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January 27, 2014

Through a glass, brightly: Sawyer's Science Fiction as a Foundation for Ethics

While the novels of Robert J. Sawyer have always contained the common tropes of science fiction, such as dinosaurs, aliens, Neanderthals and artificial intelligences, his novels have primarily focused on the human condition. These scientific nova are used as a mirror for the reader to examine humanity, with an eye to ethical behaviour.

Sawyer himself once suggested that his novels "fight the good fight about the value of rationalism over superstition, of openmindedness but not credulousness over dogma" (SF Site July 2002). As part of this scientific rationalism, Sawyer's works show continued interest in ethics as an ultimate good.

Although his early novels take place in far-future environments, Sawyer has more recently focused on near future stories, with relatively few SF tropes. When we consider Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction as:

A literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment. (qtd in Roberts 7-8)

According to Suvin's definition, Sawyer's novels are weighted in favour of a world very much recognizable as our own, with specific elements, which form the imaginative frameworks.

In novels like the Neanderthal Parallax trilogy, or Wake Watch Wonder, Sawyer presents the reader with reasoned arguments towards an alternative ethical framework, by substituting our human experiences with those of Neanderthals or AI. Through eyes not unlike our own, Sawyer's readers look at society until the light of a new world, illuminating the darkness of our past.

Many of Sawyer's more recent novels have exercised restraint in the inclusion of science fictional elements. The choice of a contemporary setting is deliberate, allowing for a critique of modern society without using obscure allegories or metaphors.

While rooting the story in the here and now, Sawyer introduces his primary plot conceit: what Suvin would term the novum. This element -- the Neanderthal world in Hominids, Humans and Hybrids, or an artificial intelligence in Wake, Watch and Wonder -- provides the focal point, not just for the story, but also for discussion and reflection around contemporary social issues.

Science fiction has long been interested in the Other, that which is not familiar. But while the SF genre has embraced it, the Other has existed throughout recorded history. The Greeks fought the Trojans. The descendants of Abraham fought the Canaanites. Much of the Christian Old Testament is concerned as much with protecting the racial identity of the Israelites, as much as it is with issues of morality.

The fear of the unknown is fed upon by techno-thrillers, such as the works of Michael Crichton. Every novel in the techno-thriller sub-genre presents some new technology that is out to kill everyone. Sawyer's novels aren't like this.

Sawyer builds empathy with the Other. We fear that which we do not understand. Accordingly, when we come to understand, we no longer fear. Is it any surprise then, that in the

beginning of his novels, there is a period of growth and understanding? In Hominids, the Neanderthal Ponter is quarantined with Mary and a few other humans. This time is spent learning about each other. In Wake, the AI Webmind gains sentience and begins to learn along with Caitlin Decter's new sight.

In Wake, when Webmind first follows some data streams on the net, it encounters the familiar:

"Of course it was familiar. I had seen something like this earlier, when the part of me that had been carved away was returning. For a moment, back then, I had seen myself as the other saw me. I had recognized myself, recognized a reflection of me" (150).

Later, Webmind discovers Caitlin, and comes to understand her in relationship to itself:

"Incredible: a third entity--or, actually, a second one, now that I was whole. A second entity that could look here, at me, and also could look... there, at a different realm, at another reality." (219)

This is the core of Sawyer's morality: recognizing yourself within the other. At the other end of the spectrum are those like Jock Krieger in the Neanderthal novels: someone who sees others as either threats or obstacles, and therefore actively seeks to eliminate them.

Even with such basic principles as recognizing the Other, morality and ethics are not black and white. In a personal interview, Sawyer explained some of the differences in how American and Canadians see issues of morality:

"Canadians as a people on the world stage have always had to seek a compromise. We don't have the ability that the United States fancied it had, which is to

go into another country and say this is how you do business from now on. Of course, history has shown that the United States rarely succeeds when they attempt that, but it's still part of the American Zeitgeist to think that we can go and tell other nations what's right and what's wrong. We in Canada have always sought compromise. We're a middle power, a middle child on the world stage, and I think that that does make us fundamentally more aware of the subjective nature of morality. We do like to explore what ethics means and why it is that some people are so dead set sure that they're right on ethical or moral issue while others are dead set sure that they're wrong. Science fiction is a great proving ground for exploring those ins and outs." (Interview with Sawyer).

Possibly the best example of this subjective nature is explored at length in the Neanderthal novels. On the Neanderthal world, most crimes are punishable by the castration of the perpetrator, as well as anyone who shares 50% of their DNA. From a community perspective, there are some clear long term benefits: genetic predisposition to crime is curtailed, and castrated individuals have reduced aggression. In Hybrids, Mary discusses this with a female Neanderthal named Bandra:

"How do you decide which traits to try to eliminate?"
"Isn't it obvious? Excessive violence. Excessive selfishness. A tendency to mistreat children. Mental retardation. Predisposition to genetic diseases" (147)

While these are traits worthy of suppression, this presents a new level of injustice. Not only is the person responsible for the crime punished, but so too are those whose only crime is genetic relationship to the criminal. When Ponter disappears from the Neanderthal world, his man-mate Akidor is accused of his murder. "Do you know what will happen if I'm found guilty? [...] It's not just me. My son Dab will be sterilized, too, and my sister Kelon--everyone who shares fifty percent of my genetic material" (Hominids 113). In Akidor's case, he is innocent, yet he is still accused of the crime.

Sawyer also shows that the severity of the punishment can serve to protect those with violent behaviour from accusation. When Mary learns of Bandra's abusive relationship, Bandra refuses to accuse her mate. "But they won't just sterilize Harb. Violence can't be tolerated in the gene pool. They will also sterilize everyone who shares fifty percent of his genetic material." (Hybrids 231). Bandra refuses to accuse her mate of abuse in order to protect her daughter's right to bear children of their own.

Sawyer shows two competing values: those of the individual and those of the species or the community. These values are intertwined with other value judgements, which can complicate seemingly straightforward issues.

"We were talking about the end of evolution. You're saying that your kind continues to evolve because it consciously weeds out bad genes."

[...] Yes, you are right. We continue to improve our gene pool by getting rid of undesirable traits"

[...] I could almost buy that--but you do it not just by sterilizing criminals, but also their close relatives, too."

Of course. Otherwise, the genes might persist."

Mary shook her head. "And I just can't abide that." [...]

Because it's wrong. Individuals have rights.

"Of course they do," said Ponter, "But so do species. We are protecting and improving the Barast species."

Mary tried not to shudder, but Ponder must have detected it regardless. "You react negatively to what I just said"

"Well" said Mary, "it's just that so often in our past, people here have made the same claim." (Hybrids 93)

Here, Sawyer philosophizes on what values are necessary in ethical behaviour. When members of two cultures meet, it is this negotiation of values that determines common behaviour.

In Watch, Caitlin Deeter learns that Webmind observed a woman commit suicide. Immediately, she lectures Webmind on ethical behaviour, and then expands on what she means.

"Not just suicide attempts!" she said, and again her tone was exasperated.

When then?

"Whenever you can make things better.

Define "better" in this context.

"Better. Not worse

Can you formulate that in another way.

[...]

"All right, how about this? Intervene when you can make the happiness in the world greater. You can't intervene in zero-sum situations--I understand that. That is, if someone is going to lose a hundred dollars and someone else is going to gain it, there's not net change in overall wealth, right? But if it's something that makes one person happier and doesn't make anyone else unhappy, do it. And if it makes multiple people happy without hurting anyone else, even better." (Watch 161)

Here, Caitlin chooses a primary value, a top of a hierarchy of values: happiness. There are a number of other values she could have chosen, and Sawyer examines some of them elsewhere in his novels. We note here that Webmind is in a particular position to choose values, without any historical baggage:

"And you can choose to value this, Webmind. You didn't evolve; you spontaneously emerged. Maybe, in most things, humans are programmed by evolution--but even though you grew out of our computing infrastructure, you weren't. We had our agendas set by natural selection, by selfish genes. But you didn't. You just are. And so you don't have... inertia. You can choose what you want to value--and you can choose to value this: the net happiness of the human race. (Watch 163-4)

In order for a crime to be prosecuted with the Neanderthals, it has to first be reported. Once it's been reported, a whole new world of surveillance is unlocked. One normative aspect of enforcing ethical or moral behaviour is the influence of others. People who go against communal values suffer social consequences. In order for this to occur, the specific behaviour must become known. In many religions, surveillance from an omniscient power acts as a normalizing

influence. One of the problems with this, is that the enforcement end of things is left for the great hereafter, rather than the here and now. For the now ubiquitous surveillance networks to be effective at influencing behaviour, it must result in some action against those who go against the values. Sawyer discusses surveillance at length. In Hominids, Sawyer reiterates some of the common literature regarding this surveillance:

"Every day of your life, you enjoy the peace and safety made possibly by that very recording [...] You know that as you walk at night, the chances of you being the victim of robbery or murder or lasagklat are almost zero, because there's no way to get away with such a crime. If you charged that--well, say, that I had attacked you in Peslar Square, and you could convince an adjudicator that your charge was reasonable, the adjudicator could order your alibi archive or mine unlocked for the time span in question, which would prove that I am innocent. But the fact that a crime cannot be committed without a record of it being made lets us all relax.

[...]

Except when someone contrives a situation to secrete himself and his victim in a place--practically the only place--in which no record of what happens between them could have been made" (174)

This last sentence is revealing. Does surveillance truly enforce behaviour, or regulate it? Some reports have suggested that cameras have merely moved crime out of sight of the cameras. Crime still occurs, with robberies occurring on a regular basis in stores covered by camera surveillance.

For victims of violent crime, the idea of constant surveillance is a welcome one. Mary, who was a victim of rape in the first novel, notes in Hybrids that:

"The notion that everyone's activities were being recorded hadn't seemed real until her own permanent Companion had been made part of her. But now she understood how liberating it was. Here, she was safe. Oh, there might still be lots of people of ill will around here, but they would never try anything...because they could never get away with anything. (130-131)

Again, there is the hint that surveillance isn't enough, without the added aspect of repercussions. While surveillance can act as a deterrent, it isn't sufficient without enforcement.

Being under surveillance also influences behaviour. Knowing that one's actions are being recorded, small decisions can be judged. Even the basic presumption of innocence can be altered. Akidor encounters such a pause before answering a question about his work:

"Being accused of a crime changed your perspective on everything, Akidor realized. Under normal circumstances, he might have just said "Fine," rather than go into the whole sorry mess. But even the driver might be called for questioning at some point: "Yes, Adjudicator, I drove Scholar Huld, and when I asked him how things were going at his computing facility, he said "fine." Ponter Boddit was dead, but he didn't show any remorse at all." (Hominids 99)

On the Neanderthal world, surveillance is continual: things are always recorded. But the recordings are not viewed until required by judicial proceedings.

When Akidor is accused of a crime, he learns that "the transmissions from Scholar Huld's Companion are being monitored directly by a living, breathing human being as they are received at the alibi-archive pavilion--and they will be so, ten tenths a day, twenty-nine days a month, until if and when his innocence is proven" (Hominids 137)

On the Neanderthal world, surveillance is only monitored when someone is under suspicion of a crime. This seems both a limitation, and a check on the power of those watching. What happens when the glass breaks? We get a sense of the possible dangers in Wonder, when Webmind's intelligence is split into unequal portions:

"When the internet had been cleaved in two before I hadn't yet engaged with the real world, and my cognitive processes had been much simpler. There had been no animosity because there had been no affection; there had been no hate because there had been no love. There had only been awareness.

But this time the large part had retained most of its mental acuity--as far as I could tell introspectively--all of its morals and ethics. But the smaller part had fallen below some critical threshold of complexity, losing its compassion; it had tormented people. Obsessed, as I was, with the memory of what had happened to Hannah Stark in Perth all those days ago--what I'd allowed to happen, what I'd watched happen--the Other felt spurred to action. But instead of trying to prevent such things, it had urged them on, it had even manufactured lies. (Wonder 259)

Here, Sawyer shows the dangers of extreme power, unchecked by ethical guidances.

"I had been nothing by kind, nothing but considerate, nothing but helpful, nothing but loving, and they--some angry fraction of them, some unruly portion, some mob--had consistently repaid that with suspicion, anger, hatred, and attempts to harm Me. My better half had turned a blind eye to that, but my lesser self perhaps had been unable to totally do so." (Wonder 259-260)

This blind eye mirrors the system in the Neanderthal novels, where surveillance is not reviewed immediately.

"The risk wasn't just to China; it was to all of humanity. My altruism, my ethics, my commitment to maximizing the net happiness of the human race--these were principled positions, arrived at through ratiocination, through careful deliberation. Who knew what the hordes Colonel Hume had called upon to eliminate me would come up with, but one thing was certain: the elimination would not be instantaneous. It would take days, if not months, for all the packets that made me up to be deleted. And, as I dwindled, presumably the same thing that happened in China might happen but without geographic restriction: my higher faculties would evaporate, leaving behind something primal and petty.

And the whole world would suffer my wrath. (Wonder 261).

Through his novels, Sawyer uses science fiction elements to allow the reader to challenge the values underlying their understanding of ethics. This allows us to better understand the consequences of new technology, as well as to better guide our community through existing issues. Science fiction has become a beacon of morality in the darkness.

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