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Voyage from Yesteryear

I thought this was a very interesting piece of sci fi. It reminded me of all the other 70s and 80s sci-fi I thumbed through on my parents book shelves, especially Speaker for the Dead in the Ender’s game series for its questions of how old societal control structures work when combined with extreme technological expansions and interstellar colonization. There is an interesting contrast Hogan presents with the appearance and true nature of the two societies in the book. The Terran society appears to be structured towards order and control, although as we see in the later chapters the government is actually incredibly chaotic and is in a constitutional crisis. On the other hand, the Chironian society at first appears to be very unorganized in its hierarchy, but is actually incredibly stable. The Chironians seem to have put their society in a kind of stable orbit, where it is constantly falling towards Earth but its velocity is enough that it keeps missing. I say this because I wonder how long they would be able to keep this system up before outright conflict struck. People obviously have relationships and friends, and I find it hard to believe legitimate hard disagreements would always have resolutions, and that one side would always clearly be in the wrong. I think that like minded tribes of friends would definitely form among this society to protect themselves from being shot in a bar. Although, any discussion of this can seemingly be waved away with the wand of post scarcity.

I find it interesting that this society maintained a facsimile of consumer culture with all of the myriad objects they end up producing which are overall “useless” to society. You would think that an interstellar colony would be much more ascetic and stark, but I guess the technology is so great as to have abundant luxury goods for no apparent reason. But I suppose Hogan takes the position that the need to create is innate, and the variety or abundance of products is not a product of Capitalism. Perhaps this is the result of the robots raising them, which is something I would liked to see more of. The robots (like the store robot), seem incredibly capitalist, so its interesting that this did not get passed down to the founding Chironians, except in their consumption tastes.

The discussion on “brain power” as the currency and “competency” as the status in Chironian society is very interesting. In a society that truly has an infinite currency like this, it makes sense why all labor is uncontracted and the concept of quid pro quo value exchanges is so vague. What’s the point of trying to define the exact amount of labor needed in exchange from a pool of infinite currency? Competency is also interesting as measure of status, especially because it appears that all work sits on an unweighted spectrum and is judged independently of other disciplines. This means the house painter has just as much respect as anyone else because he does “his” work well (judged on whatever is the best house painting work possible). I’m not sure if these two issues hold up in Chironian society. As far as currency goes, I think the actual currency in Chironian society is time, or some composite of time and brain power. This is because competency and output are not scalar quantities of brain power, but to me seem to be vectors of brain power applied over time. While brain power is valuable, it seems that the time one has to apply their brain power over x issue (and that issue’s importance) is much more valuable than that brain power itself. This changes the idea of there being an infinite source of currency in non-capital centered “craft” societies. I think people in such a society would actually trade in the time used on each other’s problems, not brain power. This introduces some level of scarcity, and I think would also result in changing of the values of people’s relative time. Because of this, the second virtue or “competence” as status is changed by giving people different values of their competency based on its difficulty and time/certainty to complete. The ultimate result being that Kath’s time (and therefore her status) would be more valuable (in addition to its added value because of its contribution to overall society) than the house painters. I think that because of this we would also see a huge increase in the aversion to idleness in this society, way more there already is. So, with this underlying inequality and the intense sin of idleness, the foundations of such a craft society would not be as stable as Hogan is proposing.

On another level I think that 40 years later there are some interesting parallels with our current society and the Chironians. One development that will be interesting to see is how close stores and restaurants in the near future will actually look with Chironian ones. We already see something that looks very similar to this in action with the new Amazon grocery stores, in which you essentially walk in and walk out with your groceries. Apple pay and nfc based app payments are also similar to this. The result of these innovations is that the act of payment is being even further separated from the actual currency. I think this new behavior combined with new stores of value in things like cryptocurrency could easily create an alternative consumption experience that is actually very much like the Chironian “free” system. Also, as with the Chironians, the idea of a “project” oriented society is actually very similar to things that we have now, especially in tech. People already hop around from project to project and job to job every five years as it is in reality, so it is not far fetched to me that we’ll see this phenomenon advance even further.

“necessary tasks” = but robots can do everything you don’t want to do

Value of chiron = value in elarning, which we can take away from