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Spending Strength and Bending Gender

The fundamental unit of the popular programming paradigm known as object-oriented programming is the object, an abstract representation of some real-world entity with both “state” and “behavior.” “State” or “data” members of the object define its attributes; “behavior” or “function” members define its actions. The classic example is a bicycle: every bicycle object is associated with descriptive data (brand, make, year, color) as well as actions (pedal, brake, change gear, use bell).

The classic bicycle example becomes confusing if the two types of members exchange roles. Perhaps it makes some sense that to pedal, to brake, to change gear, and to use a bell are valid attributes of a bike (i.e., these functions define a bicycle), but the switch from data members to function members is more unclear. What does it mean for make or color to be a function of a bicycle? A function member, like a data member, is still innate to an object— items are defined by their functional purpose— but also much more ephemeral.

The programming example is an analogy to the role of gender on the planet Winter in Ursula K. Le Guin’s science-fiction fantasy novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. A person on Winter is not born with a binary gender, but are instead androgynous: only clearly exhibiting a (previously indeterminate) binary gender during kemmer (estrus). In Spanish, the difference between a woman in our world (terra) and theirs (Gethen or Winter) is the difference between

saying “soy una mujer” and “estoy una mujer”; namely, “I am a woman” versus “I am [in the state of] a woman,” the latter definitely absurd and incorrect in our understanding of gender. But to the Karhidians and Orgoreynians of Winter, gender is most surely a function of a person, temporarily defining their body and mind. The general absence of gender for the Gethenians is a result of the harsh natural circumstances, but it is balanced with the quasi-controllable gender-like functions of kemmer and dothe.

There is a clear biological difference between men and women on terra. Men are (generally) more able to lift heavier manual loads. Women are physically adapted to carry and tend for babies as all female mammals are. The societal roles of the two genders are deep parts of a person’s identity because of their physical definitions. While men are by no means confined to physical labor nor women to domestic, child-rearing activities, their biological function gives an undeniable advantage. This is the same idea as “comparative advantage” from an economic perspective: the term “refers to an economy's ability to produce goods and services at a lower opportunity cost than trade partners” (“Comparative Advantage”); less effort is put into achieving certain tasks by one gender or the other purely by natural reasons. Men and women become specialized, and society becomes streamlined (this is one merit of delegation, of not sharing everything).

This most objective, economic view might make the impression that permanent gender is a useful construct of society (as it is for all mammals and intelligent creatures, including the rest of the Ekumen), and that the loss or lack of gender as an inherent part of one’s identity for the Gethenians is perhaps a harmful mutation of random natural selection, as an investigator initially notes (Le Guin, 89). Gethenian androgynes, normally sexually neutral but able to express female

or male sexuality during kemmer, are perhaps even more confusing than hermaphrodites such as snails, for there is an uncertainty every time one goes into kemmer (at least biologically, without the use of gender-forcing drugs). In the former and the latter, there is the certainty of being one of two sexes, or of being both at once. In the latter two, there is more of an equality between the two roles, and if a humanoid, intelligent species of hermaphrodites did exist, the society they would exist in would likely be similar to one of the Gethenians. In either case, lack of the basic societal specialization between man and woman would make a hermaphroditic society similarly technologically slow-paced as Gethen.

But the people of Winter would still have their third, latent state that spans the majority of their lifetimes. A Gethenian is never certain which gender he will naturally assume during kemmer; he can only be certain that he *will* assume a gender, and that most of his life will be spent in some intermediate state between the two binary designations. A certainty of an uncertainty.

But this uncertainty of gender doesn't have a negative effect on the world— after all, they have no preconception of a world with binary genders. The Gethenians set up kemmerhouses to isolate the behavior from the rest of society. The confusion of sex resolves itself in kemmerhouses by shielding society's eyes from the kemmerers,

At the beginning of the novel, Estraven is— or rather, is characterized as by Genly as— a powerful man, “one of the most powerful men in the country ... lord of a Domain and lord of the Kingdom, a mover of great events” (5). While Genly insists on using male pronouns for consistency, there is the strong sense of male-ness by the terran connotation of lords with men, and men with power. But during Genly's rescue mission, Estraven becomes almost a couple with

Genly, resting between maternal and romantic figure. Genly, however, remains a man biologically (as dictated by nature) and in his mindset. Estraven's gender here is a response to his relationship with Genly.

Usually, the call, the invocation of such a response, would be another Gethenian going into kemmer, but Genly's pervertedness is a constant signal. Undoubtedly this makes many Gethenian feel very uncomfortable around him; for them, it is unnatural to sustain high levels of one gender or the other.

Nature's call is something natural and unavoidable. Unlike human males, who can avoid the pains of reproduction and can therefore safely assume long positions in office, all Gethenians are susceptible to the physical burden. King Argaven is no exception; his pregnancy, and the militarization of Karhide under the surrogate king, is a result of this natural responsibility.

There are, however, ways and reasons to meddle with sexual orientation. Drugs are used in Orgoreyn to force a specific gender, to effect kemmer, or to alleviate it; the latter two are much like sexual performance and birth control drugs in common use today. Gaum attempts to seduce Estraven in an attempt of political siding with the aid of such drugs (153). During a Handdarata foretelling ceremony, there is always a male pervert that keeps a kemmering Gethenian aroused throughout the ceremony. There is also a small proportion of the Gethenians who are perverts by hormone imbalances, so Genly's sexual situation is not totally alien (albeit looked down upon).

Gethenians are average in stature and strength in comparison to humans; Genly, an average male, is taller and stronger than they are. There is no equivalent to the constantly raised levels of testosterone that give men their strength.

In times of need, however, Gethenians trained by the Handdarata can push past the boundaries of typical human strength using “dothe” strength. Imagine being able to sustain superhero-level strength for up to a day— only to be balanced afterwards by a much longer rest period, or thangen. Like kemmer, the male-ness is made up for in short, intense bursts, this time of strength rather than manliness.

What purpose does this adaptation serve for the Gethenians? As the investigator noted, “burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make” (93), citing the burden of childbearing and the privilege of free males. She also notes the absence of rape and the planet-wide lack of division and war. This is based on the premise stated earlier that women are physically disadvantaged by their reproductive function and men advantaged without such a need, emphasizing that this is the single most important difference between men and women; eliminating this difference, in the investigator’s eyes, eliminates the great natural inequality of sex.

But there is another factor— and this too is noted by the investigator, but with respect to war— more grave than any other of Winter: namely, winter weather itself. Winter is a cold and unforgiving barrier. Efficiency and technical dominance do not matter in a land where the elements guard prisons and dictate travelling routes; rather, the goal is survival. Gethenians cannot afford to have half of the race carry the burden of reproduction; kemmer allows every individual to carry children, and thus has a higher capacity for reproduction rate. And men, while stronger than women, use much more energy and have a smaller percentage body fat, so they are worse-equipped to endure cold weather; a mixture between the two genders provides a balance between physical longevity and performance. If Gethen’s situation is considered in such a way,

their physical adaptations (which would be inefficient on a planet with better living conditions) become well-justified.

While Gethenians spend most of their time sexually latent and with average strength, kemmer and dothe are equally important. They are natural power-ups for use during rituals and emergencies. They are a way for Gethenians to semi-consciously control gender and strength, turning these aspects into functions of a person, a way for them to interact with each other using the construct of gender.

Differing physical circumstances define the role of gender in different societies societies. Our terran culture is like our sun, a red giant burning bright and fast, doomed to expand and wither in five billion years. The society on Winter is like that of a red dwarf, which can last ten trillion years. The dwarf star is cooler and dimmer, but there's still a warm fire within.

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