

Mind stuff

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 24 Feb 1997

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CoxRathvon — 24 Feb 1997, 15:30

I continue to reflect on the various kinds of intelligence Wolfe has created in the Whorl. Many of them are too elusive for firm definitions. (How definable is our own intelligence?) But here are some attempts at categories:

1. Human. Example: Horn. We can assume, I think, that the "bio" Horn experiences his world much as we do ours. He's a schoolboy who idolizes his teacher, has adventures, falls in love, writes a book, toots his own horn a little, and cares for his family.
2. Embryonically enhanced humans. Examples: Mucor, Silk. There's no reason to think that Silk's extra gifts are less remarkable than Mucor's. Of course we don't know he has these gifts until the story has progressed a bit. My first inkling came when he dueled expertly with Xiphias without any prior training; but of course his tale-starting "enlightenment" might have been a mental gift burgeoning. I assume there are very few of these enhanced people in the Whorl, as the trove of frozen embryos seems to have been breached only in Tussah's time.
3. God-enhanced humans. Examples: Auk, Jerboa, Mint. Who knows what effect it has on people when these computerized blasts from the "gods" get into them? The recipients are rewarded with gifts, but there may be weird downsides to the experience.
4. Animals. Example: Oreb. Although the Whorl seems to contain many of our familiar "dumb beasts," it also contains a few oddly intelligent ones. Oreb is much smarter than even Silk supposes. He not only uses language but invents it; lacking the vocabulary word for "tent," he says to Silk something like: "Quick house. House now!" And of course, he alone in the story sees Quetzal not in terms of the Prolocutor's words or deeds, but in terms of his essential self--a "bad thing." Which brings us to:
5. Inhumani. Example: Quetzal. Their true nature? Unknown.
6. Chems. Example: Hammerstone. They seem to have an almost fully human set of thoughts and feelings, though they are variable and adjustable. Do they love and laugh as humans do? What about less complex machines? How sentient is a talus? All of this is gray area to me.
7. Electronic entities. Examples: Kyrpis, the screen monitors. These are totally beyond my ken. What are they?

What else could we mention, folks? Sleepers? I think they are essentially normal humans who have had instructions (for technology, management, etc.) programmed into their skulls. I suppose I should have mentioned that if the gods can affect humans, then humans affect the gods when "bits" of their "selves" (this is slippery stuff) are exchanged. But I don't know what to make of such hybrids.

As you could say that "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" is in part a variation played on the theme of

Self, then the Long Sun story is likewise a variation played on the theme of Mind. Pardon the capitals. I know I'm groping, but one of the essential mysteries of the story is whether the Outsider is as real as Silk believes, and whether, therefore, there is a divine purpose to all the human chaos and suffering. If the Outsider is real, then the cosmos has a divine Mind, an infinite intelligence we cannot fathom. Silk and Horn confront this mystery of faith and existence just as we do. In the end, I appreciate Wolfe's careful decision not to preach or even allegorize. He leaves alternate explanations--plenty of them! They baffle us, but that's... life.

--Henry Rathvon

Questions or problems to whorl-owner at lists.best.com