Boone Tutterow

Ms. Tao

Science Fiction and Futures

17 December 2023

Examining the Effect of Free Will on Utopian and Dystopian Worlds

In a genre that is often built around the stark contrasts between the utopian and dystopian, an absence of these settings can, in turn, make jarring pieces of science fiction that surprise their readers. Indeed, it is almost as if, through science fiction, it is expected that a suspension of disbelief must occur. When this suspension of disbelief does not come within the first few pages of a text, that in and of itself is the cause of incredulity. Such is the case with both Octavia Butler's "The Book of Martha" from *Bloodchild and Other Stories* and Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life" from *Stories of Your Life and Others*. Both worlds exhibit an abnormal science fiction setting through their depiction of the typical, everyday normality of their respective "real" worlds. "The Book of Martha" explores what happens if an ordinary woman from a normal world is given godlike powers and a world-altering decision to make. "Story of Your Life" examines a woman who gains an ability that makes her similarly godlike. In both situations, it is the mundane setting—the lack of utopia or dystopia—that makes their eventual respective novums stand out, and prompt a closer look at the characters and the people of the stories themselves, rather than the world surrounding them. Thus, with more character-centric stories in a normal setting, it is easier to examine the unique human elements found in these characters. That is, the characters, including their thoughts and ethical decisions, *are* part of the novum of the story. When the godlike being or creature emerges in the texts, the focus naturally flows to

the characters' reactions and decisions, as the characters themselves were the most complex thing prior to the novum's introduction.

With the absence of a societal extreme in the settings, the nature of free will—something prevalent in both texts—can be explored thoroughly and deeply within the characters. Through a projection of the future, or through a message from God themself, both stories reveal that free will cannot be utopic, as it by nature creates a non-utopian world. The whole idea of a utopia, then, creates a paradox: While one world may be a utopia for a person exercising their free will, that world is most certainly a dystopia for many others. If both utopian and dystopian worlds coexist, the presence of a sole person perceiving the world as dystopian eliminates the possibility of a fully utopian society. Therefore, because of free will, a utopian society will never become a reality in the "real" world. Furthermore, in a hypothetical world where everyone agreed on everything, it would be clear that free will would be non-existent in that reality, thus creating a dystopia. So, with free will existing, no utopic world is possible. However, this resulting fault of free will should bring solace and hope: As imperfection is inevitable, there is little benefit in stressing about the future, particularly in futures where everything is predetermined. Because humans inevitably introduce flaws through their exercise of free will, the futures in both "The Book of Martha" and "Story of Your Life" are effectively predetermined. There *will* be pain, sorrow, and imperfection in the future of both worlds. But there will be joy and happiness, too. So, in the end, while free will—if it even exists—might lead to unavoidably flawed worlds, this fact should bring a sense of acceptance. With the burden of optimizing the future to its unattainable perfection gone, the emphasis shifts to the much more meaningful present.

The world in which Martha speaks to God may initially appear neutral or even dystopian, but a closer look reveals that it is Martha's personalized utopia. Originally, the setting of "The

Book of Martha" is presented as a hazy utopian world through its granting of free will to Martha, while maintaining a literal gray area that was likely seen in her old, "real" world. The very first line is from God themself, who states to Martha, "It's difficult, isn't it? You're truly free for the first time" (Butler 189). Immediately, it appears that Martha has left her own world, presumably dead, and has joined with God in heaven. This heaven is immediately presumed to be a utopia, both from the nature of the place and because Martha is told that she is "truly free" in this new world. In addition, it is assumed that the world Martha was formerly in was a dystopia, as God telling Martha that she is "truly free for the first time" demonstrates that she did not experience this freedom in her old world. On the other hand, it is immediately apparent that the supposed heaven that Martha occupies is nothing like what she, nor anyone else would expect. God's smile is described as "weary," and Martha describes the place as having an "endless grayness," where "there's nothing [there], no one [there] but [God]" (189). God's "weary smile" immediately humanizes him and shatters any thoughts of a perfect deity, for a perfect God would not show tiredness. God's "weary[ness]" makes it appear that they are exhausted from watching over the complexities of a vast humanity—a humanity that has been given free will. In fact, God's imperfections and "bor[edom]" with "know[ing] everything" appear to Martha as "such a human thing to say," that she is prompted to remember the "real" world that she had been in previously. In this typical world, she had been writing her fifth novel, when she suddenly felt "stiff … hungry and thirsty" (189-190). This setting is depicted as mundane, with no utopia or dystopia present. It is simply the world that everyone is accustomed to living in, where people feel "hungry and thirsty" from time to time, yet carry on regardless. So, when Martha is transported to the godlike world, it may appear that this world mirrors her typical world through its "endless grayness," seemingly representing the mundanity of her everyday life. But, rather than the

"grayness" suggesting a boring or dystopian world, it represents a blank canvas for Martha to envision and idealize her life. Throughout her time in this new world, she is "truly free," as God tells her from the start. She originally depicts God as "a twice-live-sized, bearded white man" (190), but eventually sees them as a "stocky black man wearing ordinary, modern clothing" (208), and eventually as a "familiar woman" closely resembling herself (212). By gradually shifting from society's depiction of God to her own, Martha sees what she wants to see, doing so through her own free will. While free will is unable to create utopias among the masses, it can create individual utopias. For Martha, it is clear that she wants to visualize God as an approachable, reasonably sized person, and so that is what occurs in her subsequent revisualizations. Like an architect, Martha can use free will to create whatever she deems necessary or desirable. Interestingly, her second depiction of God as a black man wearing "ordinary clothing" shows a God who would not look perfect in the eyes of most. But to Martha, it nearly is. In the final transformation, God turns from a man to a woman. With society depicting God as a man, this final shift represents the full transformation from society's patriarchal representation of God to her own. Therefore, a utopia is not a perfect world, but instead is a world where someone can utilize their free will to the fullest.

It is through experiencing her own idealized world that Martha realizes that personal utopias within dreams are the only attainable utopias within society. The very nature of free will is established in the text as imperfect. God themself states that free will is "the freedom to make mistakes." God continues by explaining, "One group of mistakes will sometimes cancel another … Sometimes mistakes cause people to be wiped out, enslaved, or driven from their homes … Free will isn't a guarantee of anything, but it's a potentially useful tool—too useful to erase casually" (199). With God's own imperfections having been shown prior, they make an

interesting claim about the imperfection of humans themselves. God understands that humans are innately imperfect, and will make many mistakes—sometimes more often than not— when given free will. When Martha is given free will in her personalized world, however, she can slowly perfect the world to her liking. This contrast suggests that societal utopias are impossible, but individual utopias are. In an individualized world, Martha can create a personalized utopia without having to apply those changes to everyone else, as there is no one else. Thus is the issue with societal utopias: Changes intended to benefit society are often not universalizable. According to Richard Burnor and Yvonne Riley in their textbook *Ethical Choices: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy with Cases*, an act is "universalizable" only if it can be carried out consistently and universally. Furthermore, an act that is not universalizable is not ethical (181). Given this definition, most of the changes that Martha suggests would not be able to be universalized into a utopia, making them unethical to society and therefore dystopic. As a result, Martha realizes that individualized utopias are the only idealized worlds possible, as there is no need to universalize any changes made from the "real" world. Therefore, while achieving societal perfection may be impossible, individual free will can produce worlds that best suit their creator and their future selves.

While "The Book of Martha" examines free will within the dynamic setting of a personalized utopia, "Story of Your Life" is set in a truly neutral, unchanging world from its beginning. This typical static setting prompts a closer look at the main character, Dr. Louise Banks, as she lives through a world that lacks free will. From its very first page, the setting presents itself as typical. Two unnamed characters—later revealed to be Dr. Banks and her husband, Gary—have just come home from dinner. It is "after midnight," and the two of them decide to dance, like "a pair of thirtysomethings swaying back and forth in the moonlight like

kids" (Chiang 91). While presented as a happy moment, it is nevertheless set in a typical world that does not appear utopic or dystopic. While this moment is later revealed to be a glimpse into the future relative to the predominant setting of the story, the primary setting is neutral, too. Because both the future and present worlds are neither utopic nor dystopic, everything in between takes on this same neutral setting. This consistent neutrality forms a stark contrast to the nature of simultaneous time in this world, something much more complex.

In the world of "Story of Your Life," where seeing the future forces individuals to follow its course against their will, the idea of free will becomes both irrelevant and nonexistent. This realization brings a forced sense of acceptance among those who know of this fact. It may seem that knowing the future is meaningless because one can use their free will to go against that future. Dr. Banks brings up a similar idea with the *Book of Ages*, stating that the "result" of the book "is a contradiction," in that "no matter what the *Book of Ages* says she'll do, she can choose to do otherwise" (131). However, when Dr. Banks remembers a future interaction with her future daughter, she acts out of instinct, much like an animal would. When she sees a bowl on a display shelf—which she knows will later hit her future daughter on the head—she takes the bowl regardless, reflecting that "the motion didn't feel like something I was forced to do. Instead it seemed just as urgent as my rushing to catch the bowl when it falls on you: an instinct that I felt right in following" (133). Through this description, it appears that Dr. Banks has no control over her actions. While she states that picking out the bowl was not something that she "was forced to do," her "instincts" prove otherwise. Through her animal-like actions, she demonstrates a complete lack of free will. While animals may be free from self-conscious thought, they are driven by instinct and possess no free will. Dr Banks, in a similar fashion, cannot control her predetermined actions. Therefore, the *Book of Ages* can be carried out regardless, because its

readers lose their free will for the futures they see. The acceptance of the future is similarly forced onto Dr. Banks. She explains, “Now that I know the future, I would never act contrary to that future, including telling others what I know: those who know the future don’t talk about it. Those who’ve read the *Book of Ages* never admit to it” (137). With Dr. Banks decisively stating that she will never oppose the future, it is apparent that she fully embraces and has come to accept her newfound fate. After all, if there is nothing that can be done about the future, one should try and live out their role to the fullest by being the lead actor in their own play of life.

Both “The Book of Martha” and “Story of Your Life” pose worlds that defy traditional ideas, with these worlds producing unique stories that distinguish themselves even in the novum-filled worlds of the science fiction genre. Both texts challenge the idea of utopia and dystopia as a whole, fostering a deeper look into the decisions—or lack thereof—that shape the characters. The legitimacy of free will, whether powerful or absent, should not be a cause for pessimism. In Martha’s world, where free will exists, this freedom can be used as a tool to create a personalized utopia for oneself. In Dr. Banks’ world, where free will is absent, the emphasis shifts to thoroughly enjoying the present. After all, it is the buildup of present moments that creates the future, one imperfect moment at a time.

Works Cited

Burnor, Richard, and Yvonne Raley. *Ethical Choices: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy with Cases*. 3rd ed., Oxford UP, 2022.

Butler, Octavia E. "The Book of Martha." *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, Seven Stories Press, 2005, pp. 187-214.

Chiang, Ted. "Story of Your Life." *Stories of Your Life and Others*, Vintage Books, 2002, pp. 91-145.