and-light" brigade, I have to ask for more support than this. This quote does not say the Sun was wounded by Hierodules..not for Man's uppity behavior or anything else. The line about the "death agonies" of Urth being "offered to the Increate" is enigmatic but it is surely a metaphor -- for what, I have no idea. If the New Sun *is* some sort of virgin-into-the-volcano sacrifice (an angle belied by the Apheta quote you offered), there is no evidence that the Increate has ASKED for that sacrifice or that he/she is in any way involved.

So much could be made clear if I understood how Severian WAS the New Sun (which he and Apheta are somehow the parents of as well) or why a white fountain follows him to Urth and decides to plant itself in the Sun.

~ Crush

Adam Stephanides — 24 Mar 2005, 14:25 · in reply to James Wynn

on 3/23/05 5:05 PM, James Wynn at thewynns at earthlink.net wrote:
Tony Ellis wrote:

Master Ashe says.

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Even if the Urthians who would be evacuated would be only a fraction of Urth's population, they'd probably be more numerous than those who survive the New Sun's coming are; and

hence their descendants would be more numerous than the descendants of Urth's survivors in the timeline Sev picks.

Green and Blue in "The Short Sun" are undoubtedly better than Master Ashe's world

They're better than being drowned, too.

Severian has seen both outcomes.

Iirc, he hasn't seen the New Sun, just heard about it from the green man. And when he did so he didn't know that the cost of the New Sun's arrival would be the death of Urth's current population.

But Sev CAN objectively analyze both outcomes.

Perhaps he can (though, given his mental condition, his ability to "objectively analyze" anything seems questionable), but does he? He doesn't have any inkling of the New Sun's true cost until Tzadkiel tells him at the trial (p. 153, hardcover edition), and iirc he never undertakes any analysis before deciding to carry out his "mission." In fact, even after Tzadkiel's words he apparently still doesn't realize the full cost of the New Sun until after it arrives: on p. 295, he thinks "When the New Sun arrived, our Commonwealth would require a ruler who understood what had taken place," not realizing that after the New Sun arrives there will be no Commonwealth. So any analysis he had made before the fact would be flawed.

--Adam

James Wynn — 24 Mar 2005, 21:16 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

Tony Ellis wrote:

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I don't know why that would be. The Cold Urth generations are surely much less fruitful, die earlier, and lose more in childhood than the New Urth generations or generations on planets like Blue and Green. Each generation that is only a little more fruitful will yield exponential increases in only a few centuries. I have no idea how many Urthlings survived the Deluge, but I'm guessing more than you are, I think.

Green and Blue in "The Short Sun" are undoubtedly better than Master Ashe's world

They're better than being drowned, too.

Yes, but now you are being argumentative. They can't all be evacuated or Master Ashe would be studying a depopulated planet.

Severian has seen both outcomes.

lirc, he hasn't seen the New Sun, just heard about it from the green man. And when he did so he didn't know that the cost of the New Sun's arrival would be the death of Urth's current population.

I could be recalling wrong but I understood Sev was quite busy on those streams of Time.

~ Crush

Chris — 24 Mar 2005, 23:37 · in reply to maru

Maru said:

Yes, but if you are using an objective system, you can fight back easily; science strives for objectivity, and generally bows to who has better data and explanations, not who is spouting the rhetoric. What about when you have subjective systems? There you are denied even that bare chance of making a rational case against the current sub-goals.

I wasn't trying to imply that this somehow made objective worse than subjective/relative; I tend to think the opposite is true. But both have their own characteristic flaws, and the flaw you originally mentioned happened to be common to pretty much all forms of moral objectivism, not just to duty-based systems. And I had no other point in that regard.

Not just unproblematic, but commendable. Severian could have refused, and doomed the Urthians to their previous doom, but he did not, he took that cross on himself. The situation is analogous to a doomed terminal dying patient (say, a 110 year old man), who somehow has multiple livers in perfect shape (bear with me), and if you, the doctor will take that burden on yourself, you can slice out those livers and give them to a bunch of other people who are about to perish of not-having-liver-ness, thus saving say a dozen lives while hastening another out the door.

The example you describe is similar to a standard thought problem brought up by (or against) utilitarians, and it's harsher than you describe. Let's say you're a doctor with multiple patients waiting for transplants. In the ER you happen to get a friendless hobo who has nothing wrong with him, he just passed out drunk. Now maybe his liver happens to be shot, but all his other organs are in good shape. As a utilitarian the commendable thing to do is to carve up the hobo for spare parts for your other patients.

But even further than that, in that doctor's position, as a utilitarian, the even BETTER thing for you to do is to send a couple orderlies out around town collecting the homeless until you get as many organs as you need. (Of course it doesn't *have* to be homeless people, but the homeless provide optimal utility because fewer people will be distressed by their passing and they tend to lead low-quality lives anyway).

Now, I understand that there are some utilitarians who would wholeheartedly give the thumbs-up to this (although as far as I can tell *most* of them react to this example by coming up with a rationale as to why they wouldn't really do that), and you may be one of them. However if you don't see why those of us who don't share your view would find this sort of thing disturbing, "ghoulish" even, I don't know what to tell you.

The difference is: Severian's plan /worked/. All the credit, all the blame...

In the consequentialist world perhaps, but the comment you're responding to was from a duty perspective, and in matters of duty/rules, justification doesn't proceed by results.

Even utilitarian systems, in practice, aren't entirely consequentialist; if you drink two cases of

beer, pack up your 4 kids in a car and go driving down the road at 100 mph, even the utilitarian will not morally praise you because by some freak accident this combination of actions just happened to save a bus full of nuns.

There also remains the question: by what standard are you judging Severian's plan "good" (and thus his actions "good", because the plan worked)? And this is ultimately the exact same question we started with when trying to judge Severian. Appealing to his success does not advance us any steps closer to an answer to this.

Another thing: Severian is the rightful autarch of Urth; as a feudal/fascist ruler, he claims ultimate authority over his subjects. No wonder he wouldn't worry whether he should do it or not.

He is not the Autarch of Urth, he is the Autarch of the Commonwealth, a single kingdom on Urth among others. But even if he were the Autarch of all of Urth, why should this matter to *us* in judging his character?

As a side note with talk of fascism running rampant in the list I find myself reflecting that tyranny and fascism were not aspects that I strongly associated with Autarchy when I first read the books. My first impression, even at this point, when someone calls Severian "the Autarch" is to think: self-ruled, self-ruler. Only by extension do I reach an idea of governing others.

It could be that as Autarch, he has already been judged or advised so many times, by people so far above the norm in intelligence, knowledge, and experience that he doesn't give a flip about what the reader may think, he stands with the giants, and their appraisal is what matters.

Except that he obviously does care about the reader's opinion of his actions, even down to his relationships with various women.

In subsequent conversation since your post it has been cited that Severian doesn't appear to even recognize the consequences of what he's going to do until he gets to the trial. This is interesting, but I think that he is either being evasive with us on this point and pretending ignorance, or else he kept himself *willfully* ignorant up to that point. Severian is perfectly aware that natives of Urth - perhaps even *most* natives of Urth - do not like what he is planning on doing, would stop him if they could, and may even try to kill him. How does he know this without having some clue as to why they're so dead set against his project? And doesn't it seem odd that he would not ask this question, even as they did try to kill him?

Severian in this respect is a figure of - for lack of a better word - "fanatical" certainty. And this seems a certainty based more on some intuition or faith, some inherent value he holds, rather than a matter of rational deliberation.

I do not think the dual 'heavenly-New-Sun-with-no-real-free-will' and 'human-Severian' is much of a problem; at least it wasn't for most of Christinaity, and their human portion was not even a torturer but a tortured.

I expected someone else to answer this but it passed under the radar. To envision Christ without free will *would* be a problem in Christianity, a big problem. Part of the significance of his sacrifice is that Christ, alone among humans, never sinned, yet paid the price for all sinners. His never sinning itself has no significance at all if he could have sinned. And in another sense, it is important that Christ was also free to put his burden down.

In any event I'm not sure whether this particular point is any help with Severian's case.

Sorry to be so contrary. My next post will be much more agreeable, I promise.

Civet

Roy C. Lackey — 25 Mar 2005, 01:05 · follows James Wynn

Crush quoted me and wrote:

You forget that Typhon "once ruled this planet, and many more." (SWORD, p.-188)

Okay. But for all we know, he may be referring to Blue and Green and other such colonies founded by the Whorl. In that case, it is hardly a thriving empire.

You're really reaching now. You know perfectly well that Typhon established his Second Empire before he even came to Urth; that the _Whorl_ was built and stocked _after_ he came to Urth (Marble and Hammerstone were manufactured on Urth, and where do you think those "sleepers" came from? Remember Duko Rigoglio, aka Roger? He recognized his former neighborhood in the ruins of Nessus and said "They forced me to board the _Whorl_ and put me to sleep." IGJ, p.-315), and that Typhon ruled neither Blue nor Green, which were colonized three centuries (ship's time) after his death.

The survival of humanity does not depend on what happens on Urth, as I've said before. To remove any reasonable doubt, I submit the following quote:

Severian to Apheta: URTH, p.-135, both hb & pb

"Is Urth really so important to you?"

She shook her head.

"Then why bother with it or me?"

"Because your race is important to us. It would be far less laborious if we could deal with it all at once, but you are sown over tens of thousands of worlds, and we cannot."

Doesn't this quote suggest that the opposite is true? That the future of humanity hinges largely on the fate of Urth? Humanity may survive if Urth goes cold...heck, it most certainly will survive on the Tzadikel since the travel beyond Time itself...they might survive for millenia on other planets

and on ships like the Whorl like pigmy wooly mammoths on isolated islands, but there will be no significant human civilization, no Green Man, and no Hierodules.

What part of "you are sown over tens of thousands of worlds" do you find ambiguous? As for the Hierodules, see p.-137-38 in URTH. To summarize: In a previous iteration of universes, uppity Man created the Hierogrammates. That universe died and the Hierogrammates were the only work of Man to survive its death. The Hierodules were created by the Hierogrammates to be their servants. My point here is that the Hierogrammates exist _outside_ of time and the boom/bust cycle of universes. If the Hierogrammates can survive the death of a whole universe, then they will certainly survive anything that happens to a single planet.

In the current universe, where Urth's sun is dying, Typhon set out to build a Second Empire to rival the First. The H's weren't going to let him. They stopped him, partly out of spite, as revenge for the wrongs done to their ancestors during the course of their creation by Man, and partly at the behest of the Increate, who had been down that road before and didn't like where it ended. The H's are archangels who have the ear of the Increate, and who do his bidding. If that last statement isn't true, then Severian was a colossal dupe in an epic crime and Wolfe's

Urth Cycle is a farce.

The "ice future" was a contrived consequence of Man's uppity behavior. The coming of the New Sun, and the death and destruction it entailed for Man's ancestral home, was a symbolic sacrifice to appease a vengeful Increate. This is not merely my opinion; it is what the text says:

Tzadkiel to Sev: URTH, p.-153

"You are the New Sun. You will be returned
to your Urth, and the White Fountain will go with you.
The death agonies of the world you know will be offered to
the Increate. And they will be indescribable--continents
will founder, as has been said. Much that is beautiful will
perish, and with it most of your race; but your home will
be reborn."

This isn't the first time I've posted this quote, but the
sweetness-and-light variety of Christians seem to find it disturbing. I
can't help that; I didn't write it, but there it is.

At risk of being identified for the first time in my life with some
"sweetness-and-light" brigade, I have to ask for more support than this.
This quote does not say the Sun was wounded by Hierodules..not for Man's
uppity behavior or anything else. The line about the "death agonies" of
Urth
being "offered to the Increate" is enigmatic but it is surely a metaphor --
for what, I have no idea. If the New Sun *is* some sort of
virgin-into-the-volcano sacrifice (an angle belied by the Apheta quote you
offered), there is no evidence that the Increate has ASKED for that
sacrifice or that he/she is in any way involved.

Do you think Tzadkiel lied? I don't. Do archangels lie? If he lied about that he may have lied
about everything. Do we get to choose which things to believe? Urth wasn't drowned by a
metaphor. Two things are certain; the New Sun was created by the efforts of the
Hierogrammates, and old Urth was wiped clean by it. If the Increate, who "so loved the world
...", allowed that world to be destroyed, then it must have been by his will; that or he was
powerless to stop it and the H's were running the show. Pick one. Either one. If the former then
the text means just what it says; if the latter then the Christian veneer of the New
Sun/Conciliator falls to pieces.

-Roy

Tony Ellis — 25 Mar 2005, 10:18 · follows James Wynn

Crush wrote:

But Sev CAN objectively analyze both outcomes. He's not a Stalin,
Hitler, or Ozymandias killing multitudes to remake the world
according to some vision in their own minds.

And later:

I could be recalling wrong but I understood Sev was quite
busy on those streams of Time.

Well, this is the thing. Severian doesn't even start to travel the streams of time until after he
has returned to Urth from Yesod, New Sun in tow. His very first time-hop takes him to the day
the New Sun arrives. After that it doesn't matter how busy he is on the streams of time, or what
he sees, because he's already brought the New Sun.

Severian does kill multitudes without making an objective analysis of the outcome. And on a scale that makes Ozymandias look like Bob Geldof.

Adam Stephanides — 25 Mar 2005, 18:28 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

on 3/25/05 3:05 AM, Roy C. Lackey at rclackey at stic.net wrote:
The H's are archangels who have the ear of the Increate, and
who do his bidding.

Do you have a quote for this? You certainly know the text better than I do; but my vague recollection had been that while the H's believe they are doing the will of the Increate, they have no privileged access to this will.

--Adam

Chris — 25 Mar 2005, 23:48 · in reply to maru

An exchange:

Sort of half-related, someone also raised a good point to me about how in a sense our judgments of Severian, or Urth in general, seem only semi-real in the first place (even for a work of fiction) because Severian has a way of talking as if he were half-dreaming. This strikes a chord with me; Urth never seemed real as a "place" to me but had the sort of geography of a dream, or subconscious realm. In this respect I do think that perhaps a comparison with WK might be in order as you say.

Allow me to draw a parallel with WK; does it not seem to you that Urth, dying Urth, is more than a little uncanny and bizaare? What logic is there to it, what substantial reality? it seems almost a dream of madness, or a warped parody of what should be (everything decaying and in ruins.) We pass from place to place with little propelling plot, in picaresque manner, though it feels intuitively that there is a vast hidden logic webs of meaning (I thinking of the ambience of "Foucault's Pendulum" here, but less factual and explicit). Does not Old Urth seem unreal, as unreal as the angel in the Knight would have seemed in Muspell?

In short, YES. It has always seemed surreal to me, from the first time I layed eyes on it. And the more I learned, the stranger its elements became.

I have always also found it strange that some of the veterans here avoid discussing this surreality like the plague. I do not know whether to attribute this to the idea that it is all old hat to them, now... or whether they simply weren't sure what to make of it. It becomes even more perplexing when people who I would expect to know the best seem to approach the story in a very literal sci-fi narrative fashion.

But riddle me this, those who know: why, when choosing his whole qabbalistic naming scheme in BotNS, did Wolfe choose to ground the realm of Urth under the name of "Yesod"? This is a level too high for any literal story. Shouldn't it be "Malkhut"?

Urth in TBOTNS is lit by an old sun; its inhabitants seem unreal- we know this by how many of them turn out to not be- even Agilus, a basic scammer is suspected of otherworldly origins- and it doesnot seem unreasonable!

Again, YES. Wolfe produces a state of practical paranoia when it comes to generating connections between characters. If this is accidental then it is a mark of poor, poor

craftsmanship. We have good reason to believe that this is not due to poor craftsmanship. On the surface such a scenario could not produce an intelligible story. And yet one hazy level removed from this, is it not true that such connections seem to pass unnoticed?

When a New Sun comes, and everything is brought to a higher reality, when we move up a cabalic tree, (like a day of judgement) is it unreasonable to expect some shadows of the old world to pass away?

I say we see the unreality of Urth and do not condemn the slaying of shadows.

~Maru

It is precisely the shadows that reside in the *higher* levels, and the more material bodies in the lower. Perhaps we mourn for the slaying of the shadows because in a way all the slayings of all the "real people" are just the physical manifestations of that single slaying of shadows, represented over and over in the lower realms.

But it is the nature of such a structure to make it difficult to distinguish the higher from the lower. I feel I'm being cryptic here, but I've thought of 5 different ways to say this as I sit here and every one of them only works if you already *apprehend*, in some way, what I'm trying to say. Perhaps the only way to express such a thing is to write a story, in which people won't be able to isolate the elements in an intelligible way but may still be able to convey something that everyone intuitively understands yet is unable to explain...

Roy C. Lackey — 26 Mar 2005, 00:11 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam quoted and wrote:

on 3/25/05 3:05 AM, Roy C. Lackey at rclackey at stic.net wrote:

The H's are archangels who have the ear of the Increate, and who do his bidding.

Do you have a quote for this? You certainly know the text better than I do; but my vague recollection had been that while the H's believe they are doing

the will of the Increate, they have no privileged access to this will.

As with much else in Wolfe, it is largely inferred. The quote about "The death agonies of the world you know will be offered to the Increate" implies that the Hierogrammates have, at the least, the Increate's attention. And Urth, as Man's planet of origin, has a unique place in the eyes of the Increate, from a Christian perspective. We know Wolfe is a Christian and that the Urth Cycle was written with that perspective in mind. Unmistakable Christian imagery pops up throughout the Sun Cycle -- from Ctesiphon's Cross, water into wine, the Temptation, death and resurrection, in NS, to Silk's vision of the Cross during his epiphany in LS. There are probably more, but that's just off the top of my head.

Probably the best quote I can give is the one from pages 137-138 of URTH:

"Severian, do you know the meaning of that word you used? Of Hierogrammate?"

I told her that someone had once told me it designated those who recorded the rescripts of the Increate.

"So much is correct."

My old _Webster's New World Dictionary Of The American Language_, College Edition, 1966, defines rescript this way: "1. an order or decree issued by a Roman emperor or by the Pope in answer to some difficulty or point of law presented to him, and having the force of law; hence,

2. any official decree or order. 3. a) a rewriting. b) something rewritten; copy. 4. in law, an order, as from a court to its clerk, or from an appellate court to a trial court, giving the disposition of a case."

I gave all of the definitions because I didn't want to be accused of picking the ones that suited my case, or twisting them to fit my fancy. (I could have used my compact edition of the OED, but the type is a hell of a lot smaller than it was twenty years ago, and it says much the same thing, anyway.[g]) Definitions 1, 2 and 4 each involve some sort of communication between a higher and lower power, any of which suffice to support my assertion that the H's receive their orders from a higher authority, and what authority is higher than an archangel but the Increate? But even #3 requires an author, and the above quote specifies that the Increate was the author of the rescripts, the H's merely the recorder. All in all, I don't see any way around it; the Increate was calling the shots.

-Roy

Chris — 26 Mar 2005, 00:31 · in reply to nastler

nastler said:

Urth only seems unreal because we see it through Sev, and he is not well in his head. Compare with the Urth sections related for us in SS.
"Urth IS real (and I, unfortunately, am nastler)."

Comparisons with passages about Urth in BotSS can only go so far. But here's a comparison for you:

People who get sucked into the sort of astral travel that Silkhorn engages in tend to interpret what happened in that projection as...

A dream.

MESCHIA: "Do you think you are more than a corpse? You are less"
This line of the play, spoken by Sev, is his opinion of his fellow Urthers. It is what allows him to do what he does.

It indicates his attitude, which allows him to do as he does. But: do you think it is right or wrong for him to hold this attitude? And if right, then why?

What's bizarre about the stance I am taking is that by it, I don't intend to discount the actual narrative of the New Sun books, or the actions of Severian. Nonetheless I feel this is a not only justified but INTENDED point of view, and that these opinions are not contradictory. I hope I can be forgiven for this lapse (though I think it is an oddity that Wolfe intended to produce).

Civet

Andy Robertson — 26 Mar 2005, 01:21 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

between a higher and lower power, any of which suffice to support my assertion that the H's receive their orders from a higher authority, and what authority is higher than an archangel but the Increate? But even #3 requires an author, and the above quote specifies that the Increate was the author of the rescripts, the H's merely the recorder. All in all, I don't see any way around it; the Increate was calling the shots.

-Roy

There is that passage where Severian remarks the existence of the angels (creatures of the rank of Tzadkiel) can be deduced by pure logic even if the existence of the Increate can not.

There is in fact nothing in boTNS to verify the existence of god: He is not seen, only his servants are. Presumably their faces are turned to him and we see only their backs, but they might be faking. It's all faith and instructions transmitted by messengers.

((In boTSS we do of course have a direct divine contact with man.))

Chris — 26 Mar 2005, 01:35 · in reply to Andy Robertson

There is in fact nothing in boTNS to verify the existence of god: He is not seen, only his servants are. Presumably their faces are turned to him and we see only their backs, but they might be faking. It's all faith and instructions transmitted by messengers.

There is an implication that this role is only perceived to be with the Hierogrammates/Hierodules because of the particular stage of the cycle that humanity was on at the time. That is, at some other time humanity acted as the servants as the Increate to uplift the H's; they are returning the favor, and in turn presumably humanity will (in its improved state) act to improve the H's even further.

((In boTSS we do of course have a direct divine contact with man.))

I think that this is at best a gnostic sort of divine contact. The scene in which Silkhorn feels the presence behind them... if he had turned around they would have seen Wolfe's face.

Of course he did not, because that is not what we do. It is not for the created to look on the face of the creator. But Wolfe in a way I think has to acknowledge his role as a mediating creator between God and the characters in Wolfe's novels.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 26 Mar 2005, 11:16 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Various folks wrote...

my vague recollection had been that while the H's believe they are doing
the will of the Increate, they have no privileged access to this will.

As with much else in Wolfe, it is largely inferred. The quote about "The death agonies of the world you know will be offered to the Increate" implies that the Hierogrammates have, at the least, the Increate's attention.

Perhaps, but it doesn't imply any "privileged access to" the will of (oh, just say it) God. Certainly not to a Catholic, to whom every suffering is to be "offered up" to Jesus.

(Side note, to Christians in the group: I'm finally being confirmed in the Catholic church this evening. Please offer a prayer.)

--Dan'l

You probably do not want to know what that odor is.
<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

Uwe Schuerkamp — 26 Mar 2005, 13:58 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Sat, 26 Mar 2005 11:16:40 -0800, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

(Side note, to Christians in the group: I'm finally being confirmed in the Catholic church this evening. Please offer a prayer.)

all the best with your "new" belief.

uwe

Adam Stephanides — 27 Mar 2005, 11:41 · in reply to Chris

on 3/25/05 1:37 AM, Chris at rasputin_ at hotmail.com wrote:

In subsequent conversation since your post it has been cited that Severian doesn't appear to even recognize the consequences of what he's going to do until he gets to the trial. This is interesting, but I think that he is either being evasive with us on this point and pretending ignorance, or else he kept himself *willfully* ignorant up to that point. Severian is perfectly aware that natives of Urth - perhaps even *most* natives of Urth - do not like what he is planning on doing, would stop him if they could, and may even try to kill him. How does he know this without having some clue as to why they're so dead set against his project? And doesn't it seem odd that he would not ask this question, even as they did try to kill him?

My recollection of the five books is spotty, but here's what I found looking through UotNS. First Idas tries to kill Sev, but he assumes it's because she's working for Abaia (51). When Purn tries to kill him, he first thinks it's out of rivalry for Gunnie. When Purn tells him that "Everybody knew ... that you meant to bring back the New Sun if you could, turn Urth upside down and kill everybody," Sev is "stunned ... not just by what he said but by his very evident sincerity" (84-85). Later when Apheta tells him, immediately before the trial, that if he succeeds "your Urth will be destroyed," he responds "Purn was right, then. He wanted to kill me, and I should have let him." (148) So unless Sev is lying outright, it would seem that the idea that the New Sun would mean Urth's destruction was new to him, and that he was incredulous that anybody could believe it. (Though he did learn the truth slightly earlier than I'd thought.)

--Adam

Adam Stephanides — 28 Mar 2005, 07:55 · in reply to James Wynn

on 3/24/05 11:16 PM, James Wynn at thewynns at earthlink.net wrote:

Tony Ellis wrote:

Master Ashe says.

"At this time, many of your people are already gone," Master Ashe continued. "Those you call the cagogens have mercifully carried them to fairer worlds. Many more will leave before the final victory of the ice. I am myself, you see, descended from those refugees." TCOTA. Chapter XVII

I understood "many of your people" to be a fraction of a small remnant of humanity surviving at the end of Old Sun's lifecycle, and I understood "better worlds" to mean "better than Urth is at the end of the Old Sun's life cycle."

Even if the Urthians who would be evacuated would be only a fraction of Urth's population, they'd probably be more numerous than those who survive the New Sun's coming are; and hence their descendants would be more numerous

than the descendants of Urth's survivors in the timeline Sev picks.

I don't know why that would be. The Cold Urth generations are surely much less fruitful, die earlier, and lose more in childhood than the New Urth generations or generations on planets like Blue and Green.

But as soon as they were evacuated they'd start breeding at normal rates.

Each generation that is only a little more fruitful will yield exponential increases in only a few centuries. I have no idea how many Urthlings survived the Deluge, but I'm guessing more than you are, I think.

Asked who will survive, Baldanders says "Those on ships, possibly. Those whose ships are in the air or in the void, certainly. Those who live under the sea already, as I have now for fifty years." (300) Probably only a few of the first group would survive. There would be only a few of the second group. The third group is Abaia's slaves; we don't know how many there are of these, but I doubt it's their fate Sev is concerned with. We can also add those, like Odilo, who manage to survive by clinging on to some debris, but again there will probably be only a few of these. (The extent to which the pre-deluge Urth has been forgotten after only two generations, in the Ushan village Sev comes to, is further evidence that there weren't many survivors.)

Note that we're not talking about a big tidal wave: the continents *sink* (153, 300, 339). (I know it's scientifically implausible, but plausibility doesn't seem to be a particular concern of Wolfe's in UotNS.)

I can see that one could argue that the total number of humans ever existing would be maximized in the New Sun future (e.g. by assuming that humanity will expand to occupy all the habitable planets in the galaxy, and will increase on each planet to the limits of its carrying capacity), but it's hardly a certainty. Personally, I wouldn't want to kill millions of people on the chance that such an argument might be true (even assuming such a transaction would be morally justified).

Green and Blue in "The Short Sun" are undoubtedly better than Master Ashe's world

They're better than being drowned, too.

Yes, but now you are being argumentative. They can't all be evacuated or Master Ashe would be studying a depopulated planet.

Ash is studying a depopulated planet: in the time corresponding to the top level of his house, his house is the only thing not covered by ice. But you're correct that not everyone would be evacuated: Ash says "No, not everyone. Some would not go, some could not be found. No home could be found for others." (CotA, ch. 17, p. 131, Timescape edition). But the impression I get from Ash's words is that most were evacuated. (Note that carrying capacity is not a problem; and why should it be? If the ship can travel backwards and forwards in time, then the number of trips it can make is limited only by the need to avoid colliding with itself.) In any case, more would be evacuated than survived the coming of the New Sun.

--Adam

Adam Stephanides — 28 Mar 2005, 07:56 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

on 3/26/05 2:11 AM, Roy C. Lackey at rclackey at stic.net wrote:
Adam quoted and wrote:

on 3/25/05 3:05 AM, Roy C. Lackey at rclackey at stic.net wrote:

The H's are archangels who have the ear of the Increate, and who do his bidding.

Do you have a quote for this? You certainly know the text better than I do; but my vague recollection had been that while the H's believe they are doing the will of the Increate, they have no privileged access to this will.

As with much else in Wolfe, it is largely inferred. The quote about "The death agonies of the world you know will be offered to the Increate" implies that the Hierogrammates have, at the least, the Increate's attention. And Urth, as Man's planet of origin, has a unique place in the eyes of the Increate, from a Christian perspective.

True; but, if the universe of the Sun cycle is our universe, then the Incarnation has already taken place; whereas if it's a previous universe, as Wolfe once said in an interview, then it won't take place on Sev's Urth at all. Either way, there seems no particular reason for the Increate to concern himself with the Urth of Sev's day.

Probably the best quote I can give is the one from pages 137-138 of URTH:

"Severian, do you know the meaning of that word you used? Of Hierogrammate?"
I told her that someone had once told me it designated those who recorded the rescripts of the Increate.
"So much is correct."

My old _Webster's New World Dictionary Of The American Language_, College Edition, 1966, defines rescript this way: "1. an order or decree issued by a Roman emperor or by the Pope in answer to some difficulty or point of law presented to him, and having the force of law; hence, 2. any official decree or order. 3. a) a rewriting. b) something rewritten; copy. 4. in _law_, an order, as from a court to its clerk, or from an appellate court to a trial court, giving the disposition of a case."

I gave all of the definitions because I didn't want to be accused of picking the ones that suited my case, or twisting them to fit my fancy. (I could have used my compact edition of the OED, but the type is a hell of a lot smaller than it was twenty years ago, and it says much the same thing, anyway.[g]) Definitions 1, 2 and 4 each involve some sort of communication between a higher and lower power, any of which suffice to support my assertion that the H's receive their orders from a higher authority, and what authority is higher than an archangel but the Increate? But even #3 requires an author, and the above quote specifies that the Increate was the author of the rescripts, the H's merely the recorder. All in all, I don't see any way around it; the Increate was calling the shots.

This is an important quote, but it doesn't seem to me to be as straightforward as you imply. It could just as easily mean that the Hierogrammates are keepers of sacred writings, rather than that they receive a continuous stream of orders from the Increate. If the latter were the case, one would expect to see the Hierogrammates described as carrying out the orders, rather than just recording them.

I'm also dubious about your identification of the Hierogrammates with archangels. For one thing, they were created by the men of the previous universe. For another, they can die, or at least their children can (Tzadkiel's son).

--Adam

Adam Stephanides — 28 Mar 2005, 07:56 · in reply to Chris

on 3/26/05 1:48 AM, Chris at rasputin_ at hotmail.com wrote:

In short, YES. It has always seemed surreal to me, from the first time I layed eyes on it. And the more I learned, the stranger its elements became.

I have always also found it strange that some of the veterans here avoid discussing this surreality like the plague. I do not know whether to attribute this to the idea that it is all old hat to them, now... or whether they simply weren't sure what to make of it. It becomes even more perplexing when people who I would expect to know the best seem to approach the story in a very literal sci-fi narrative fashion.

I never found Urth as depicted in BotNS to be particularly surreal, or unreal. Picaresque, yes, but not surreal. UotNS, though, I did find disjointed and dreamlike to the point of incoherence, and reviewing UotNS only confirms this impression.

On the other hand, it seems clear to me that Wolfe does intend us to judge the morality of Sev's actions in UotNS (whether well or ill). And to do so we have to be able to extrapolate the likely consequences of these actions, which means that the cosmos of UotNS must be rule-bound to some extent; it can't just be a dream (at least in Wolfe's intentions).

But riddle me this, those who know: why, when choosing his whole qabbalistic naming scheme in BotNS, did Wolfe choose to ground the realm of Urth under the name of "Yesod"? This is a level too high for any literal story. Shouldn't it be "Malkhut"?

Actually, Urth's universe is BriaH; Yesod is the Hierogrammates' universe. But this makes things more puzzling, since "BriaH would appear to be a different spelling of Beri'ah" (Andre-Driussi, Lexicon Urthus, p. 270), which is above Yesod.

--Adam

Chris — 28 Mar 2005, 10:27 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

You're right, that was a grievous error on my part.

The use of "BriaH" is confusing no matter which way you look at it. "BriaH" is one of a few fairly common spellings for the word indicated in Lexicon Urthus, although the entry there is a little misleading. What "BriaH" actually means, or stands for, changes depending on what you're talking about. This could be because the qabbalistic traditions are fragmented, or just because of a general concept shift (in other words, the uses could be equivalent). In either event "BriaH" isn't a sefirot, as Yesod is; the two are categorically different in a way. In addition, while it's correct that the whole of the tree of life can be divided into the 4 realms as Andre-Driussi shows, it's also true that **each individual sefirot** can equally be divided into the four realms; you might say that each sphere has its own path of energy down from the divine. On this picture of things it is indeed confusing, because the name you would expect for the physical realm is "Assiah"; "BriaH" is a higher "archangelic" realm.

This can make a certain amount of sense if you choose to see BriaH as a higher realm, because in BriaH there is an archangel of mercy named Tzadkiel who is part of a matched pair with the archangel of "severity", Sammael.

Now for the qualification: Nutria has shared on the list that Wolfe says that while the names were "plucked" from the qabbalah (indicating that there probably is at least something **appropriate** about the names), he didn't intend a "larger spin" or that these terms would be

the key to interpreting the book. So there are limits to how far this can be taken. I do think that the qabbalistic names that he chose to pluck were chosen because of their appropriateness to what they were naming; if this is the case then a materialistic/literalist interpretation would make "Malkhut" the obvious choice for Urth's universe, with "Assiah" as a close second.

Thanks for reminding me of all this.

Regards,

Civet

Actually, Urth's universe is Briah; Yesod is the Hierogrammates' universe. But this makes things more puzzling, since "Briah would appear to be a different spelling of Beri'ah" (Andre-Driussi, Lexicon Urthus, p. 270), which is above Yesod.

--Adam

Roy C. Lackey — 28 Mar 2005, 21:32 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam wrote:

True; but, if the universe of the Sun cycle is our universe, then the Incarnation has already taken place; whereas if it's a previous universe, as Wolfe once said in an interview, then it won't take place on Sev's Urth at all. Either way, there seems no particular reason for the Increate to concern himself with the Urth of Sev's day.

As I've said earlier, the destruction of Urth was largely a symbolic punishment; symbolic because Urth was man's ancestral birthplace, and mankind was dispersed too far and wide in the galaxy (galaxies?) for the Hierogrammates to overcome entropy (135) and hit mankind all at once. If the Incarnation took place in the Sun cycle universe, and that universe was also ours, then the site of that Incarnation seems to me quite sufficient reason for the Increate to concern himself with Urth. All the Christian echoes I noted before indicate that Urth was that site, otherwise how did they get there from a previously collapsed universe?

Also, if Urth is Earth, as I think it must be, then the Increate walked the planet with various Old Testament luminaries -- to say nothing of the life and death of Jesus. There can be no more hallowed ground in any universe.

If the Sun cycle did not take place in our universe, then the Incarnation presents a religious problem. It is central to the Christian faith that the Incarnation was a unique historical event. If that is so, and Jesus didn't suffer on Urth, then the people of Urth were doubly damned. Not only were they paying a price for the 'sins' of the Hieros of a prior universe -- something they had no control over, but they had no chance for 'salvation', for, as Christians maintain, only by way of Jesus might they be redeemed. Big problem.

This is an important quote, but it doesn't seem to me to be as straightforward as you imply. It could just as easily mean that the Hierogrammates are keepers of sacred writings, rather than that they receive a continuous stream of orders from the Increate. If the latter were the case, one would expect to see the Hierogrammates described as carrying out the orders, rather than just recording them.

I thought that in putting the Epitome of Urth on trial they were carrying out the orders of the Increate.

At one point Sev noted the "spangled sky of Yesod", and asked Apheta about other worlds. She said "When we require them, the Hierogrammates will build more -- worlds as fair as this, or more fair. Suns for them too, should we require more suns." (p-142) It's hard for me to imagine the Creator permitting such godlike feats without express leave to do so. From _Genesis_ onward, the Increate seems to take grave exception to such things.

I'm also dubious about your identification of the Hierogrammates with archangels. For one thing, they were created by the men of the previous universe. For another, they can die, or at least their children can (Tzadkiel's son).

I thought that the angelic nature of the Hierogrammates had been hashed out and largely agreed upon by this list years ago. <g> Alga, for one, iirc, held them to be such. Since you appealed to _Lexicon Urthus_, so will I. "In the Kabbalistic book _The Zohar_, Tzadkiel is fourth of the ten archangels of the Briatic world." (247)

And if archangels are invulnerable by nature, why was Michael wearing armor? (KNIGHT, 274)

-Roy

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 29 Mar 2005, 03:17 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy says inter alia:

As I've said earlier, the destruction of Urth was largely a symbolic punishment; symbolic because Urth was man's ancestral birthplace, and mankind was dispersed too far and wide in the galaxy (galaxies?) for the Hierogrammates to overcome entropy (135) and hit mankind all at once.

I feel that "symbolic" and "punishment" must both be wrong, somehow.

If it were a punishment and only symbolic, why then would Tzadkiel's son fight and die in the Trial Battle? Why would that battle take place at all? Why the whole rigmarole - why not just zap a White Fountain into the heart of the Sun?

Similarly, when Alpheta tells Sev that Urth is not important, I think she is lying, as she lied about humanity not being important.

It must be that Ushas is a necessary part of the Plan. And it must,

somehow, be necessary for the victim to consent in the sacrifice, by

the assent of Sev as Epitome.

I don't claim to know from the text why this should be the case, but if it isn't, I don't think the narrative makes any sense.

(Personally, I find the idea of one person exemplifying the whole, and the idea of a Greater End requiring the death of multitudes, to

be quite repellant. That's one reason why I prefer to think of BOTNS as a complete whole; I don't think it's necessarily the case that Wolfe have had the UOTNS scheme of things in mind when

he wrote it. Even the description of the end of Urth in Talos' play, with continents foundering etc, could have been simply a lie.)

And if archangels are invulnerable by nature, why was Michael wearing armor?
(KNIGHT, 274)

FWIW, you also have the story Gabriel and the sparrow, in BOTNS, where Gabriel says something like, "If I had known that we might die, I would not have been at all times so brave."

David Duffy — 29 Mar 2005, 19:52 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

Much discussion here about appropriateness of higher authorities flooding the whole world for 40 days and killing everyone save a small band of survivors. I suspect this has been previously discussed in other forums ;),

The only difference is that Severian is the instrument causing the suffering, rather than the sacrifice himself. As with Abraham (as discussed upthread), he has to believe things will turn out all right in the long term, even though he cannot comprehend the necessity of the ordained methods.

David Duffy.

Uwe Schuerkamp — 30 Mar 2005, 03:35 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On Mon, 28 Mar 2005 23:31:54 -0600, Roy C. Lackey <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:
the planet with various Old Testament luminaries -- to say nothing of the life and death of Jesus. There can be no more hallowed ground in any universe.

Now now, aren't you reading too much into Wolfe's christian background? Funny thing is that when I found out he is a converted catholic (he mentioned it in some interview I read on the web), this fact alone really put me off his books for a while, and I was reading too much into certain scenes he describes, too (like the one where Maytera's daughter and Silk/Horn "re-invent" the communion).

Your definition of "hallowed ground" might not fit Wolfe's.

All the best & bye for now,

uwe

Adam Stephanides — 30 Mar 2005, 20:28 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

on 3/28/05 11:31 PM, Roy C. Lackey at rclackey at stic.net wrote:
If the Sun cycle _did not_ take place in _our_ universe, then the Incarnation presents a religious problem. It is central to the Christian faith that the Incarnation was a _unique_ historical event. If that is so, and Jesus didn't suffer on Urth, then the people of Urth were doubly damned. Not only were they paying a price for the 'sins' of the Hieros of a prior universe -- something they had no control over, but they had no chance for 'salvation', for, as Christians maintain, only by way of Jesus might they be redeemed. Big problem.

But no bigger a problem than those in the real world who died before Jesus's birth. For that matter, the inhabitants of Urth are virtually all damned anyway. There was a discussion about whether Christianity existed in Sev's day a long time ago on the list, but I don't recall what

conclusion was reached, if any; but if there are any Christians still around, they're surely a very small minority.

I've never really understood how Christian readers of Wolfe can take the Christian imagery surrounding the New Sun at face value, ignoring the fact that unlike Jesus, it brings not salvation but indiscriminate death and damnation.

(Incidentally, I don't like the idea that the Sun cycle takes place in a previous universe either -- I'd like to believe that it was something Wolfe dreamed up after the fact, so I could reject it with a clear conscience -- but since Wolfe did say it, I feel I have to take it into account.)

This is an important quote, but it doesn't seem to me to be as straightforward as you imply. It could just as easily mean that the Hierogrammates are keepers of sacred writings, rather than that they receive a continuous stream of orders from the Increate. If the latter were the case, one would expect to see the Hierogrammates described as carrying out the orders, rather than just recording them.

I thought that in putting the Epitome of Urth on trial they were carrying out the orders of the Increate.

My point was that the definition Sev (and you) quoted, and Apheta endorsed, refers to them only as recording "rescripts," rather than carrying them out.

At one point Sev noted the "spangled sky of Yesod", and asked Apheta about other worlds. She said "When we require them, the Hierogrammates will build more -- worlds as fair as this, or more fair. Suns for them too, should we require more suns." (p-142) It's hard for me to imagine the Creator permitting such godlike feats without express leave to do so. From Genesis onward, the Increate seems to take grave exception to such things.

I'm not sure what to say about this argument; it doesn't seem convincing at all to me. Though Wolfe is a conservative Catholic, I doubt he believes that the Babel story is literally true. And as Andy Robertson pointed out, there's no direct evidence in BotNS or UotNS of the Increate directly intervening in the created world in any way, if I'm not mistaken.

I'm also dubious about your identification of the Hierogrammates with archangels. For one thing, they were created by the men of the previous universe. For another, they can die, or at least their children can (Tzadkiel's son).

I thought that the angelic nature of the Hierogrammates had been hashed out and largely agreed upon by this list years ago. <g>

You may be right; I don't remember. I'm not doubting that the Hierogrammates are closely associated by Wolfe with angels, only that they literally are archangels. Not only were they created by the Hieros, but they still revere the Hieros (138); to me this tells against their being archangels, whom one would expect to revere only God.

--Adam

Roy C. Lackey — 31 Mar 2005, 00:10 · follows Adam Stephanides

Uwe Schuerkamp quoted me and wrote:
the planet with various Old Testament luminaries -- to say nothing of the life and death of Jesus. There can be no more hallowed ground in any universe.

Now now, aren't you reading too much into Wolfe's christian background? Funny thing is that when I found out he is a converted

catholic (he mentioned it in some interview I read on the web), this fact alone really put me off his books for a while, and I was reading too much into certain scenes he describes, too (like the one where Maytera's daughter and Silk/Horn "re-invent" the communion).

Your definition of "hallowed ground" might not fit Wolfe's.

Perhaps not; but my point in the above excerpt was to maintain that, from one end of the Judeo-Christian spectrum to the other, from the Old Testament to the New, the world we live on is necessarily the most dear piece of real estate in Creation to the Increate. I don't see how either Jew or Christian could argue with that.

In my recent postings I have tried, by my phrasing and use of quotes, to present common Christian beliefs, some of which are probably, even necessarily held by Wolfe, without appearing to endorse them. I don't. I am not a Christian, but that doesn't make me blind to Wolfe's religious background or use of Christian themes and imagery. Particularly in his short stories, Wolfe is decidedly Christian. Just two examples: read "No Planets Strike" and tell me it isn't Christian, or "Queen", which is nothing but.

-Roy

Roy C. Lackey — 31 Mar 2005, 00:11 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Adam wrote:

But no bigger a problem than those in the real world who died before Jesus's birth. For that matter, the inhabitants of Urth are virtually all damned anyway. There was a discussion about whether Christianity existed in Sev's day a long time ago on the list, but I don't recall what conclusion was reached, if any; but if there are any Christians still around, they're surely a very small minority.

Agreed.

I've never really understood how Christian readers of Wolfe can take the Christian imagery surrounding the New Sun at face value, ignoring the fact that unlike Jesus, it brings not salvation but indiscriminate death and damnation.

(Incidentally, I don't like the idea that the Sun cycle takes place in a previous universe either -- I'd like to believe that it was something Wolfe dreamed up after the fact, so I could reject it with a clear conscience -- but since Wolfe did say it, I feel I have to take it into account.)

Maybe Wolfe placed the Sun cycle in a previous universe in an attempt to dodge the problem presented by the Incarnation that I mentioned. But both Newton and Einstein would frown on uncaused effects -- those Christian symbols.

At one point Sev noted the "spangled sky of Yesod", and asked Apheta about other worlds. She said "When we require them, the Hierogrammates will build more -- worlds as fair as this, or more fair. Suns for them too, should we require more suns." (p-142) It's hard for me to imagine the Creator permitting such godlike feats without express leave to do so. From Genesis onward, the Increate seems to take grave exception to such things.

I'm not sure what to say about this argument; it doesn't seem convincing at all to me. Though Wolfe is a conservative Catholic, I doubt he believes that the Babel story is literally true. And as Andy Robertson pointed out, there's no direct evidence in BotNS or UotNS of the Increate directly intervening in the created world in any way, if I'm not mistaken.

Perhaps not in those five books; I'd have to think about it. Water into wine? The Cathedral of the Pelerines rising into the night sky? Sev called it a "miracle" when he and Dorcas saw it rise. (SHADOW, 243) And the lady vendor in Saltus said of her scientific-minded grandson-in-law's explanation, "He can't see the Hand in nature." (CLAW, ch. III)

But in the larger universe of the Sun cycle we have Silk's epiphany, and how do we account for his coming back to life after he was buried in the rubble, but by the intervention of the Outsider?

-Roy

stoneox17 at aol.com — 31 Mar 2005, 08:54 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey writes:

Adam wrote:

But no bigger a problem than those in the real world who died before Jesus's birth. For that matter, the inhabitants of Urth are virtually all damned anyway. There was a discussion about whether Christianity existed in Sev's day a long time ago on the list, but I don't recall what conclusion was reached, if any; but if there are any Christians still around, they're surely a very small minority.

Agreed.

Isn't there some dispute about what happened to those who died before Jesus was born? Jesus' own words from the Bible:

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live" (John 5:25).

Doing a little searching on the web, it seems "dead" in this passage is often interpreted as "dead of spirit" and not "dead in the grave," but I don't know what Wolfe's take on this would be. Until a few months ago, I would have said that Peace showed Wolfe thought the dead could still be saved, but since I recently saw an interview where he explicitly denied having intended Weer to be in Purgatory when he wrote it (although he didn't actually disagree with this interpretation), I'm now not sure where he stands.

I've never really understood how Christian readers of Wolfe can take the Christian imagery surrounding the New Sun at face value, ignoring the fact that unlike Jesus, it brings not salvation but indiscriminate death and damnation.

(Incidentally, I don't like the idea that the Sun cycle takes place in a previous universe either -- I'd like to believe that it was something Wolfe dreamed up after the fact, so I could reject it with a clear conscience -- but since Wolfe did say it, I feel I have to take it into account.)

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Stone Ox

David Kirby — 31 Mar 2005, 09:23 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

Adam Stephanides wrote:

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I've never understood the fascination with the "previous universe" theory, no matter what Wolfe said after writing the books. Surely the text of the books trumps post-book statements, and we're all familiar with "G.W."s appendix, "A Note on the Translation," at the end of SHADOW:

To those who have preceded me in the study of the post-historic world, and particularly to those collectors -- too numerous to name here -- who have permitted me to examine artifacts surviving so many centuries of futurity, and most especially to those who have allowed me to visit and photograph the era's few extant buildings, I am grateful.

There is no question that the Urth Cycle, "originally composed in a tongue that has not yet achieved existence," chronicles the future.

-- David

=====
"It is possible I already had some presentiment of my future."
== Gene Wolfe, Shadow of the Torturer
David B. Kirby, dbkirby at pressroom.com
=====

James Wynn — 31 Mar 2005, 10:43 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

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

From: "Roy C. Lackey"

my point in the above excerpt was to maintain that, from one end of the Judeo-Christian spectrum to the other, from the Old Testament to the New, the world we live on is necessarily the most dear piece of real estate in Creation to the Increate. I don't see how either Jew or Christian could argue with that.

"And if there's life on other planets
Then I'm sure that He must know,
And He's been there once already
And has died to save their souls"

-- Larry Norman ("He's An Unidentified Flying Object")

Maybe Wolfe placed the Sun cycle in a previous universe in an attempt to dodge the problem presented by the Incarnation that I mentioned. But both Newton and Einstein would frown on uncaused effects -- those Christian symbols.

I have understood Wolfe to be saying consistently and through multiple novels that that imagery is universal. That Christ did what he did because he was the Christ, not because circumstances shaped his history. That Christ being who he is, all creation and all saviors in myth and history tend to look like him.

And I don't see any more point in speculating on the eternal fate of the Urthlings than to question the eternal fate of Frodo. I could say, "well since these Urthers were before Adam, why they must have had no eternal souls" or "being in a different Universe, the current concepts of Heaven and Hell are not relevant". But what's the point? Those are hardly the only way to bring the Sun cycle into the Christian universe. But I don't think Wolfe intends any such thing. He wrote a new mythology here, not speculative fiction.

Personally, I've come to like the idea of a "futuristic novel" set in a vast distant future that occurs in the staggeringly distant "past" (if that's the proper word for something that occurs beyond multiple iterations of the collapse and rebirth of Time). It's just the sort of twisting Wolfe does all the time with his stories and characters. Maybe he didn't think of it until later but I don't find it especially undermined in the text (even the quote David Kirby mentioned since the Bang-Gnab theory Wolfe is playing with was similar to the parallel universe concept of String theory). I don't see it as a plot hole at all.

Stone Ox asks:

Isn't there some dispute about what happened to those who died before Jesus was born?

There's a tradition (touched on in the Apostolic Creed) that Jesus went to Hell to free those like Abraham, Moses, and Elijah who were held because no permanent sacrifice had yet been offered.

~ Crush

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 31 Mar 2005, 11:37 · in reply to James Wynn

Crush wrote...

There's a tradition (touched on in the Apostolic Creed) that Jesus went to Hell to free those like Abraham, Moses, and Elijah who were held because no permanent sacrifice had yet been offered.

I think it's a bit more than "a tradition." It's based pretty solidly on this bit of Scripture (from 1 Peter 3; it bridges from vv18b through 20a):

He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit,
through whom[d] also he went and preached to the spirits in
prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently
in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.

--Dan'l

You probably do not want to know what that odor is.
<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

Roy C. Lackey — 31 Mar 2005, 12:37 · follows David Kirby

David Kirby quoted and wrote:

Adam Stephanides wrote:

(Incidentally, I don't like the idea that the Sun cycle takes place in a previous universe either -- I'd like to believe that it was something Wolfe

dreamed up after the fact, so I could reject it with a clear conscience --

but since Wolfe did say it, I feel I have to take it into account.)

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> too numerous to name here -- who have permitted me to
> examine artifacts surviving so many centuries of futurity,
> and most especially to those who have allowed me to visit
> and photograph the era's few extant buildings, I am
> grateful.

There is no question that the Urth Cycle, "originally composed in a tongue that has not yet achieved existence," chronicles the future.

It's not that clear cut. In URTH Sev says that "in a previous manvantara" the Hieros shaped the Hierogrammates. (137) But in the chapter "The Key to the Universe" in CITADEL (too much to quote here; the last few pages), he says that the Hierogrammates exist in Yesod, outside of Time and the cycle of expanding and collapsing universes. He also says, in effect, that with each succeeding cycle an evolution takes place so that "all things advance by some minute step". That logically implies -- no, compels -- the advancement to follow whatever went before.

But then, Sev also says: "I was not told what became of the Humanity of that cycle." and "From that vantage point [Yesod] they [the Hierogrammates] look both forward and back, and in so looking they have discovered us. Perhaps we are no more than a race like that who shaped them. Perhaps it was we who shaped them - or our sons - or our fathers. Malrubius said he did not know, and I believe he told the truth. However it may be, they shape us now as they themselves were shaped; it is at once their repayment and their revenge." (242) This implies that the Hieros could have come from a past, present, or future universe -- or so I read it. Ditto for the Urth cycle.

-Roy

David Kirby — 31 Mar 2005, 15:11 · in reply to James Wynn

James Wynn wrote:

Personally, I've come to like the idea of a "futuristic novel" set in a vast distant future that occurs in the staggeringly distant "past" (if that's the proper word for something that occurs beyond multiple

iterations of the collapse and rebirth of Time).

Actually, I like the idea, too. There are, uh, cycles within the Cycle, and this idea undergirds the vastness of that proposition.

Its just the sort of twisting Wolfe does all the time with his stories and characters. Maybe he didn't think of it until later but I don't find it especially undermined in the text (even the quote David Kirby mentioned since the Bang-Gnab theory Wolfe is playing with was similar to the parallel universe concept of String theory). I don't see it as a plot hole at all.

From what I've read on this list and its now-deceased "sister" list, it's also like Wolfe to say things that undermine conclusions that are reasonably reached from basic readings of his texts. I suspect he does this on purpose, to keep us digging, but that may be giving him too much credit; he certainly enjoys readers' reactions to puzzles and "Easter eggs" he places in the texts. Even if he does think everything is crystal clear.

And despite what I recall being the ascendancy of the Bang-Gnab theory in the early '80s, when NEW SUN was first published, doesn't current thinking have it that the universe won't "Gnab" on us, won't continually expand, but will reach a state of (very desolate) steadiness? That's the assumption of Brian Greene's 2004 book, THE FABRIC OF THE COSMOS; it is likely based on 2003 ideas and data, but I don't recall seeing anything more recent.

So maybe Wolfe *thought* he was correct when he talked about (or "translated") the Bang-Gnab theory, but our (*cough,* *cough*) *vastly* superior knowledge of the cosmos renders that assumption incorrect.

(I'm sure you're aware, by the way, that the parallel universe concept of "hard" physics dates to the 1950s, quite a while before string theory came along in any form.)

-- David

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"It is possible I already had some presentiment of my future."
== Gene Wolfe, Shadow of the Torturer
David B. Kirby, dbkirby at pressroom.com
=====

David Kirby — 31 Mar 2005, 16:51 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

David Kirby quoted and wrote:

There is no question that the Urth Cycle, "originally composed in a tongue that has not yet achieved existence," chronicles the future.

It's not that clear cut.

Of course not! This is Wolfe we're dealing with.

In URTH Sev says that "in a previous manvantara" the Hieros shaped the Hierogrammates. (137) But in the chapter "The Key to the Universe" in CITADEL (too much to quote here; the last few pages), he says that the Hierogrammates exist in Yesod, outside of Time and the cycle of expanding and collapsing universes. He also says, in effect, that with each succeeding cycle an evolution takes place so that "all things advance by some minute step". That logically implies -- no, compels -- the advancement to follow whatever went before.

I'll check out CITADEL. Your explanation clearly establishes the expanding and collapsing universes, but I don't see where it shows that Sev's adventures couldn't be taking place in the future of *our* "manvantara," as "G.W."s note states in the portion of my original post I deleted above. (Damn. "Manvantara" defeated my RANDOM HOUSE UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY, 2d edition, my NEW LEXICON WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY, and dictionary.com. M. Andre-Driussi, in LEXICON URTHUS, failed me as well. So what's the word *really* mean?)

But then, Sev also says: "I was not told what became of the Humanity of that cycle." and "From that vantage point [Yesod] they [the Hierogrammates] look both forward and back, and in so looking they have discovered us. Perhaps we are no more than a race like that who shaped them. Perhaps it was we who shaped them - or our sons - or our fathers. Malrubius said he did not know, and I believe he told the truth. However it may be, they shape us now as they themselves were shaped; it is at once their repayment and their revenge." (242) This implies that the Hieros could have come from a past, present, or future universe -- or so I read it. Ditto for the Urth cycle.

I remember that latter quote, and I've always read it and similar statements to refer to a "look both forward and back" within an existing universe. (Your ". . . that cycle" quote pretty clearly kills that idea, assuming that Sev understands what he is told, that what he's told is correct, and that "G.W." translated Sev correctly. Sev isn't exactly well versed in 1980s or 2000s cosmology. [2000th? First time I've used that formation!])

This is going to get a bit too metaphysical for me, but . . .

There clearly are, within the Cycle, parallel universes and jumpings between parallel universes. I read these parallel universes as existing simultaneously (or as existing as close to simultaneously as makes no difference, because an epoch might as well be a second when we're dealing with the existence of a universe). Think DC Comics' (pre-1985) Earth-1, Earth-2, and Earth-X, -Y, and -Z, if you're familiar with the concept. I don't see a requirement that the parallel universes exist successively outside a given "metaverse" or "Bang-Gnab cycle," to bring up a term James Wynn and I used in messages recently posted under another heading.

The time in which our universe has existed and will exist is huge! Our sun is (what?) a 2nd or 4th generation sun. How many generations of "sun" exist before the (current) universe dies? Even without time travel (but that it exists is certainly clear by URTH), why assume the existence of "pre-Bang" universes?

I suspect that replies to this message will depend upon beliefs in an "ultra-universe" god. Perhaps we'd best not get into that.

Thanks!

-- David

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"It is possible I already had some presentiment of my future."
== Gene Wolfe, Shadow of the Torturer
David B. Kirby, dbkirby at pressroom.com
=====

Roy C. Lackey — 01 Apr 2005, 00:10 · follows David Kirby

David Kirby wrote:

I'll check out CITADEL. Your explanation clearly establishes the expanding and collapsing universes, but I don't see where it shows that Sev's adventures couldn't be taking place in the future of *our*

As I've said earlier, the destruction of Urth was largely a symbolic punishment; symbolic because Urth was man's ancestral birthplace, and mankind was dispersed too far and wide in the galaxy (galaxies?) for the Hierogrammates to overcome entropy (135) and hit mankind all at

once.

I feel that "symbolic" and "punishment" must both be wrong, somehow.

Agreed. As I read it, the punishment was placing the black hole in the Sun, and the New Sun is the lifting of that punishment. Tzadkiel's words to Severian at the "trial," and Apheta's words afterwards, make no sense if the coming of the New Sun is supposed to be a punishment.

Similarly, when Alpheta tells Sev that Urth is not important, I think she is lying, as she lied about humanity not being important.

Apheta says as much on p. 162.

It must be that Ushas is a necessary part of the Plan. And it must, somehow, be necessary for the victim to consent in the sacrifice, by the assent of Sev as Epitome.

I don't claim to know from the text why this should be the case, but if it isn't, I don't think the narrative makes any sense.

Again, I agree.

(Personally, I find the idea of one person exemplifying the whole, and the idea of a Greater End requiring the death of multitudes, to

be quite repellant.

Once more, I agree.

--Adam

maru — 01 Apr 2005, 16:59 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

In the current universe, where Urth's sun is dying, Typhon set out to build

a Second Empire to rival the First. The H's weren't going to let him. They stopped him, partly out of spite, as revenge for the wrongs done to their ancestors during the course of their creation by Man, and partly at the behest of the Increate, who had been down that road before and didn't like where it ended. The H's are archangels who have the ear of the Increate, and who do his bidding. If that last statement isn't true, then Severian was a colossal dupe in an epic crime and Wolfe's Urth Cycle is a farce.

Whoa, whoa!

I had thought, that in (I believe) The Citadel of the Autarch, Melito's story pretty conclusively said that the Hierogrammates definitely did /not/ have the confidence of the Increate.

"The eagle looked at the angel when he heard what the cock said, and the angel looked at the eagle. 'The Pancreator is infinitely far from us', the angel said. 'And thus infinitely far from me, though I fly so much higher than you. I guess at his desires- no once can do otherwise.' "

The eagle is the hierodules, and the Angel Hierogrammates.

~Maru

maru — 01 Apr 2005, 18:22 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

It indicates his attitude, which allows him to do as he does. But: do you think it is right or wrong for him to hold this attitude? And if right, then why?

What's bizarre about the stance I am taking is that by it, I don't intend to discount the actual narrative of the New Sun books, or the actions of Severian. Nonetheless I feel this is a not only justified but INTENDED point of view, and that these opinions are not contradictory. I hope I can be forgiven for this lapse (though I think it is an oddity that Wolfe intended to produce).

Civet

That there's some excellent questions. To counter-query: Do you feel that rights and the ontological status of beings which produces those rights should be treated as being binary, or as falling on a continuum (ex. apparently fundamentalist Christian theology in which animals and the environment have absolutely no rights, and humans can exploit them freely for any purpose as much as they like., or ex. pro-abortion people who consider the mother to have more rights than the fetus.).

If you opt

for the latter, then the H's who occupy a higher, realer plane of reality have justification for sacrificing so many to their inscrutable projects. if the former, then they are merely committing murder, even if the ends are themselves laudable.

A corpse can change nothing, in any final accounting. Do people trapped on a doomed dying planet have a chance to matter? Do people only matter in that they matter?

~Maru

maru — 01 Apr 2005, 18:59 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

An exchange:

Allow me to draw a parallel with WK; does it not seem to you that Urth, dying Urth, is more than a little uncanny and bizaare? What logic is there to it, what substantial reality? it seems almost a dream of madness, or a warped parody of what should be (everything decaying and in

ruins.) We pass from place to place with little propelling plot, in picaresque manner, though it feels intuitively that there is a vast hidden logic

webs of meaning (I thinking of the ambience of "Foucault's Pendulum" here, but less factual and explicit). Does not Old Urth seem unreal, as unreal as the angel in the Knight would have seemed in Muspell?

In short, YES. It has always seemed surreal to me, from the first time I layed eyes on it. And the more I learned, the stranger its elements became.

I have always also found it strange that some of the veterans here

avoid discussing this surreality like the plague. I do not know whether to attribute this to the idea that it is all old hat to them, now... or whether they simply weren't sure what to make of it. It becomes even more perplexing when people who I would expect to know the best seem to approach the story in a very literal sci-fi narrative fashion.

But riddle me this, those who know: why, when choosing his whole qabbalistic naming scheme in BotNS, did Wolfe choose to ground the realm of Urth under the name of "Yesod"? This is a level too high for any literal story. Shouldn't it be "Malkhut"?

Urth in TBOTNS is lit by an old sun; its inhabitants seem unreal- we know this by how many of them turn out to not be- even Agilus, a basic scammer is suspected of otherworldly origins- and it does not seem unreasonable!

Again, YES. Wolfe produces a state of practical paranoia when it comes to generating connections between characters. If this is accidental then it is a mark of poor, poor craftsmanship. We have good reason to believe that this is not due to poor craftsmanship. On the surface such a scenario could not produce an intelligible story. And yet one hazy level removed from this, is it not true that such connections seem to pass unnoticed?

It is interesting to note that at around BOTNS's writing, the paranoiac style was beginning to develop.

It is precisely the shadows that reside in the *higher* levels, and the more material bodies in the lower. Perhaps we mourn for the slaying of the shadows because in a way all the slayings of all the "real people" are just the physical manifestations of that single slaying of shadows, represented over and over in the lower realms.

In Platonism, the lower are imperfect, high-disgusting parodies and apings of the higher abstractions

But it is the nature of such a structure to make it difficult to distinguish the higher from the lower. I feel I'm being cryptic here, but I've thought of 5 different ways to say this as I sit here and every one of them only works if you already *apprehend*, in some way, what I'm trying to say. Perhaps the only way to express such a thing is to write a story, in which people won't be able to isolate the elements in an intelligible way but may still be able to convey something that everyone intuitively understands yet is unable to explain...

"The Ascian said, 'All who speak Correct Thought speak well. Where then is the superiority of some students to others? It is in the speaking. Intelligent students speak Correct Thought intelligently. The hearer knows by the intonations of their voices that they understand. By this superior speaking of intelligent students, Correct Thought is passed, like fire, from one to another.'

I think that none of us realized he was listening. We were all a trifle startled to hear him speak now. After a moment, Foila said, 'He means you should not judge by the content of the stories, but by how well each was told. I'm not sure I agree with that- still, there may be something in it.'

"

It is my sincere belief that the Acian would have won the story context- the best story is one the reader helps invent.

~Maru

An analogy I often think of is differentiation from calculus: It abstracts vital information regarding the rates of changes, and is utterly necessary, and makes much plain- but it irretrievably loses much specific information. Generality at the cost of context.

maru — 01 Apr 2005, 19:00 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

You're right, that was a grievous error on my part.

The use of "Briah" is confusing no matter which way you look at it. "Briah" is one of a few fairly common spellings for the word indicated in Lexicon Urthus, although the entry there is a little misleading. What "Briah" actually means, or stands for, changes depending on what you're talking about. This could be because the qabbalistic traditions are fragmented, or just because of a general concept shift (in other words, the uses could be equivalent). In either event "Briah" isn't a sefirot, as Yesod is; the two are categorically different in a way.

....

So is 'Briah' one of the inverse sephirah? (Afraid the technical term escapes me at the moment.)

~Maru

maru — 01 Apr 2005, 19:02 · in reply to David Kirby

"Sister-list"?

Before my time- a little history please?

~Maru

David Kirby wrote:

James Wynn wrote:

Personally, I've come to like the idea of a "futuristic novel" set in a vast distant future that occurs in the staggeringly distant "past" (if that's the proper word for something that occurs beyond multiple iterations of the collapse and rebirth of Time).

Actually, I like the idea, too. There are, uh, cycles within the Cycle, and this idea undergirds the vastness of that proposition.

It's just the sort of twisting Wolfe does all the time with his stories and characters. Maybe he didn't think of it until later but I don't find it especially undermined in the text (even the quote David Kirby mentioned since the Bang-Gnab theory Wolfe is playing with was similar to the parallel universe concept of String theory). I don't see it as a plot hole at all.

From what I've read on this list and its now-deceased "sister" list, it's also like Wolfe to say things that undermine conclusions that are reasonably reached from basic readings of his texts. I suspect he does this on purpose, to keep us digging, but that may be giving him too much credit; he certainly enjoys readers' reactions to puzzles and "Easter eggs" he places in the texts. Even if he does think everything is crystal clear.

And despite what I recall being the ascendancy of the Bang-Gnab theory in the early '80s, when NEW SUN was first published, doesn't current thinking have it that the universe won't "Gnab" on us, won't continually expand, but will reach a state of (very desolate) steadiness? That's the assumption of Brian Greene's 2004 book, THE FABRIC OF THE COSMOS; it is likely based on 2003 ideas and data, but I don't recall seeing anything more recent.

So maybe Wolfe *thought* he was correct when he talked about (or "translated") the Bang-Gnab theory, but our (*cough,* *cough*) *vastly* superior knowledge of the cosmos renders that assumption incorrect.

(I'm sure you're aware, by the way, that the parallel universe concept of "hard" physics dates to the 1950s, quite a while before string theory came along in any form.)

-- David

maru — 01 Apr 2005, 19:08 · in reply to Jason Willard

That was great!

I'd have to say, I think that whatever is in Dune, it ain't fascism, since Dune fails some of the traits mentioned. 'Elitist', 'oppressive' 'contemptuous of the masses and averages' maybe. But not 'fascist'. By my count, Dune fails 1, 5, 7, 14, 11 and probably 3 tho' that one is more debatable.

~Maru

Jason Willard wrote:

Hope this isn't too long!

Robert O. Paxton in his book The Anatomy of Fascism says: "Fascism may be defined as a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion."

Roger Griffin defines fascism as "a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism."

Umberto Eco lists the following 14 traits of 'ur-fascism':

"...But in spite of this fuzziness, I think it is possible to outline a list of features that are typical of what I would like to call Ur-Fascism, or Eternal Fascism. These features cannot be organized into a system; many of them contradict each other, and are also typical of other kinds of despotism or fanaticism. But it is enough that one of them be present to allow fascism to coagulate around it.

1. The first feature of Ur-Fascism is the /cult of tradition/.

Traditionalism is of course much older than fascism. Not only was it typical of counter-revolutionary Catholic thought after the French

revolution, but it was born in the late Hellenistic era, as a reaction to classical Greek rationalism. In the Mediterranean basin, people of different religions (most of them indulgently accepted by the Roman Pantheon) started dreaming of a revelation received at the dawn of human history. This revelation, according to the traditionalist mystique, had remained for a long time concealed under the veil of forgotten languages in Egyptian hieroglyphs, in the Celtic runes, in the scrolls of the little known religions of Asia.

This new culture had to be /syncretistic/. Syncretism is not only, as the dictionary says, "the combination of different forms of belief or practice"; such a combination must tolerate contradictions. Each of the original messages contains a silver of wisdom, and whenever they seem to say different or incompatible things it is only because all are alluding, allegorically, to the same primeval truth.

As a consequence, there can be no advancement of learning. Truth has been already spelled out once and for all, and we can only keep interpreting its obscure message.

One has only to look at the syllabus of every fascist movement to find the major traditionalist thinkers. The Nazi gnosis was nourished by traditionalist, syncretistic, occult elements. The most influential theoretical source of the theories of the new Italian right, Julius Evola, merged the Holy Grail with /The Protocols of the Elders of Zion/, alchemy with the Holy Roman and Germanic Empire. The very fact that the Italian right, in order to show its open-mindedness, recently broadened its syllabus to include works by De Maistre, Guenon, and Gramsci, is a blatant proof of syncretism.

If you browse in the shelves that, in American bookstores, are labeled as New Age, you can find there even Saint Augustine who, as far as I know, was not a fascist. But combining Saint Augustine and Stonehenge?/that/ is a symptom of Ur-Fascism.

2. Traditionalism implies the /rejection of modernism/. Both Fascists and Nazis worshiped technology, while traditionalist thinkers usually reject it as a negation of traditional spiritual values. However, even though Nazism was proud of its industrial achievements, its praise of modernism was only the surface of an ideology based upon Blood and Earth (/Blut und Boden/). The rejection of the modern world was disguised as a rebuttal of the capitalistic way of life, but it mainly concerned the rejection of the Spirit of 1789 (and of 1776, of course). The Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, is seen as the beginning of modern depravity. In this sense Ur-Fascism can be defined as /irrationalism/.

3. Irrationalism also depends on the cult of /action for action's sake/. Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation. Therefore culture is suspect insofar as it is identified with critical attitudes. Distrust of the intellectual world has always been a symptom of Ur-Fascism, from Goering's alleged statement ("When I hear talk of culture I reach for my gun") to the frequent use of such expressions as "degenerate intellectuals," "eggheads," "effete snobs," "universities are a nest of reds." The official Fascist intellectuals were mainly engaged in attacking modern culture and the liberal

intelligentsia for having betrayed traditional values.

4. No syncretistic faith can withstand analytical criticism. The critical spirit makes distinctions, and to distinguish is a sign of modernism. In modern culture the scientific community praises disagreement as a way to improve knowledge. For Ur-Fascism, disagreement is treason.

5. Besides, disagreement is a sign of diversity. Ur-Fascism grows up and seeks for consensus by exploiting and exacerbating the natural /fear of difference/. The first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist movement is an appeal against the intruders. Thus Ur-Fascism is racist by definition.

6. Ur-Fascism derives from individual or social frustration. That is why one of the most typical features of the historical fascism was the /appeal to a frustrated middle class/, a class suffering from an economic crisis or feelings of political humiliation, and frightened by the pressure of lower social groups. In our time, when the old "proletarians" are becoming petty bourgeois (and the lumpen are largely excluded from the political scene), the fascism of tomorrow will find its audience in this new majority.

7. To people who feel deprived of a clear social identity, Ur-Fascism says that their only privilege is the most common one, to be born in the same country. This is the origin of nationalism. Besides, the only ones who can provide an identity to the nation are its enemies. Thus at the root of the Ur-Fascist psychology there is the /obsession with a plot/, possibly an international one. The followers must feel besieged. The easiest way to solve the plot is the appeal to xenophobia. But the plot must also come from the inside: Jews are usually the best target because they have the advantage of being at the same time inside and outside. In the US, a prominent instance of the plot obsession is to be found in Pat Robertson's /The New World Order/, but, as we have recently seen, there are many others.

8. The followers must feel humiliated by the ostentatious wealth and force of their enemies. When I was a boy I was taught to think of Englishmen as the five-meal people. They ate more frequently than the poor but sober Italians. Jews are rich and help each other through a secret web of mutual assistance. However, the followers must be convinced that they can overwhelm the enemies. Thus, by a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak. Fascist governments are condemned to lose wars because they are constitutionally incapable of objectively evaluating the force of the enemy.* *

9. For Ur-Fascism there is no struggle for life but, rather, life is lived for struggle. Thus /pacifism is trafficking with the enemy/. It is bad because /life is permanent warfare/. This, however, brings about an Armageddon complex. Since enemies have to be defeated, there must be a final battle, after which the movement will have control of the world. But such a "final solution" implies a further era of peace, a Golden Age, which contradicts the principle of permanent war. No fascist leader has ever succeeded in solving this predicament.

10. Elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology, insofar

as it is fundamentally aristocratic, and aristocratic and militaristic elitism cruelly implies /contempt for the weak/. Ur-Fascism can only advocate a /popular elitism/. Every citizen belongs to the best people of the world, the members of the party are the best among the citizens, every citizen can (or ought to) become a member of the party. But there cannot be patricians without plebeians. In fact, the Leader, knowing that his power was not delegated to him democratically but was conquered by force, also knows that his force is based upon the weakness of the masses; they are so weak as to need and deserve a ruler. Since the group is hierarchically organized (according to a military model), every subordinate leader despises his own underlings, and each of them despises his inferiors. This reinforces the sense of mass elitism.

11. In such a perspective /everybody is educated to become a hero/. In every mythology the hero is an exceptional being, but in Ur-Fascist ideology, heroism is the norm. This cult of heroism is strictly linked with the cult of death. It is not by chance that a motto of the Falangists was /Viva la Muerte/ (in English it should be translated as "Long Live Death!"). In non-fascist societies, the lay public is told that death is unpleasant but must be faced with dignity; believers are told that it is the painful way to reach a supernatural happiness. By contrast, the Ur-Fascist hero craves heroic death, advertised as the best reward for a heroic life. The Ur-Fascist hero is impatient to die. In his impatience, he more frequently sends other people to death.

12. Since both permanent war and heroism are difficult games to play, the Ur-Fascist transfers his will to power to sexual matters. This is the origin of /machismo/ (which implies both disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality). Since even sex is a difficult game to play, the Ur-Fascist hero tends to play with weapons doing so becomes an ersatz phallic exercise.

13. Ur-Fascism is based upon a /selective populism/, a qualitative populism, one might say. In a democracy, the citizens have individual rights, but the citizens in their entirety have a political impact only from a quantitative point of view one follows the decisions of the majority. For Ur-Fascism, however, individuals as individuals have no rights, and the People is conceived as a quality, a monolithic entity expressing the Common Will. Since no large quantity of human beings can have a common will, the Leader pretends to be their interpreter. Having lost their power of delegation, citizens do not act; they are only called on to play the role of the People. Thus the People is only a theatrical fiction. To have a good instance of qualitative populism we no longer need the Piazza Venezia in Rome or the Nuremberg Stadium. There is in our future a TV or Internet populism, in which the emotional response of a selected group of citizens can be presented and accepted as the Voice of the People.

Because of its qualitative populism Ur-Fascism must be /against "rotten" parliamentary governments/. One of the first sentences uttered by Mussolini in the Italian parliament was "I could have transformed this deaf and gloomy place into a bivouac for my maniples?" "maniples" being a subdivision of the traditional Roman legion. As a matter of fact, he immediately found better housing for his maniples, but a little later he liquidated the parliament.

Wherever a politician casts doubt on the legitimacy of a parliament because it no longer represents the Voice of the People, we can smell Ur-Fascism.

14. Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak. Newspeak was invented by Orwell, in /1984/, as the official language of Ingsoc, English Socialism. But elements of Ur-Fascism are common to different forms of dictatorship. All the Nazi or Fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning. But we must be ready to identify other kinds of Newspeak, even if they take the apparently innocent form of a popular talk show..."

So, I don't know if this particular word, 'fascism', is the one we want to be using so frequently... or we should at least be more aware of its subtleties.

maru — 01 Apr 2005, 19:10 · in reply to Tony Ellis

Tony Ellis wrote:

I wrote:

And what about all the generations who *will* be born on Urth if the New Sun doesn't come? Not to mention all those born on all the other worlds to which humanity is transplanted after Urth dies. Don't they count?

Crush countered:

Who's to say humanity would have been transplanted?

Master Ashe says.

"At this time, many of your people are already gone," Master Ashe continued. "Those you call the cagogens have mercifully carried them to fairer worlds. Many more will leave before the final victory of the ice. I am myself, you see, descended from those refugees." TCOTA. Chapter XVII

Humanity does not die if Severian fails to bring the New Sun. It is taken to better worlds, where it continues.

Severian's murder of millions can't be said to preserve any more unborn generations than Ozymandias' murder of thousands.

The essential question is whether the Urth being able to continue supporting life will probably produce more human life than the cost of making it so capable. With an open-ended universe, that can almost be guaranteed.

~Maru

maru — 01 Apr 2005, 19:15 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

Adam Stephanides wrote:

But Sev CAN objectively analyze both outcomes.

Perhaps he can (though, given his mental condition, his ability to "objectively analyze" anything seems questionable)...

Sev often engages in clever reasoning, and deduction in complex situations. His recollections are suspect, not his ability to make decent decisions.

~Maru

maru — 01 Apr 2005, 19:43 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

Maru said:

Not just unproblematic, but commendable. Severian could have refused, and doomed the Urthians to their previous doom, but he did not, he took that cross on himself. The situation is analogous to a doomed terminal dying patient (say, a 110 year old man), who somehow has multiple livers in perfect shape (bear with me), and if you, the doctor will take that burden on yourself, you can slice out those livers and give them to a bunch of other people who are about to perish of not-having-liver-ness, thus saving say a dozen lives while hastening another out the door.

The example you describe is similar to a standard thought problem brought up by (or against) utilitarians, and it's harsher than you describe. Let's say you're a doctor with multiple patients waiting for transplants. In the ER you happen to get a friendless hobo who has nothing wrong with him, he just passed out drunk. Now maybe his liver happens to be shot, but all his other organs are in good shape. As a utilitarian the commendable thing to do is to carve up the hobo for spare parts for your other patients.

But even further than that, in that doctor's position, as a utilitarian, the even BETTER thing for you to do is to send a couple orderlies out around town collecting the homeless until you get as many organs as you need. (Of course it doesn't *have* to be homeless people, but the homeless provide optimal utility because fewer people will be distressed by their passing and they tend to lead low-quality lives anyway).

Now, I understand that there are some utilitarians who would wholeheartedly give the thumbs-up to this (although as far as I can tell *most* of them react to this example by coming up with a rationale as to why they wouldn't really do that), and you may be one of them. However if you don't see why those of us who don't share your view would find this sort of thing disturbing, "ghoulish" even, I don't know what to tell you.

I do find that ghoulish: what if you are *wrong*? Think of all the people you just brutally slaughtered, and of the breakdown in public order that engenders and all the other side effects of it... I think it tips the scale towards, y'know, not doing that in real life (not to mention the whole going to pound-you-in-da-butt prison for the rest of your life etc), and so I guess I'd be one of those utilitarians who hedges. Now, if I could be darn certain (100%) that such dicing and slicing would in fact result in a greater good, than yeah. But of course, such an ideal universe we do not live in, and is but an academic point.

The difference is: Severian's plan /worked/. All the credit, all the blame...

In the consequentialist world perhaps, but the comment you're responding to was from a duty perspective, and in matters of duty/rules, justification doesn't proceed by results.

Even utilitarian systems, in practice, aren't entirely consequentialist; if you drink two cases of beer, pack up your 4 kids in a car and go driving down the road at 100 mph, even the utilitarian will not morally praise you because by some freak accident this combination of actions just happened to save a bus full of nuns.

There also remains the question: by what standard are you judging Severian's plan "good" (and thus his actions "good", because the plan worked)? And this is ultimately the exact same question we started with when trying to judge Severian. Appealing to his success does not advance us any steps closer to an answer to this.

We strive for plans maximizing good. Severian's actions, while having horrible intermediate results, results in greater good, both in theory and in practice (the Green man remember); we applaud.

Another thing: Severian is the rightful autarch of Urth; as a feudal/fascist ruler, he claims ultimate authority over his subjects. No wonder he wouldn't worry whether he should do it or not.

He is not the Autarch of Urth, he is the Autarch of the Commonwealth, a single kingdom on Urth among others. But even if he were the Autarch of all of Urth, why should this matter to *us* in judging his character?

Because what you do with things has different moral values depending on whose you think they are (ex. moving a TV from house to house depends on just who you think owns it, one is helpful and the other is theft.). And I'm pretty sure the Autarch is the 'legal' ruler of Urth, from all the other planets views anyway. And if the Hierodules didn't think so as well, why would a petty ruler of one little kingdom have been chosen as Epitome mm? The Autarch as legitimate ruler of Urth (but not de facto) was certainly the impression I got. Anyone care to weigh in?

As a side note with talk of fascism running rampant in the list I find myself reflecting that tyranny and fascism were not aspects that I strongly associated with Autarchy when I first read the books. My first impression, even at this point, when someone calls Severian "the Autarch" is to think: self-ruled, self-ruler. Only by extension do I reach an idea of governing others.

"To rule others, first rule yourself" ?

It could be that as Autarch, he has already been judged or advised so many times, by people so far above the norm in intelligence, knowledge, and experience that he doesn't give a flip about what the reader may think, he stands with the giants, and their appraisal is what matters.

Except that he obviously does care about the reader's opinion of his actions, even down to his relationships with various women.

In subsequent conversation since your post it has been cited that Severian doesn't appear to even recognize the consequences of what he's going to do until he gets to the trial. This is interesting, but I think that he is either being evasive with us on this point and pretending ignorance, or else he kept himself *willfully* ignorant up to that point. Severian is perfectly aware that natives of Urth - perhaps even *most* natives of Urth - do not like what he is planning on doing, would stop him if they could, and may even try to kill him. How does he know this without having some clue as to why they're so

dead set against his project? And doesn't it seem odd that he would not ask this question, even as they did try to kill him?

Before he became Autarch (the subsequent events on Urth are veiled to us and are of little help with answering your questions) I can find only two incidents of anti-New Sun ness; the magicians, who give no reason for it, and which forces Severian to guess why (I don't think his guess is either affirmed or denied by anything; I could be wrong however.) and Typhon, who Sev would dismiss as not having any reasons worth considering because Typhon has a... shall we say 'vested interest' in the matter? And once he became Autarch it was a bit late to reconsider his views.

Severian in this respect is a figure of - for lack of a better word - "fanatical" certainty. And this seems a certainty based more on some intuition or faith, some inherent value he holds, rather than a matter of rational deliberation.

...

Civet

~Maru

Incidentally lowerth, reading the dailies and mags in Britain, I think I figured out what you were referring to; you were referencing the Tories plans to, if they win the 2005 general elections (req. since it has been whatever years since the last, and nobody called an election voluntarily) and form a gov.'t etc, hold the line on increased public spending at least a little. Right?

Tony Ellis — 02 Apr 2005, 06:30 · follows maru

Maru said, quoting me:

Severian's murder of millions can't be said to preserve any more unborn generations than Ozymandias' murder of thousands.

The essential question is whether the Urth being able to continue supporting life will probably produce more human life than the cost of making it so capable. With an open-ended universe, that can almost be guaranteed.

In the post you're quoting from, the question was whether the mere preservation of future generations could be used to justify Severian's mass-murder *at all*. To which the answer is still "No".

In the wider context, I don't see why the ability of the Urth to produce, or not to produce, a certain number of humans, should be the 'essential' question.

'Why did so many innocents have to be sacrificed in the first place?' seems a more important question to me.

maru — 02 Apr 2005, 07:16 · in reply to Tony Ellis

Tony Ellis wrote:

Maru said, quoting me:

Severian's murder of millions can't be said to preserve any more unborn generations than Ozymandias' murder of thousands.

The essential question is whether the Urth being able to continue supporting life will probably produce more human life than the cost of making it so capable. With an open-ended universe, that can almost be guaranteed.

In the post you're quoting from, the question was whether the mere preservation of future generations could be used to justify Severian's mass-murder *at all*. To which the answer is still "No".

Not 'mere preservation'. To preserve something is to keep that which already is. The default for Urth is to dwindle and die. Keeping that course of events by not intervening (and not causing the death of untold millions yada yada) would be 'mere preservation', since that course of events is what already is. This is not the 'preservation' of future generations- it is *causing to come about*. Generation, not preservation. And considering the near-infinite depths of time, the extraordinary numbers of humans and Green people and other un-hinted at civilizations and races, all that *easily* compensates for the death of the multitudes, who frankly were doomed anyway.

In the wider context, I don't see why the ability of the Urth to produce, or not to produce, a certain number of humans, should be the 'essential' question.

You don't? Do you follow ethico-political issues at all? What is the abortion debate over if not over the *potential* of a fetus, or the debate over Schiavo if not over her *potential* to one day wake up and be what we consider human again (In which case any withholding of extraordinary medical attention would have been murder.)? This potential thing is ingrained in humanity by evolution, and by a calculus of odds and actions- why 'women and children first'? But this is a tangent.

'Why did so many innocents have to be sacrificed in the first place?' seems a more important question to me.

Ask the Increate. Or the Hierogrammates. Seems to be because that was the only way to stop their revenge.

~Maru

Tony Ellis — 02 Apr 2005, 13:35 · follows maru

I wrote:

In the post you're quoting from, the question was whether the mere preservation of future generations could be used to justify Severian's mass-murder *at all*. To which the answer is still "No".

Maru wrote:

Not 'mere preservation'. To preserve something is to keep that which already is. The default for Urth is to dwindle and die.

Yes, mere preservation. The Green Man future 'already is'. It's just as real – or unreal – as the ice future. We meet someone who lives there. Bringing the New Sun preserves the generations of one future, not bringing it preserves the generations of another.

...all that *easily* compensates for the death of the multitudes, who frankly were doomed anyway.

No, they weren't. The multitudes would have continued to live their ordinary lives if Severian hadn't drowned them all.

Do you follow ethico-political issues at all? What is the abortion debate over if not over the *potential* of a fetus, or the debate over Schiavo if not over her *potential* to one day wake up and be what we consider human again?

The last time I followed ethico-political issues, I don't recall that planets had to be drowned to realise the potential of a fetus, or the unfortunate Mrs Schiavo. Since a planet does have to be drowned to realise the potential of a handful of survivors in the New Sun future, I think that's more important.

maru — 02 Apr 2005, 13:45 · in reply to Tony Ellis

Tony Ellis wrote:

....

...all that *easily* compensates
for the death of the multitudes, who frankly were doomed anyway.

No, they weren't. The multitudes would have continued to live their ordinary lives if Severian hadn't drowned them all.

On a dying planet. With the most dehumanizing gov.'t ever conceived poised to take over their lives, liberties, minds (Abaia & co. ?) quite literally. With a sun guttering out. I am curious as to what your life is like if you can consider that 'ordinary'.

Do you follow ethico-political issues at all? What is the abortion debate over if not over the *potential* of a fetus, or the debate over Schiavo if not over her *potential* to one day wake up and be what we consider human again?

The last time I followed ethico-political issues, I don't recall that planets had to be drowned to realise the potential of a fetus, or the unfortunate Mrs Schiavo. Since a planet does have to be drowned to realise the potential of a handful of survivors in the New Sun future, I think that's more important.

Not just a handful. A handful prolifically reproducing to repopulate the planet. A 'handful' which will persist throughout periods of time that if you even apprehended a smidgen of their yawning aeons of time would drive you mad. A 'handful' which will quite literally engender a number of descendants which are difficult to express in your mundane numbers, partially fused as they are with infinity. Getting the idea of how many people have a chance to live should Severian choose to sacrifice a few? It is not inconceivably somewhere in the range of quadrillions for each current Urthian Sev. sacrifices. To tie this in to Catholicism, is it unreasonable to demand the death of one man to save and give a chance at eternal life for multitudes yet to come?

~Maru

'Hmm. I am puzzled, and not a little alarmed.'

-Sin City

Chris — 02 Apr 2005, 17:08 · in reply to maru

To summarize before trying to answer, what I take it you're asking is (shifting the focus from Severian to the Hieros, since on this view Severian is just a tool of the Hieros) whether the Hieros, as higher beings, are above judgment with regard to their plans for Urth. (Although to be honest I'm not sure that the Hieros plan for things to be this way, or if they simply accept it as an inevitability and willingly play their roles).

Following Aquinas, God is beyond human judgment and the Hieros could be themselves just

tools of God, or else beings who operate, like God, in a sphere where our judgments are not qualified to reach. Theologically speaking once you've taken this first move, of allowing that Sev is really a tool of a higher power with no choice in the matter, you've mooted the whole question before you begin; this way of looking at Sev is not a perspective which allows us to *ask* ethical questions in the first place.

To move things one step down and more safely answer the direct queries here: Personally I think rights do follow a continuum scale to an extent, and I think this accords *generally* with our intuitions in how we ought to deal with animals and other people in a variety of circumstances. It's certainly arguable, though, so I'm not going to claim my opinion is obviously or self-evidently true.

What I can say is that thinking of rights along a continuum scale do not automatically authorize the move you suggest. On a simplistic level, we can imagine a limited continuum scale on which "rational beings" form one endpoint, and insentate matter (rocks, let's say) the other; by this scale the Hieros would stand on an equal level with humans, cacogens, etc. And if you don't like rationality as an endpoint, others are imaginable ("moral agents" perhaps).

But this is a tricky question because it is very easy to slip back toward the theological standpoint, wholly or partially. For example we could imagine the Hieros having "super-rational powers", etc. To this end just remember that our ethical judgments are bound to *our* way of thinking, what we call rationality, and we can judge things by no other standard. What I am calling the "theological move" is not a way of saying that we *can't* judge godly or super-rational beings on our own terms - we can - but it is a normative claim that we *ought not* do so.

And, yes, if we make such a move then we will end up exempting Severian from judgment; this was one of my original points in the post about judging Severian. But if so we should be aware that this is what we are doing, and try to reach an understanding of why we're doing it, how we got to this point of view.

That there's some excellent questions. To counter-query: Do you feel that rights and the ontological status of beings which produces those rights should be treated as being binary, or as falling on a continuum (ex. apparently fundamentalist Christian theology in which animals and the environment have absolutely no rights, and humans can exploit them freely for any purpose as much as they like., or ex. pro-abortion people who consider the mother to have more rights than the fetus.).

If you opt for the latter, then the H's who occupy a higher, realer plane of reality have justification for sacrificing so many to their inscrutable projects. if the former, then they are merely committing murder, even if the ends are themselves laudable.

A corpse can change nothing, in any final accounting. Do people trapped on a doomed dying planet have a chance to matter?
Do people only matter in that they matter?

~Maru

Chris — 02 Apr 2005, 20:46 · in reply to maru

Maru said:

I do find that ghoulish: what if you are *wrong*?

Well isn't that just it? In any moral system where you're supposed to be guided by consequences (which you can't know in advance) you **always** be wrong. And since results aren't to be judged just on their immediate effects but also on indirect consequences extending indefinitely into the future, when can you finally settle and say "that was good" or "that was bad"? G.E. Moore, a rather tough-minded utilitarian, took the logical consequences of this and simply extended them - perhaps there never had been, or will be, an action which can be effectively evaluated in terms of its true utility. In the presence of doubt, he said, the utilitarian will simply "do the done thing", that is, follow the same customary rules of thumb that non-utilitarians use.

This isn't exactly satisfactory, because at that point there's no point to being a "utilitarian". What seems to be needed is some form of justification for doing what you **think** will produce the most utility, but this is hard for a traditional act utilitarian to accept because it seems to be rule-based rather than consequence-based. (ie, in any given case it's always better to **actually** produce more utility than it is to, by rule-following, just **try** to produce more utility). It's not impossible to build a system that deals with it, but you would probably find such systems a little more arcane than what you're thinking of.

Think of all the people you just brutally slaughtered,

This isn't an objection that's really open to the utilitarian, because while it's true that if you're wrong you've just caused a great deal of harm, on the other hand if you abstain from acting and you're wrong about that, you have just condemned an even larger number of people who need transplants to death.

There is no inherent virtue in refusing to act for a utilitarian; the results of inaction are just as substantial as the results of action. But the next one you mention **is** commonly used:

and of the breakdown in public order that engenders and all the other side effects of it... I think it tips the scale towards, y'know, not doing that in real life

This is a reasonable objection, although I'd note that if you really start applying this standard, then the utilitarian starts "doing the done thing" more and more... utilitarianism becomes less distinct because its proponent is constrained from actually acting according to its dictates.

Also, it is a bit disconcerting to try and advance any ethic which, if it were followed, would cause widespread breakdown of laws and considerable social harm. Side question: if you could create an entirely utilitarian society, what would be its laws? How would punishments and rewards be allotted? [I don't think the list would appreciate an actual exploration of this question, though.]

yeah. But of course, such an ideal universe we do not live in, and is but an academic point.

If it requires an ideal universe for you to act according to your ethic, then it's not a very practical ethic.

Severian's case is interesting in that we're stipulating that he knows with 100% certainty the **immediate** results of his action, and some of the secondary/indirect results. We have somewhat discussed what conclusions a person who tried to judge consequences would reach in his position. You have an immediate loss of almost all animal life on the planet, with a later rebirth (and future generations that seem to turn out pretty well). If he fails to act then people live out their lives for generations, eventually most of those remaining get evacuated to other worlds which may or may not be just as good as Ushas (no basis for comparison here). This calculus, I think, tends to weigh heavily against Sev's action **unless** you attach some very heavy importance to "human life on Ushas" as opposed to "human life on any other planet". I think it's reasonable to say that Severian, in some slightly confusing way, does count life on

Ushas to be somehow more significant... but I also have the general feeling that Sev *didn't* think it out and weigh the consequences, he just acted decisively.

We strive for plans maximizing good. Severian's actions, while having horrible intermediate results, results in greater good, both in theory and in practice (the Green man remember); we applaude.

The Green man, or something as good as the Green Man, could have arisen elsewhere in one of the other worlds humanity was spread across. But this is pretty much implicit in the above.

Because what you do with things has different moral values depending on whose you think they are (ex. moving a TV from house to house depends on just who you think owns it, one is helpful and the other is theft.). And I'm pretty sure the Autarch is the 'legal' ruler of Urth, from all the other planets views anyway. And if the Hierodules didn't think so as well, why would a petty ruler of one little kingdom have been chosen as Epitome mm? The Autarch as legitimate ruler of Urth (but not de facto) was certainly the impression I got. Anyone care to weigh in?

I think this starts to wade into the more murky, symbolic areas of the text. Taken literally, though, I can't really think of a way in which we would assent that it would be morally laudable for George W. to kill us all because he's president. If we imagine him as king, tyrant, or whatever else, it doesn't really change our judgment of such an act.

Now if you're saying that if we had been born in such a tyranny we might judge differently, well, perhaps, but perhaps not. Would such a judgment be just as valid as the one we make now in our more "enlightened" age? We're not free to take this out unless we're moral relativists, and that's not a position anyone here has endorsed.

As a side note with talk of fascism running rampant in the list I find myself reflecting that tyranny and fascism were not aspects that I strongly associated with Autarchy when I first read the books. My first impression, even at this point, when someone calls Severian "the Autarch" is to think: self-ruled, self-ruler. Only by extension do I reach an idea of governing others.

"To rule others, first rule yourself" ?

Or perhaps, like Talos's play, Urth is full of just a few people who wear different masks and play different roles as their parts require... then Sev might literally just be ruling himself. But that's another of those murky metaphysical tales.

Iorwerth Thomas — 04 Apr 2005, 07:50 · in reply to maru

Actually, it was more the attempt to use a 'pseudo-Kantian' categorical principle in order to enact oppressive laws on an ethnic minority, i.e. the travelling community [1].

But that'll do equally well. And I can't quite remember its relevancy to whatever point I was trying to make at the time anyhow.

Hope you liked our lovely weather... :)

Iorwerth

[1] Not that there isn't a problem; but this isn't the way to solve it - and it's largely Howard's fault from when the Tories were in charge anyhow.

From: maru <marudubshinki at gmail.com>

Incidentally lowerth, reading the dailies and mags in Britain, I think I figured out what you were referring to; you were referencing the Tories plans to, if they win the 2005 general elections (req. since it has been whatever years since the last, and nobody called an election voluntarily) and form a gov.'t etc, hold the line on increased public spending at least a little. Right?

maru — 04 Apr 2005, 15:34 · in reply to lorwerth Thomas

Oh. Darn- I saw a little about that (columnists inveighing against the Human Rights Act or some such) but it never occurred to me that that was what you were referring to...

And actually, when I was there the weather was lovely. Now, Paris' just sucked- rain practically every day.

~Maru

lorwerth Thomas wrote:

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But that'll do equally well. And I can't quite remember its relevancy to whatever point I was trying to make at the time anyhow.

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Matt Tillman — 05 Apr 2005, 17:19 · in reply to Tony Ellis

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maru — 05 Apr 2005, 17:27 · in reply to Matt Tillman

Matt Tillman wrote:

Tony Ellis wrote:

In the post you're quoting from, the question was whether the mere preservation of future generations could be used to justify Severian's mass-murder *at all*. To which the answer is still "No".

In the wider context, I don't see why the ability of the Urth to produce, or not to produce, a certain number of humans, should be the 'essential' question.

'Why did so many innocents have to be sacrificed in the first place?' seems a more important question to me.

A question worth asking is whether the population was considered innocent. Not by us mind you, but by the Increate. Remember that the antedeluvian world was not innocent, and the best solution at the time was a cleansing of the global palate. Much the same can be said of Sodom and Gomorrah, where, even today debate rages over the sin that was grounds for their destruction. Even in this case, the sin is irrelevant to humanity, it was a sin in the eyes of God.

In other words, is the flood of Noah the right analogy?

~Maru

Matt Tillman — 06 Apr 2005, 17:22 · in reply to maru

maru wrote:

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Tony Ellis wrote:

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In other words, is the flood of Noah the right analogy?

I don't presuppose that the analogy to *The Flood* is flawed, as it is certainly an obvious choice, with much the same results. However, in the more cosmic sense, there are some nice parallels to Sodom and Gomorrah. Remember that in that part of Genesis (which I am certainly not a scholar of), God destroys the sinful cities while he spares the rest of humanity (e.g. killing the denizens of Urth but not touching the rest of mankind's diaspora). Recall also that the cities were destroyed with a rain of fire and brimstone, perhaps a stretch but that sort of sounds like a literal interpretation of "white fountain". If someone could look up this verse(G 19:24) in Hebrew that would be wonderful to see what the original wording was prior to the butcherous translation into English.

Along the lines of something that might just be an absolute coincidence (but might not), the tale

of Sodom and Gomorrah has always been used to condemn homosexuality, and the first century saw Philo referring to "servile, lawless and unseemly pederasty." When I read that on Wikipedia, it caught my eye because I recalled Severian using that exact word in wondering what Baldanders was doing in his castle. Wolfe used many obscure words, but I won't discount this as sure serendipity.

If we carry this S&G analogy one step further, Severian clearly assumes the role of Lot in the BotNS. He deals with the angels in the same way (as agents of God/Increate) and is found to be "worthy". While Lot is allowed to leave and warned never to look back, Sev is spared and is given hegemony over the future.

Just a thought, it would not be out of line for Wolfe to throw a curve ball big enough to flood the world.

maru — 07 Apr 2005, 19:14 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

Maru said:

I do find that ghoulish: what if you are **wrong**?

Well isn't that just it? In any moral system where you're supposed to be guided by consequences (which you can't know in advance) you **always** be wrong. And since results aren't to be judged just on their immediate effects but also on indirect consequences extending indefinitely into the future, when can you finally settle and say "that was good" or "that was bad"? G.E. Moore, a rather tough-minded utilitarian, took the logical consequences of this and simply extended them - perhaps there never had been, or will be, an action which can be effectively evaluated in terms of its true utility. In the presence of doubt, he said, the utilitarian will simply "do the done thing", that is, follow the same customary rules of thumb that non-utilitarians use.

This isn't exactly satisfactory, because at that point there's no point to being a "utilitarian". What seems to be needed is some form of justification for doing what you **think** will produce the most utility, but this is hard for a traditional act utilitarian to accept because it seems to be rule-based rather than consequence-based. (ie, in any given case it's always better to **actually** produce more utility than it is to, by rule-following, just **try** to produce more utility). It's not impossible to build a system that deals with it, but you would probably find such systems a little more arcane than what you're thinking of.

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There is no inherent virtue in refusing to act for a utilitarian; the results of inaction are just as substantial as the results of action. But the next one you mention **is** commonly used:

and of the breakdown in public order that engenders and all the other side effects of it... I think it tips the scale towards, y'know, not doing that in real life

This is a reasonable objection, although I'd note that if you really start applying this standard, then the utilitarian starts "doing the done thing" more and more... utilitarianism becomes less distinct because its proponent is constrained from actually acting according to its dictates.

Also, it is a bit disconcerting to try and advance any ethic which, if it were followed, would cause widespread breakdown of laws and considerable social harm. Side question: if you could create an entirely utilitarian society, what would be its laws? How would punishments and rewards be allotted? [I don't think the list would appreciate an actual exploration of this question, though.]

yeah. But of course, such an ideal universe we do not live in, and is but an academic point.

If it requires an ideal universe for you to act according to your ethic, then it's not a very practical ethic.

Severian's case is interesting in that we're stipulating that he knows with 100% certainty the *immediate* results of his action, and some of the secondary/indirect results. We have somewhat discussed what conclusions a person who tried to judge consequences would reach in his position. You have an immediate loss of almost all animal life on the planet, with a later rebirth (and future generations that seem to turn out pretty well). If he fails to act then people live out their lives for generations, eventually most of those remaining get evacuated to other worlds which may or may not be just as good as Ushas (no basis for comparison here). This calculus, I think, tends to weigh heavily against Sev's action *unless* you attach some very heavy importance to "human life on Ushas" as opposed to "human life on any other planet". I think it's reasonable to say that Severian, in some slightly confusing way, does count life on Ushas to be somehow more significant... but I also have the general feeling that Sev *didn't* think it out and weigh the consequences, he just acted decisively.

We strive for plans maximizing good. Severian's actions, while having horrible intermediate results, results in greater good, both in theory and in practice (the Green man remember); we applaud.

The Green man, or something as good as the Green Man, could have arisen elsewhere in one of the other worlds humanity was spread across. But this is pretty much implicit in the above.

Because what you do with things has different moral values depending on whose you think they are (ex. moving a TV from house to house depends on just who you think owns it, one is helpful and the other is theft.). And I'm pretty sure the Autarch is the 'legal' ruler of Urth, from all the other planets views anyway. And if the Hierodules didn't think so as well, why would a petty ruler of one little kingdom have been chosen as Epitome mm? The Autarch as legitimate ruler of Urth (but not de facto) was certainly the impression I got. Anyone care to weigh in?

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Now if you're saying that if we had been born in such a tyranny we

might judge differently, well, perhaps, but perhaps not. Would such a judgment be just as valid as the one we make now in our more "enlightened" age? We're not free to take this out unless we're moral relativists, and that's not a position anyone here has endorsed.

We are discussing how Severian feels no problem bringing on the New Sun, despite, as another poster put it, considerable pressure not to; I suggested that in addition to the suggestion that Sev is essentially duped, he regards himself as the sole legitimate ruler of Urth- he rather blatantly makes that clear, both with Typhon, and during UOTNS, esp. before the court of Tzadkiel the Just. I never said that makes it right. AUTARCH: Here I sit as though the lord of a hundred worlds. Yet not master even of this.

As a side note with talk of fascism running rampant in the list I find myself reflecting that tyranny and fascism were not aspects that I strongly associated with Autarchy when I first read the books. My first impression, even at this point, when someone calls Severian "the Autarch" is to think: self-ruled, self-ruler. Only by extension do I reach an idea of governing others.

"To rule others, first rule yourself" ?

Or perhaps, like Talos's play, Urth is full of just a few people who wear different masks and play different roles as their parts require... then Sev might literally just be ruling himself. But that's another of those murky metaphysical tales.

It is a curiosity of the play that it dwells at length on the supplantation of the old by the new, which will be stronger and more beautiful. Perhaps it is merely a conceit of mine, but methinks that is a rare theme- last I saw it was in Greek myth, and Keats' poetic treatises there of. Murkiest in the play is the ending. Severian in UOTNS is not Severian in the play- but Nod? Does Jahi mean one of the two sleeping goddesses?

~Maru

maru — 07 Apr 2005, 19:32 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

Maru said:

I do find that ghoulish: what if you are *wrong*?

Well isn't that just it? In any moral system where you're supposed to be guided by consequences (which you can't know in advance) you *always* be wrong. And since results aren't to be judged just on their immediate effects but also on indirect consequences extending indefinitely into the future, when can you finally settle and say "that was good" or "that was bad"?

Never: but again is this really unique to utilitarianism? Can't you be uncertain as to whether you have really fulfilled your duty in a duty-based system, or whether you fell into a fiendish trap whose appearances tricked you?

G.E. Moore, a rather tough-minded utilitarian, took the logical consequences of this and simply extended them - perhaps there never had been, or will be, an action which can be effectively evaluated in terms of its true utility. In the presence of doubt, he said, the utilitarian will simply "do the done thing", that is, follow the same customary rules of thumb that non-utilitarians use.

Sounds like a cop-out: Because you can't be perfect and 100%, just do what everybody else does. As the saying goes, 'No one was ever fired for buying IBM.'

This isn't exactly satisfactory, because at that point there's no point to being a "utilitarian". What seems to be needed is some form of justification for doing what you **think** will produce the most utility, but this is hard for a traditional act utilitarian to accept because it seems to be rule-based rather than consequence-based. (ie, in any given case it's always better to **actually** produce more utility than it is to, by rule-following, just **try** to produce more utility). It's not impossible to build a system that deals with it, but you would probably find such systems a little more arcane than what you're thinking of.

If your 'trying' does not do as well as 'actually producing', there is something more than a little screwed up about your efforts, And how can you 'actually produce' more utility without previously having decided to do what you 'thought' would produce the most utility? Accident?

Think of all the people you just brutally slaughtered,

This isn't an objection that's really open to the utilitarian, because while it's true that if you're wrong you've just caused a great deal of harm, on the other hand if you abstain from acting and you're wrong about that, you have just condemned an even larger number of people who need transplants to death.

There is no inherent virtue in refusing to act for a utilitarian; the results of inaction are just as substantial as the results of action.

Again, not unique. 'Sins of omission' &etc

But the next one you mention **is** commonly used:

and of the breakdown in public order that engenders and all the other side effects of it... I think it tips the scale towards, y'know, not doing that in real life

This is a reasonable objection, although I'd note that if you really start applying this standard, then the utilitarian starts "doing the done thing" more and more... utilitarianism becomes less distinct because its proponent is constrained from actually acting according to its dictates.

I've held that in practice we use triage- like governments prioritizing aid, seeking the maximum utility for buck. So it is little surprise if in our everyday life it changes the actual actions only a little, and is more a paradigm shift. It is like replacing Newton's physics with Einsteins'- the edge cases vary considerably, but in more mundane realms, they accord pretty closely.

Also, it is a bit disconcerting to try and advance any ethic which, if it were followed, would cause widespread breakdown of laws and considerable social harm. Side question: if you could create an entirely utilitarian society, what would be its laws? How would punishments and rewards be allotted? [I don't think the list would appreciate an actual exploration of this question, though.]

But what ethical system in its gross and naive formulations wouldn't cause all that?

yeah. But of course, such an ideal universe we do not live in, and is but an academic point.

If it requires an ideal universe for you to act according to your ethic, then it's not a very practical ethic.

Severian's case is interesting in that we're stipulating that he knows with 100% certainty the **immediate** results of his action, and some of the secondary/indirect results. We have somewhat discussed what conclusions a person who tried to judge consequences would reach in

his position. You have an immediate loss of almost all animal life

Are we defining animals like God & Noah did?

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Well, I've argued elsewhere that a major factor is the loss of Urth as a habitat, which all things equal (and it appears they are; no one says that Ice Urthians will be brought to a new, just as good planet, which isn't already colonized.) means a drastic reduction in future numbers of humans.

We strive for plans maximizing good. Severian's actions, while having horrible intermediate results, results in greater good, both in theory and in practice (the Green man remember); we applaude.

The Green man, or something as good as the Green Man, could have arisen elsewhere in one of the other worlds humanity was spread across. But this is pretty much implicit in the above.

~Maru

maru — 07 Apr 2005, 19:47 · in reply to Chris

Chris wrote:

To summarize before trying to answer, what I take it you're asking is (shifting the focus from Severian to the Hieros, since on this view Severian is just a tool of the Hieros) whether the Hieros, as higher beings, are above judgment with regard to their plans for Urth. (Although to be honest I'm not sure that the Hieros plan for things to be this way, or if they simply accept it as an inevitability and willingly play their roles).

Following Aquinas, God is beyond human judgment and the Hieros could be themselves just tools of God, or else beings who operate, like God, in a sphere where our judgments are not qualified to reach.

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To move things one step down and more safely answer the direct queries here:

Personally I think rights do follow a continuum scale to an extent, and I think this accords *generally* with our intuitions in how we ought to deal with animals and other people in a variety of circumstances. It's certainly arguable, though, so I'm not going to claim my opinion is obviously or self-evidently true.

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not automatically authorize the move you suggest. On a simplistic level, we can imagine a limited continuum scale on which "rational beings" form one endpoint, and insensate matter (rocks, let's say) the other; by this scale the Hieros would stand on an equal level with humans, cactogens, etc. And if you don't like rationality as an endpoint, others are imaginable ("moral agents" perhaps).

But this is a tricky question because it is very easy to slip back toward the theological standpoint, wholly or partially. For example we could imagine the Hieros having "super-rational powers", etc. To this end just remember that our ethical judgments are bound to *our* way of thinking, what we call rationality, and we can judge things by no other standard. What I am calling the "theological move" is not a way of saying that we *can't* judge godly or super-rational beings on our own terms - we can - but it is a normative claim that we *ought not* do so.

Just a minor point- Are you sure about that definition of the 'theological move'? It strikes more as a way to say that godly beings' concerns reach so far beyond ours, in areas beyond our experience, dealing with such vast quantities of time/space/creatures/data that our intuitions are flawed, merely human logic is essentially guaranteed to be wrong, simply because we lack the necessary data or heuristics. Which is not a normative claim, but more a practical one, like a monkey trying to understand calculus, 'don't even bother trying'. Personally, I see little of the normative claim in UOTNS- things *are* explained and justified, if not well or completely, and the Hs do not act utterly superior; they go so far as to repeatedly test Autarchs and get some semblance of permission from Urthians (the battle), so they definitely don't believe in the normative claim, and if the Hs don't accept it, who could have the right? The Increate? But the Increate never intervenes.

And, yes, if we make such a move then we will end up exempting Severian from judgment; this was one of my original points in the post about judging Severian. But if so we should be aware that this is what we are doing, and try to reach an understanding of why we're doing it, how we got to this point of view.

~Maru

David Duffy — 07 Apr 2005, 23:59 · in reply to maru

On Thu, 7 Apr 2005, maru wrote:

Chris wrote:

To summarize before trying to answer, what I take it you're asking is (shifting the focus from Severian to the Hieros, since on this view Severian is just a tool of the Hieros) whether the Hieros, as higher beings, are above judgment with regard to their plans for Urth. (Although to be honest I'm not sure that the Hieros plan for things to be this way, or if they simply accept it as an inevitability and willingly play their roles).

Following Aquinas, God is beyond human judgment and the Hieros could be themselves just tools of God, or else beings who operate, like God, in a sphere where our judgments are not qualified to reach. Theologically speaking once you've taken this first move, of allowing that Sev is really a tool of a higher power with no choice in the matter, you've mooted the whole question before you begin; this way of looking at Sev is not a perspective which allows us to *ask* ethical questions in the first place.

... Personally, I see little of the normative claim in UOTNS-things *are* explained and justified, if not well or completely, and the Hs do not act utterly superior; they go so far as to repeatedly test Autarchs and get some semblance of permission from Urthians (the battle), so they definitely don't believe in the normative claim, and if the Hs don't accept it, who could have the right? The Increate? But the Increate never intervenes.

In Soldier, Short Sun and Wizard-Knight, Wolfe spends a bit of time on judgement by humans of gods. The Giants-proper (not the little ones ;)) are of Skai, and as such should be respected, but not admired or worshipped; Loki is more ambiguous. And on multiple occasions, we hear the argument about demons taking over the role of God becoming indistinguishable from the real thing (cf The Day after Judgement). And the real thing (righteous authority deriving ultimately from the Increate) is recognizable, presumably using ethical criteria.

After saying that, Wolfe's worlds are all high mortality settings: not a lot of happy immortal uploads here ;). To a medieval Christian viewpoint, and perhaps to the Hieros, death and suffering are ubiquitous, *mysterious*, necessary waystations on the infinite journey. The offering up of suffering to the Increate comment by Apheta comes right out of tradition.

David Duffy.

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Chris — 09 Apr 2005, 15:25 · in reply to maru

Never: but again is this really unique to utilitarianism? Can't you be uncertain as to whether you have really fulfilled your duty in a duty-based system, or whether you fell into a fiendish trap whose appearances tricked you?

The error I think you make in the above is that you are thinking of duty in a consequentialist framework - that duty is somehow objectively fulfilled by a set of consequences that result from the action. But deontological ethical systems precisely do *not* work this way. (You're not alone in this by the way; Nagel makes almost exactly the same mistake in his critique of Kant in "Moral Luck").

In a duty-based system, you are following a rule based on the input you have; you can have doubts as to the verity of that input, but ultimately you do know when you've followed the rule as well as you are able. You know, for example, as you speak that you are trying to follow the rules of language, and you can "know" (as well as you "know" anything) that you've followed them correctly. Sure, you can introduce radical skeptical doubt, evil demons, and the like. But that kind of skepticism is just that: radical. If you take it too seriously, then you end up conceding that we're not really communicating with each other at all because such communication is impossible.

Sounds like a cop-out: Because you can't be perfect and 100%, just do what everybody else does.

As the saying goes, 'No one was ever fired for buying IBM.'

It pretty much does sound like a cop-out, just throwing your hands up in the air. But you have to understand that Moore is not taking it lightly. It's not just a matter of your knowledge being imperfect - it's that you have *no basis at all* from which to judge the probabilities of the ultimate results (extended off indefinitely into the future) of your actions.

The pragmatic way out, from your standpoint (and this hits on something you've talked about in a couple other posts, so I skipped responding to those and just made the point here) is to use something of a "discount function". A present good is always better than an equal good in the future, because contingent circumstances beyond your control might come up to prevent you from attaining that future good. Beyond a certain point in time the probabilities become so uncertain that you then discount any consequences beyond that point entirely because you're unable to weigh them. [I am not a utilitarian, but if I were, this is how I'd try to deal with the problem.]

Most of our actions have pretty short horizons in this regard. We live in a very, very contingent world. Severian's case is interestingly different (to bring this back around to his case) because he's been told, to some extent, what the results of his actions are going to be. So to judge him in consequentialist terms, where do we draw the horizon? Well, you could make an argument that it would be as far forward as the Green Man's time. I don't think this is practical, though, because while the Green Man's time is a very good period, it may have been preceded by some pretty awful times, and going forward from the Green Man's time may be a pretty terrible future. [You could argue that the entirety of the future history of man is cyclical and predetermined, but while this would give Severian a broader horizon of knowledge, it would also end up making Severian's *choice* predetermined too, and so not really a choice at all. This means you don't end up judging Severian by consequences, you end up exempting him from judgment entirely as a mere tool, as described in my original post on this.]

I think that, in the frozen-Urth future, the horizon extends basically to Ash's time. The outcome there is that a lot of people live diminished (but certainly not entirely unhappy) lives for a long time [a substantial positive value], followed by evacuation of *most of* the population to other worlds [also a positive], along with a minority who eventually perish on Urth [a small negative].

On the Ushas side, you start with an extremely large negative, a lot of deaths. It's unclear where to draw the horizon here, but considering the small number of survivors (who will generate only the tiniest amount of utility in a given generation) we can assume that it would take a very long time to repopulate Ushas back to the point where it was producing enough positive outcome to outweigh the negative balance you start with. Even if you eventually break even, the frozen-Urth branch has been racking up utility the entire time; and if a substantial number of people were evacuated, their sheer population alone would make it very difficult for the Ushas branch to catch up. Ultimately I think that it would take far too long for the Ushas future to catch up, even assuming that it could catch up; drawing the horizon so far out gets into territory where it's very unlikely that Severian can judge probabilities.

And so I think that even a strict consequentialist (which, granted, I am not) would not find reason for approval without some *other*, additional factor.

Well, I've argued elsewhere that a major factor is the loss of Urth as a habitat, which all things equal (and it appears they are; no one says that Ice Urthians will be brought to a new, just as good planet, which isn't already colonized.) means a drastic reduction in future numbers of humans.

It doesn't mean this at all. It doesn't seem likely that the limiting factor for human populations in Urth's future will be the sheer number of planets available as habitats. Terraforming seems far from impossible (see: the green Moon). So if one more world is needed it would seem better to terraform one without people already on it.

If your 'trying' does not do as well as 'actually producing', there is something more than a little screwed up about your efforts. And how can you 'actually produce' more utility without previously having decided to do

what you 'thought' would produce the most utility? Accident?

Sure. Even the slightest bit of bad luck. Or, alternately, if you chose a suboptimal path and got a little lucky you could easily come out better. Action *outcomes* involve a considerable luck factor. Any system that relies on consequences to judge actions has to either find a way to disregard the luck factor, or else embrace the idea that it is better to be lucky than well-intentioned - in fact, it's hard to find any room for crediting intentions at all, if they don't end up producing the right results.

Even JS Mill acknowledged that this was a problem. His answer was to make a sort of distinction between "motive" and "intention"; so he was able to say that a Utilitarian ignores "motives" in moral judgment, but not "intentions". Unfortunately his distinction ends up being a little too slippery to provide an adequate answer.

This isn't an objection that's really open to the utilitarian, because while it's true that if you're wrong you've just caused a great deal of harm, on the other hand if you abstain from acting and you're wrong about that, you have just condemned an even larger number of people who need transplants to death.

There is no inherent virtue in refusing to act for a utilitarian; the results of inaction are just as substantial as the results of action.

Again, not unique. 'Sins of omission' &etc

I am not the one who tried to use "But what if you're wrong?" as an objection; you basically implied that you wouldn't hack up the homeless people, despite this being what your ethical system seems to require, on the grounds that you might be wrong and if so, better to not do it. The point here is just to show that for a committed utilitarian this is not an allowable excuse.

The deontological ethicist won't hack up the homeless for organs because she follows rules which respect the rights of individuals. She does not need to appeal to uncertainty about the outcome.

I've held that in practice we use triage- like governments prioritizing aid, seeking the maximum utility for buck. So it is little surprise if in our everyday life it changes the actual actions only a little, and is more a paradigm shift. It is like replacing Newton's physics with Einsteins'- the edge cases vary considerably, but in more mundane realms, they accord pretty closely.

Well, it's an interesting concept that has been argued, that collective actions (the actions of organizations, governments, etc) would be best ruled by a utilitarian standard, while individual actions continue to be governed by rules. Utilitarian ethics for governments, deontological ethics for people. I don't really have a position on that. I gather that you wouldn't accept it, though, because it would imply that you personally shouldn't try to be a utilitarian.

Chris — 10 Apr 2005, 02:08 · in reply to maru

Maru said:

Just a minor point- Are you sure about that definition of the 'theological move'?

human logic is essentially guaranteed to be wrong, simply because we lack the necessary data or heuristics. Which is not a normative claim, but more a practical one, like a monkey trying to understand calculus, 'don't even bother trying'.

Well, yes, more or less. I think you have the idea here - 'don't even bother trying' being normative, not descriptive.

To put it in context, the whole reason Aquinas was addressing this subject was the "Problem of Evil", ie "If God is all-powerful and all-knowing, how could he be good and still allow evil in the world?" Aquinas is pointing out that when you ask that question, you're presuming to judge God (and so it's obviously not *impossible* to judge God). But the inadequacy of your knowledge and reason in this case give you no way of knowing what would be an accurate judgment for a being like God. As such he can't try to *answer* the question without making the same mistake, so he points out that we shouldn't ask it.

if not well or completely, and the Hs do not act utterly superior; they go so far as to repeatedly test Autarchs and get some semblance of permission from Urthians (the battle), so they definitely don't believe in the normative claim, and if the Hs don't accept it, who could have the right? The Increate? But the Increate never intervenes.

If I remember correctly I wasn't suggesting that the Hierogrammates make such a claim. I was saying that it was one reason a person might give for why they don't judge Severian harshly.

The way you're interpreting the battle as a sort of "consent test" for the population of Urth is possible, I suppose, but I don't know that it's to be taken for granted. There is something a little paradoxical about the trial on almost any explanation of it.