

Soul & Body

The Whorl list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 27 Feb 2001

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James Jordan — 27 Feb 2001, 14:54

At 12:09 PM 2/27/2001 -0700, you wrote:

I think the most interesting question one can ask is whether or not Wolfe seriously considers the doctrine that at the true resurrection the body and the spirit are reunited in perfection. In this orthodox understanding of the resurrection, the body cannot be seen as an evil and flawed temporal construct,

but as a necessary component of perfection. How should we consider disembodied "souls" like Horn or even (at times) Mucor? Are they the total being? Is the soul enough? For a fascinating discussion of the relation between the "real" identity of a man and the parts of his body, Ultan's lecture to Severian at the beginning of Shadow is an ideal place to start. (can the smallest finger of a man contains his whole essence, etc). At the end of The Urth of the New Sun, it is very clear that Severian's soul has been

hoisted from one body to another. Is he the same Severian in essence without that body, or are they inextricably linked? I think the same kinds of ideas are being thrown around when we consider "Horn" in Silk.

Marc Aramini

Good ramble. Definitely some of what Wolfe's playing with. As always, Ultan gives us a Borgesian perspective.

I don't know that there is any real good way to "do" this kind of thing. Our doctrine says that the soul (person) is separated from the physical body at death, but rejoined to a new body (new atoms) in the resurrection. So, there is some reality to the soul as the seat of personhood. But, despite the many ways in which all branches of the Church keep lapsing into gnosticism, Biblical religion is very physical, sexual, culinary, festive, and bodily -- thus sacramental in the best sense. I.e., the sacraments are not a means of withdrawal from engagement with "social issues," but should push believers back into the world, transformed.

Now, "What happens if one soul gets into another body?" Well, I don't think that ever happens, or even can, so there really is not going to be a way to describe the results that is very satisfactory. To put it another way, on Hindu presuppositions there is no problem; on Christian presuppositions there is a vast problem. Souls don't "merge," and the body is really an extension of the soul. Each soul has its own proper body, and none other.

Thus, one could use as a literary artifice the "ghost in a machine" view, and just put Horn into Silk's body, with Silk himself gone. Initially I thought that was all that was going on.

Or, you can roll a bunch of memories together and give them to a particular person, as happens to Casher O'Neill in Cordwainer Smith, and to Severian in his Memoirs. That can be done, as in Smith, as a way of saying that when a person receives Christ, he also receives all of the Church, all of "true humanity" also -- thus all the wisdom of Jesus and all the wisdom of humanity with Him.

Or, you can dump memories into another person, and have those memories "come to life again" as a person, like Thecla and everybody else that comes into Severian (so that he becomes a kind of positive "Legion"). I guess something like that has happened to Horn in Silk. But, who are the "new Thecla" and the "new Horn"? Have the original Thecla and Horn gone on to their reward with the Outsider, so that we have new persons, with new destinies, now travelling

inside of Severian and Silk? Or is it that old Horn and Thecla are not really yet dead and are continuing their lives inside Silk and Severian?

Again, what is the "soul status" of a download, like Mainframe Pas, Kypris, or Silk? Are these separate persons? Are they real persons, who can change, who are images of God in some sense, and who will go to the Outsider in the end? Or are they just mechanical programmes? How does Wolfe treat them? Or does Wolfe keep them backstage precisely because there really is no answer to such questions within his own Christian framework? (Smith's answer seems to be that if robots and animals are raised to the point of being able to use language, they can interact with the Word of God, and thus are true persons. Is that how Wolfe views the "gods of mainframe"?)

I guess my point is that to press into these questions may be pointless. Such combinations of persons work at a symbolic level, and can be dramatized in a SF narrative as a literary device. But this is literature, not philosophy.

There is a good deal of such stuff in Cordwainer Smith, given Linebarger's interest in psychoanalysis, such as the question of what happens to a "person" if his entire memory is wiped (i.e., at the end of "The Dead Lady of Clown Town"). The Christian answer has to be that God preserves the person, in His own way, though we cannot see it. Somehow it is the same person, and a person is more than memory. But given that nobody really understands even this stuff in real life, I don't see how Wolfe can be very satisfactory if called upon to delineate the particulars of the kinds of things he's doing. It works best, I suggest, to leave it at the literary and symbolic level.

FWIW

Ptero-nutria (not a cradle Roman Catholic, but did go to RC grammar school in the '50s)

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 27 Feb 2001, 15:13 · follows James Jordan

Whooee! The fur is flying. (Possibly the fur on Quetzal's stole?) And if anyone out there is about to protest this turning into a Christian discussion group -- Start something else equally interesting.

The Rat in the Vat wrote:
Our doctrine says that the soul (person) is separated
from the physical body at death, but rejoined to a
new body (new atoms) in the resurrection.

Stripped of the Platonic-Aristotelean terminology, that's what Augustine was talking about too. (I **think** it was Augustine!)

But, despite the many ways in which all branches of
the Church keep lapsing into gnosticism, Biblical
religion is very physical, sexual, culinary, festive,
and bodily -- thus sacramental in the best sense.

Man, you and I have to have an offline talk about this sometime. This has always seemed to me a very Catholic idea -- we call it "incarnationalism" -- and I'm really amazed to see it coming from a Reformed fellow.

Now, "What happens if one soul gets into another body?"

Before we can answer that we have to answer the question "what is a soul, and is it different from spirit and from memory and from personality, and if so, how?" At least in Mr Wolfe's work 8*)

Questions, I think, much more interesting than any answers I've ever seen for them...

on Christian presuppositions there is a vast problem. Souls don't "merge," and the body is really an extension of the soul. Each soul has its own proper body, and none other.

H'mmm. I take it you don't believe in "demon possession," or any other kind, then. Stated as fact, not praise or condemnation.

On the "merging" question, though, I don't know of any Christian doctrine, however splinter, that would fit that.

Okay: granted (as I hope we do) that Wolfe is writing from a Christian viewpoint, I think it's safe to say that whatever passes between people (and machines) in the various mind-or-body-swapping games, it isn't the soul, except, possibly, in Mucor's case. Yet manifestly the _personality_ transfers. So, what's up, Doc?

Good on ya bringing up Cordwainer Smith. I have to reread the Casher O'Neill stories, it's been years.

... who are the "new Thecla" and the "new Horn"? Have the original Thelca and Horn gone on to their reward with the Outsider, so that we have new persons, with new destinies, now travelling inside of Severian and Silk? Or is it that old Horn and Thecla are not really yet dead and are continuing their lives inside Silk and Severian?

Can't be the latter if souls don't merge, because Thecla/ Sev and Silkhorn do indeed seem to merge in some important way. So the "Horn" in Silkhorn, the "Thecla" and "Autarchs" in Severian-Plus, I think, can't be the people themselves (again, with the maybe? exception of Thecla resurrected by the Claw?).

Or not? It's pretty durned confusing.

Again, what is the "soul status" of a download, like Mainframe Pas, Kypris, or Silk? Are these separate persons? Are they real persons, who can change, who are images of God in some sense, and who will go to the Outsider in the end? Or are they just mechanical programmes?

If the inhumi and the chems have "soulhood," then so, I suppose, do the Mainframe residents.

There's a weirder issue about Mainframe, though -- remember that the Vironese who ride the airship to Mainframe meet their dead there. Is it possible that Wolfe is positing a machine that can actually capture souls before they depart the Whorl? If so, that's a hideous concept indeed.

(And I'm reminded also of the Babylon-5 concept of the "Soul Hunters." Not the first time, nor I suppose shall it be the last, that something in Mr Straczynski's reminded me of something in Mr Wolfe's and/or vice versa...

On an almost totally offtopic note, I'm fascinated that the muzzy mystic Roddenberry thought of religion as something humanity would "outgrow," while the coldly atheistic Straczynski not only keeps religion important to humans in his future, he posits objectively measurable souls. There will be more about JMS later this post.)

How does Wolfe treat them? Or does Wolfe keep them backstage precisely because there really is no answer to such questions within his own Christian framework?

Again, the chems come in handy as a talking-point here.
I feel reasonably certain that Mr Wolfe intends us to
view Marble and Hammerstone (the only chems we get to
know very well) as ensouled beings. Yet Hammerstone proves to be highly reprogrammable.

We have to consider the chems, also, as the *reductio ad absurdum* of the old claim that if we
had a soul, we'd be able to find it when we vivisected a living human, but we don't, so we don't.
The chems literally build their offspring extrasomatically, and if there were a physical location
for a soul they'd know it...

(I think the answer, from the Christian viewpoint, is,
"if humans build something capable of hosting a soul,
God is capable of putting a soul into it, though it's
in His free choice whether to do so or not.")

I guess my point is that to press into these questions may
be pointless. Such combinations of persons work at a symbolic
level, and can be dramatized in a SF narrative as a literary
device. But this is literature, not philosophy.

Right, mostly: there's something kind of pathetic about the litcrit mentality that whenever it
sees a symbolic structure has to find The Interpretation. Wolfe's writing, like any writing
complex enough to be worth discussing, is polysemous and doesn't have a Correct Symbolic
Interpretation -- rather, it's a rich stew of symbolic and metaphoric *_stuff_*, which can be eaten
many ways (but, I fear, tasted for the first time only once -- in a state of expectant confusion).

There is a good deal of such stuff in Cordwainer Smith, given
Linebarger's interest in psychoanalysis, such as the question
of what happens to a "person" if his entire memory is wiped
(i.e., at the end of "The Dead Lady of Clown Town").

... which is where Straczynski has to come back into the game here. One can and I think should
draw a close comparison between "Dead Lady," Latro, and Brother Wossis in "A Walk Through
Gethsemane." (Patrat, if you haven't watched B5, you *****MUST***** watch at least that episode;
your life will be better for it.)

The Christian answer has to be that God preserves the
person, in His own way, though we cannot see it.

I don't like these "has to"s. The Christian answer can just
as easily be "God knows what it is that makes a person a person, and we don't." Does the
total-amnesiac become a new soul, is the old one "crossed over the river"? I don't know and
profoundly distrust anyone else's claim that they do, or that they know how many souls an MPD
patient has. What I do know is that both of them have at least one and must be treated with the
full dignity due to a person -- as also must anything else that *_might_* have a soul. Meet an
alien, meet a machine that acts like it has a personality (I don't mean the simple misreading of
Turing's test, I mean really *_acts_* like it), and you're in territory where the only justifiable
course is to treat it as a person. Otherwise you're in the same position as the
Reconstruction-era writer who claimed that persons of African descent (he used the N word)
didn't have souls...

--Dan'l

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