

Study Guide

Angels of the Singularity Chapter 3



The “Lagrangian points” were calculated by the French mathematician Joseph Lagrange in the 18th century, based on Newton’s physics of gravitation. At such a point, a small satellite can remain stationary with respect to two larger bodies. Near the Earth and Moon there are five of these, but the first one (“L1”) puts the palace smack in front of the Moon, marring the view. That sort of sums up how much the immortals populating the palace care about their impact on Earth’s remaining people.

In the 1970s there was a group of ambitious technologists who, along with their proposal for “terraforming” Mars (so we could plant colonies there), promoted the idea of a space station located at the fifth Lagrangian point. They called themselves the L5 society, and believed humans should colonize space. The spirit of this was very similar to later transhumanism, in being an example of “scientism”; the belief that you can solve any problem with science, if you are aggressive enough. Overpopulated Earth? Expand into space. Human body less than perfect? Fix it. Superficially reasonable, but it collides with economics and humanistic values. The collision with humanistic values is the whole point of this comic. Here was my inspiration for the palace.

In this chapter, I describe the palace/space station as if human beings were going to live there, with artificial gravity (centripetal force) and places for growing food. In later chapters I claim the immortals were rendered abstract and absorbed into a virtual world created by the Moon God. I prefer the latter interpretation, but then why have gravity and solar days? Maybe there are human servants living up there, for the amusement of the noblemen.

Jackson might be able to answer that question. He knows more about the palace than I do. Why is this? Was he actually there? I don’t know. There is no hidden truth behind the mysteries I pose.

In answer to those who might accuse me of stealing an idea from the film *Elysium* (with all the rich people in a space station, having left a trashed Earth), I’ll say that I came up with the palace concept before that film, but after many others going back to Jonathan Swift. In *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift has an exclusive club of nobles floating around in a magnetically levitated island. They extort protection money from towns below, threatening to crush them. The towns put up magnetic spikes. I love Swift’s attitude.

The discussion of natural versus artificial brains was inspired by a published philosophical thought experiment where a person is transported using a device like on *Star Trek*. When the person comes out the other side, are they the same person, or is this just a duplicate that /who thinks it’s/they’re the same person? (It would be hard to persuade them otherwise!) If one believes the latter, and operates the transporter in the usual way, one would think the original was destroyed to make the duplicate, although this needn’t be the case (if, for instance, you kept both). Does consciousness have to be continuous in order for personal identity to remain real? Or, contrarily, is something with the same memories and brain structure the same person? I don’t know the answer to this. It’s not like I secretly share Grant’s or Jackson’s opinion. The option of transferring consciousness to a machine brings up the possibility of multiple embodiments, as many as one pleases (or can afford). The issues of identity in question here are treated amusingly by philosopher Daniel Dennett in “Brainstorms: Philosophical essays on mind and psychology.” He contemplates a science fiction scenario (thought experiment) where his brain controls a substitute body from afar, and is then duplicated in a computer. One of my complaints about the transhumanists is that they don’t seem to treat issues of consciousness and identity as subtly as the philosophers.

I should make clear that neither of our heroes has a human body, although it might appear so. How do you get a mind in there? One obvious way would be to put a real human brain in, and hook it up to control the body, so there are no questions of abstracting consciousness. The mainstream view of consciousness among philosophers and scientists is that it’s an information processing function, one that can be realized on any adequate platform including a machine, so maybe you could take consciousness out of the original brain somehow and put it into a new machine brain in a new body. The machine would probably have to be structured like the human brain in order to efficiently compute human mind functions, but it wouldn’t have to be organic. What then is

loaded into the machine to make it a particular person? Information processing styles particular to a person, which constitute “personality”? Memories? Probably something like that, but without knowing how the mind is implemented in actual physical processes (which is yet-undiscovered scientific knowledge) one can't say. When singularitarians or transhumanists talk about “uploading your mind” into a computer, this has no more scientific basis than the Star Trek transporter. One can talk about it, but in ignorance.

The Time Man (as I call him) is able to travel in time, but time is like space; mostly empty. The inspiration for his loneliness was a story related by a friend, who was invited to look into a telescope at the Andromeda galaxy. This closest neighbor galaxy can be seen with the naked eye, but is almost three million light years away. My friend contemplated the vast expanses of nothing between the galaxies, where, even traveling at the speed of light, you would have to go millions of years before finding a place to land. Elsewhere in the universe there are enormous bubbles without galaxies, a yet more imposing wasteland. The Time Man can see some of this from his four-dimensional vantage point. When he disappears, things happen that are topologically impossible in three dimensions, such as his lower ring moving to a different location on his body. His body design was inspired by Henry Moore's sculpture *Oval with Points*.

Why does the Time Man appear when he does? Because important as their argument is, Grant and Jackson's tiff pales in comparison with yet more profound truths. Ultimately, they both function well enough as human minds so that a difference in the physical substrate doesn't get in the way of their friendship. Still, this difference becomes important in subsequent episodes (e.g. chapter 5).