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Escape as Recovery and Consolation

Great fantasy literature is about the experience of wonderment. Few things can be as important for us today in our contemporary humdrum world of boring regularity and postmodern cynicism. While a child can be endlessly fascinated by the simple dynamics of a helium balloon rising to the ceiling every time he lets it go, the poor parent playing this game with the child soon grows tired of the repetition. Yet, the adult needs wonderment just as much as the child, though he would likely not admit it. J. R. R. Tolkien knew this truth all too well, and those who become enraptured by his mythic tales of hobbits, dragons, rings, elves, wizards, encroaching Evil, and victorious Good, relish diving into his books and turn each page with anticipation, no matter how many times they’ve been turned before. In describing the experience of reading The Lord of the Rings Peter J. Kreeft, a Christian philosopher, writes, “Exploring Tolkien’s world was not just interesting (that all-purpose meaningless euphemism). It was not even just fascinating. It was sheer joy. For we knew that here we had touched truth. This book was a homecoming. This book broke our hearts.” But what is it, exactly, that breaks our hearts? What in this fantasy novel

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1 Kreeft, The Philosophy of Tolkien, 9.
engages us so deeply and personally? Why does this book remain the bestselling and most widely read of books, next to the Bible (much to the chagrin of many critics²)? Why do fans read it over and over, and why do some dress up and act out scenes in obscure yet strangely inviting subcultural book clubs? Why do we always see a Gandalf, or a Bilbo, or an Aragorn, or a Strider, or a Lady Galadriel at most Renaissance festivals? Because Tolkien deals not in vapid escapism but in spiritually meaningful escape.

Tolkien was well aware of how some elitist scholars and dismissive critics responded to his work, and he simply chose to disregard their opinions, stating, “Some who have read the book, or at any rate have reviewed it, have found it boring, absurd, or contemptible; and I have no cause to complain, since I have similar opinions of their works, or the kinds of writing that they evidently prefer.”³ Most critics of his day preferred realism, and they disdained the mythic and the fantastic, dismissing such literature as childish, unrealistic, and escapist. Plus, they just hated fantasy. Thankfully, Tolkien did not care one wit what these critics thought, for as he said, he didn’t like the literature they liked to read. Thus, with his Inkling friends such as C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams, Tolkien wrote the kind of literature they liked, the kind of books they believed were missing from contemporary fiction. His stated goal was to write tales that delighted, amused, excited, and at times, deeply moved his readers.⁴ He achieved this artistic goal by developing a keen understanding of what literature of escape is really all about, and he understood escape to be vastly different than escapism.

What the critics of his day actually despised was literary escapism, not literature of escape, but they could not (or would not) make this fine distinction. This fear and loathing of

² For a delightful overview and discussion of elitist critical reproaches to the success of The Lord of the Rings, see Kreeft, The Philosophy of Tolkien, 13-14.
³ Tolkien, Fellowship, xiv.
⁴ Ibid.
escapist literature was a carryover from the utilitarian worldview of the Victorian period. Indeed, not everyone in the late nineteenth century subscribed to hard-nosed utilitarianism, but many intellectuals and several of those in the circle of critics did hold to a utilitarian suspicion of all things imaginative and imaginary. Thus, fantastic narratives were often dismissed as a waste of time, as fiction that unduly stimulated the imagination, leading to unrealistic expectations, the threat of frustration from unfulfilled wish fantasies, and the dangers of time-wasting daydreaming. Like some of their Victorian predecessors, many early twentieth-century critics and reviewers found fantasy childishly unsophisticated, and they considered it a trivial narrative form that encouraged unproductive and unhealthy escapism.

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Tolkien had some news for them: he flatly rejected these critics’ opinions. Moreover, he found them shortsighted, narrow minded, and altogether mistaken in their understanding of escape. In his essay “On Fairy-stories,” Tolkien explains:

I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which “Escape” is now so often used: a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism gave no warrant at all. In what the misusers are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic. In real life it is difficult to blame it, unless it fails; in criticism it would seem to be the worse the better it succeeds. Evidently we are faced by a misuse of words, and also by a confusion of thought. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-
walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using escape in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and what is more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter.\(^5\)

Tolkien notes that those critics have it wrong who suggest to escape reality is somehow to abnegate responsibility for social change or to ignore the real issues and problems of the age. If reality is not working or is in some way a prison, then why blame the man for trying to escape from that which oppresses through its abject failure to please and to provide productive freedom of expression and life. Escape into fantasy is not necessarily the ignoble act of a deserter cowardly fleeing from the challenges of reality; rather, it is the heroic imaginative endeavor of the innocent who has found himself victim to a failed reality, unjustly punished by a broken world he did not choose and one which he did not necessarily break.

Moreover, the escape of fantasy is not a reactionary dismissal of the real, nor is it a misguided or even Luddite rejection of modern progress. Rather, according to Tolkien, reading fantasy is a transformative act of the imagination whereby truths are discovered and true vision restored such that the broken real world can be transformed, improved, and reshaped according to eternal principles of Truth (re)discovered in the luminary Secondary World of fantasy.\(^6\) Instead of trying to reject the real through escapism, good fantasy seeks to restore and renew through a spiritual process of recovery: “Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view. … We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from

\(^5\) Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader*, 79.
\(^6\) Ibid., 80-81.
possessiveness.”

Fantasy, then, is not mere escapism but a type of recovery or renewal or revisioning movement from a view of reality that has been corrupted by secular humanism and limited by scientific materialism toward a restored and proper vision of the real. As Thomas W. Smith notes, “Tolkien insists that his stories are primarily about recovery. Or, they are about an escape from a false view of human life and the world, to a more real view of human life and the world, which can be achieved by creating alternative realities in which traditions and virtues can be rediscovered because they are being portrayed in a fresh light.”

According to Joseph Pearce, escape for Tolkien is not a leaving home to find new things and to leave the old behind; rather, it is a returning home or a going into ourselves to (re)discover the truth of reality that we have ignored or overlooked. In other words, fantasy is a recovery of true vision, which is ultimately a biblical worldview.

Finally, Tolkien extolled the value of fantasy in the face of modernist critics and skeptical readers by highlighting the comfort and consolation it brings to willing and even unsuspecting readers. Tolkien firmly believed that fantasy provides an imaginative consolation, helping us relieve deep-seated disappointments and satisfy long-awaited desires not possible in our limited lives. Yet, beyond provisions of comfort, community, and satisfied desires, fantasy’s greatest gift of consolation comes in what he termed *eucatastrophe*—the good ending, the sudden turn from horror, failure, defeat, and destruction toward joy, fulfillment, success, and freedom. The tale will take its characters through very challenging adventures, deep loss, heavy grief, and sometimes unimaginable suffering—true catastrophe—but at some moment in the narrative, there is the unexpected turning point, a show of unforeseen grace that fills the heart with joy and

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7 Ibid. 77.
8 Smith, “Tolkien’s Catholic Imagination,” 82.
10 Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader*, 83.
wonder and that offers true consolation and hope. According to Tolkien, these fantastical myths, legends, and fairy tales—true fantasy—offer a glimpse of the Gospel in which there is hope of overcoming the greatest catastrophe of all, death itself: “It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence if you will) universal final defeat [eternal death or hell] and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.”

Why does The Lord of the Rings continue to be widely read and favored among readers even into the twenty-first century, much to the consternation and utter disbelief of so many critics and literary scholars? Because the epic fantasy brought to life by the magical pen of Tolkien accomplishes all that Tolkien designed in his subcreation of good fantasy: when readers escape into Middle-earth, they are not merely engaging an escapist wish fulfillment; rather, they are imaginatively transcending the real, experiencing soul-changing eucatastrophe, discovering lost and forgotten truths, recovering lost vision, and enjoying the blessings of consolation so that when they return home they are transformed in heart, mind, and soul and may, if they so wish, engage in transforming their own reality from the renewed perspective of a radically restored vision and altered worldview. But it is important to remember that this restored vision is a Judeo-Christian one, and the worldview that changes readers’ perspectives is a biblical one that reveals God’s Truth and thus restores proper vision, understanding, and perspective.

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Natural Law in Middle-earth: Understanding Good and Evil

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11 Ibid., 85-86.
Fantasy literature presents readers with immense struggles and exciting, if not unsettlingly violent, battles between the forces of Good and Evil. On the face of it, we can quite naturally recognize and identify that which is of the Good and that which is of the Evil. Curiously, though, due to the prevalence of secular humanist worldviews, constructivist theories of knowledge, and relativistic notions of morality, most people are hard pressed to come up with a reasonable and workable definition of good and evil. Ask any group of seemingly intelligent people to explain how we might know and differentiate good from evil, and you will first get blank stares and raised eyebrows. Then, the wandering eyes, looking at each other for answers. Then, the various forays into all kinds of confused, albeit sincere, postmodern posturing about relativism and situational ethics. Most people are really good at regurgitating what the secular humanists have taught them, but few folks can explain the definitions nor critically examine the principles and assumptions informing these views. This is what makes reading and contemplating Tolkien a joy—he cuts through the confusion and provides clarity on the very important questions and issues of good and evil. But one must be willing to look, listen, and learn from the master storyteller and self-styled hobbit of Oxford.

Some of those who read Tolkien for the first time without knowing anything about his theistic worldview often come to the conclusion that he must be an ethical dualist, one who believes that Good and Evil are eternal absolutes that co-exist in a cosmic balance, such that when one asserts itself in excess of a perceived balance, the other must respond so as to restore balance. However, a simple reading of Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion* or researching into his Christian theistic worldview reveals quite clearly that Tolkien was no ethical dualist but, rather, held firmly to a biblical notion of good and evil. As philosopher Peter Kreeft explains, Tolkien draws from his biblical, Christian theistic understanding which teaches that God created all
things ontologically good but due to freewill in man (a moral agent), man was free to choose the Good or the Evil. In the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve, we see that man chose Evil and thus became evil by nature. Evil is not co-existent with the Good but, rather, Good is pre-existent and Evil is defined in terms of Good. Evil is the negation or deprivation of Good. This is the same theological principle according to which Tolkien constructs or subcreates the Arda universe.¹³ In this intellectual and moral framework, Good and Evil are not dualistically balanced. Rather, the Good is pre-existent (God) and determines all of reality, and all of reality is defined in relation to the eternal Good. God as the eternal, uncaused¹⁴, causal being is in his essence purely good, and he has designed the universe and moral structures out of his own goodness. As such, there is a purpose behind all of design, and we can determine moral good and morally good behavior from studying the design of things.

This moral perspective is commonly termed natural law theory, and we must understand this view if we are to understand Tolkien. Natural law theory presupposes the necessity of design within the created universe. There is an oughtness to how things operate and how moral agents designed with freewill should interact with designed reality. The fact of design in nature necessitates a divine Creator or Designer, for there cannot be oughtness or intentional design within nature if there isn’t a Mind with intentions designing things for a purpose. In this view, nature has a purpose and its purpose is sufficiently discernible from analyzing its design. When moral agents act according to the designed purpose, they are doing good, and when they violate

ⁱ⁴ Basic logic tells us that God must be uncaused and eternally existent, for if there were ever a moment when there was truly and absolutely nothing, then nothing could ever be. Science tells us with much evidence that the universe as we know it was caused, that it was brought into being out of nothing. The law of causality tells us that all things that are created had a beginning and thus has a cause or an agent or power beyond itself that brought it into being. Nature or the universe could not have caused itself, for that would require it to preexist itself in order to bring itself into existence, and that is simply nonsense. Thus, there must be a supernatural (that is something that is above or beyond nature), eternal, uncaused causal agent that brought the physical universe, nature, and reality into existence, and that divine being is God. It is no accident that the Bible begins with this very logical phrase: “In the beginning, God…” (Genesis 1:1).
the designed purpose, they are doing evil. Consider, for example, the human lungs. We know by its clear design that the lungs are supposed to exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood. That is the designed purpose of the lungs. We can choose to violate this design, for example by filling them with water or poisonous gases instead of air, but this act violates the intent of the lungs and thus is an evil that causes harm (or violence, because it violates the original purpose of the biological system). Similarly, good is that which corresponds to the original intentions of the design as seen in nature. Thus, good is that which corresponds to the designs, purposes, and intentions of God (the eternal Good), and evil is that which militates against purpose and design in nature.¹⁵

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With this natural law moral framework in mind, we can better understand the ways in which Tolkien constructs Middle-earth and represents these discernibly contrasting manifestations of good and evil. Let’s start at the beginning, with the Good. The Silmarillion starts in a similar way as the Bible. Genesis 1:1 reads, “In the beginning God…” and Ainulindale, the first chapter of The Silmarillion, states, “There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Iluvatar…”¹⁶ Thus, there is a pre-existent, eternal, creator figure who corresponds to God as the necessary being who brings Arda and Middle-earth into existence and defines reality and the moral good. The Silmarillion also shows us, as does the Bible, that evil is not co-existent with the Good but, rather, comes into being as a rejection of or rebellion against the Good. In Scripture (notably Ezekiel 28 and Isaiah 14), Lucifer, one of God’s beautiful, celestial creations, becomes filled with pride over his own beauty and desires to be God and to usurp his position. In Tolkien’s cosmology, it is Melkor who rebels against Illuvatar and thus ushers evil into

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¹⁵ For more information on natural law theory see Budziszewski, Line Through the Heart, 10-17.
¹⁶ Tolkien, Silmarillion, 3.
existence. Evil, then, is the privation of good and good must be prior to evil, just as disease (disease) is the privation of health (or ease)—there must first be health (ease) before there can be disease.

This good in Middle-earth is characterized by harmony, unity, and peace, which we see represented in Eru’s creation act: he creates and communicates primarily through harmonious song. The goodness of harmony, peace, and song is seen throughout The Fellowship of the Ring, from the basic life of a hobbit in Hobbiton, to the prayer-like songs or incantations of Tom Bombadil, to the harmonious peace of Rivendell wrought mainly through elven song, to the peace and tranquility of Lothlorien. Harmony—the adherence to order, structure, purpose, and design—consistently characterizes the Good throughout this novel. On the other hand, evil is characterized by disharmony, disunity, and war or aggression against peace (note that harmony, unity, and peace must first exist as a good before there can be the evil of disharmony, disunity, and war). There is the dark land of Mordor in which chaos and confusion reign supreme, and there is Isengard in which discord, deception, and disharmony rule the day.

The Good is also manifest throughout the novel as friendship and fellowship. The various races understand Middle-earth as it ought to be, with different kingdoms and communities living in peace and harmony, free to pursue their interests and aspirations without interference from others and without imposing upon the rights and liberties of other civilizations. This has not always been the case, but this is the ideal good to which each culture of Middle-earth aspires. And, when there is a threat to this general peace and harmony, the ancient Council of Elrond convenes to resolve the problems to everyone’s mutual benefit or to form political treaties and martial pacts based on sacrifice, joining forces against the threat of evil for the good of Middle-earth. The forces of evil, however, join to militate against the order, peace, and general good
welfare of Middle-earth, not just for the sake of destroying order and ushering in discord but in order to conquer the peaceful lands of Middle-earth for its own selfish desires for power, wealth, and control. Moreover, whereas the treaties of the Good are based upon selflessness and mutual benefit, the pacts of Evil are based on fear, tyranny, and oppression, each one a violation of the natural order of things. Moral agents are born free and are deserving of self-governance and self-determination, but Evil violates these natural rights and imposes upon free agents through oppression and tyranny. Sauron seeks to imprison all of Middle-earth and thus to destroy the beauteous creation of Illuvatar. Saruman, as a pawn of Sauron, oppresses the orcs, tyrannizes the urukai, and conquers the various human races in an attempt to build an evil army with which to control Middle-earth in service to Sauron.

Finally, the Good expresses itself in truthfulness, seeking in all honesty to express itself in statements that correspond to reality. Through such efforts, the Good seeks to encourage people toward goodness, rest, and peace. Associated with this desire for truthfulness is a sincere commitment to selflessness and forgiveness. Over the long history of Middle-earth, the various races and cultures have warred with each other; however, when all of Middle-earth is faced with mutual destruction at the hands of the evil Sauron, the races strive to forgive the offenses of the other and to co-exist in truthfulness and peace to defeat the evil for each other’s benefit. The Council of Elrond is crucial for this process of exposing and expressing the truth, engaging in the giving and receiving of forgiveness, and forming confederations and fellowships to defeat evil. On the other hand, Evil in *The Lord of the Rings* relishes in lies, deceit, and manipulation. Evil purposely expresses statements that contradict reality for the purposes of selfish gain. Evil in the novel tempts people toward error, often by deceiving the person into believing that the bad is actually something good. For example, the Ring of Power constantly tempts Frodo into believing
that putting on the ring will help him escape danger and harm, thus transforming the natural desire of self-preservation into evil selfishness that would sacrifice others for the good of the self. Gandalf warned Frodo never to put on the ring, for to do so would alert Sauron as to its presence and would begin the corrosive process of destroying his soul, a process that if allowed to proceed too long may actually mutate the good-natured Frodo into the pathetic (and pitiable) Gollum. As Ralph C. Wood notes, the evil of the ring essentially enslaves the will of the user.17

Tolkien’s masterful fantasy teaches us that the Good is that which adheres to purpose and design in nature, that which seeks to follow the natural law, while evil is that which violates purpose and design, that which militates against the eternally existent Good which establishes intent and purpose in reality. A reasonable question becomes how are we to know or to measure what is good and what is evil. In this rational worldview, the measurement is not subjective or culturally determined. Rather, it is granted as a moral law from the eternal Good, from the Moral Law Giver. Moral law becomes an external measurement by which we know good and evil. If there is evil, then there must be good. If we can know what is good and what is evil (in an objective, ultimate sense), then there must be an objective moral law by which to determine what is good and evil. If there is a moral law, then there must be a Moral Law Giver. Note that it makes no sense for an unthinking, amoral, impersonal universe to anticipate the emergence of a rational moral agent and thus to give rise to a corresponding moral law to guide this thinking, rational moral being. In theism, this Moral Law Giver is God, and in Arda, this figure is Eru, the One, or Iluvatar. Thus, to fully understand and appreciate the morality of *The Lord of the Rings*, we must comprehend these basic theistic principles of natural law theory, and only then can we apprehend the moral lessons of the novel and integrate them meaningfully into our lives, thus experiencing some of the consolation and transformation Tolkien envisioned for his readers.

You Were Meant to Have It: Providence and Understanding Issues of Fate and Freewill

One of the most perplexing intellectual, spiritual, and emotional issues facing humanity is the question of providence and freewill. Am I a free moral agent or am I determined by some other power or force, be it physical (my DNA) or metaphysical (God’s sovereign will or polytheistic fate). Or, worse, am I simply a deceived dupe tricked into thinking I am free, but underneath it all I’m simply a pathetic fool subject to pitiless chance in an arbitrary and mercilessly random universe? Once again, the Hobbit of Oxford provides some intellectually comforting perspectives on these heady issues, all couched within the guise of “mere fantasy.” Tolkien shows us through the use of imaginative myth that the truth is not stranger than fiction: we are free moral agents living in a universe designed and maintained by a sovereign, omniscient, omnipotent God who is characterized by love, mercy, grace, and righteousness. As such, he has created a universe in which we are rational beings capable of making real choices, and we act freely upon a limited sovereignty subsumed within the absolute sovereignty of God.

Just as Tolkien draws from Judeo-Christian intellectual traditions in his structuring of moral systems in the novel, he also relies upon the theological underpinnings of his Catholic faith in presenting the dynamic and seemingly paradoxical interactions of freewill and divine providence. Providence means to have control or rule over reality, like a king ruling over a province (note that province and providence are linguistically related). The Designer of the universe, God, thus has providence over his creation, and he providentially cares for, manages, directs, and maintains creation benevolently for his glory and for the good of his people. Providence is God’s working out his will, design, and purposes in all things throughout all
history. Related to this notion of providence is the concept of sovereignty, or possessing the attribute of supreme rule. God as designer and creator is thus sovereign over his creation, and He achieves his good ends or purposes, working with and through his creation guiding all events toward a planned outcome. Therefore, we rest assured that the universe has purpose and meaning, because it was designed by an omniscient Creator, who is sovereignly managing and directing all things. Life is not random, meaningless, nor arbitrary, as the existentialist, materialist, atheist, and nihilist may believe. Rather, as Paul reminds us in Scripture: “[W]e know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28, NKJV). This truth should give us great comfort and inner peace.

How, then, do we understand freewill? If Iluvatar has ultimate, absolute sovereignty, then do the people of Middle-earth have freewill? The short answer is, yes! We must understand the difference between absolute sovereignty and limited sovereignty. Individuals freely act within the boundaries of absolute sovereignty. Also, individuals can choose to act in ways contrary to the absolute sovereign design, but those actions have negative consequences, and the Sovereign Will still accomplishes His ultimate purposes and goals despite the free rebellion of the subjects He sovereignly rules. Just as in society, we are free to act in various ways but within the boundaries of law, morality, and social custom. We are constrained by these codes, but we can freely rebel against them, realizing that there will be natural and justifiable consequences. God is sovereign over the ultimate ends to all things, and he is also sovereign over the means by which these ends are achieved. He has designed reality such that our free actions are part of the means he has sovereignly arranged in order to achieve his goals.
In *The Fellowship of the Ring* Iluvatar interacts with his creation primarily through providence and less so by miraculous and dramatic interventions. He manages and maintains through the process of free actions, allowing individuals to act rightly and wrongly and to experience the various ramifications and consequences, all working toward the larger, ultimate good purposes he has designed for his people. Some readers wonder why there isn’t more dynamic magic in Tolkien’s narrative, like what we see in *Harry Potter*, for example. The answer lies in Tolkien’s understanding of God’s providentially working within our reality. Peter Kreeft explains it this way: “God prefers to act by providence rather than miracles, because He loves the natures of all the things He created and wants to perfect them rather than bypass them. He is like a wise, unselfish king Who exalts and empowers His servants rather than distrusting them and micro-managing His kingdom. ‘Grace perfects nature.’”\(^\text{18}\) We see the Divine working in *The Fellowship of the Ring* much in this way, not through many overt and overpowering miraculous intrusions into Middle-earth, but, rather, by allowing the creatures to act and work within the parameters of the Divine Will. The objective is to permit them to act so that they can bring about the purposes and designs of the Divine Will but also, in the process, to experience life and to be perfected, to learn, develop, and grow through the process of working out in reality the unseen and unknown Will of the Divine. In this sense, things were meant to happen, yet no one is compelled to act. This is a divine mystery, a paradox, but not a logical contradiction. The creatures are still free and act from freewill, but they do not have unlimited autonomy.

When discussing and analyzing this issue of freewill and providence in Tolkien, sometimes other words and concepts such as chance, fate, and destiny are used.\(^\text{19}\) However, inserting these concepts into the discussion confuses matters and tends to misunderstand, or at

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\(^{18}\) Kreeft, *Philosophy of Tolkien*, 54-55.

\(^{19}\) For example, see Davis, “Holy Elven Light,” 8-9 in which notions of fate, fatalism, and chance are integrated into his discussion of providence.
least misrepresent, Tolkien’s larger theistic message. Chance suggests a randomness that is beyond any sovereign control or that can take the sovereign by surprise, and fate or fatalism suggests the utter absence of freewill or that there is some power outside that of the sovereign that determines the final outcome. These are ideologically contrary to Tolkien’s Christian theistic framework. As Rolland Hein explains, “Nowhere in the text are decisions freely made by either individual characters or groups abrogated. The One honors without exception the set of the will and works completely through human endeavor. It is, therefore, hardly accurate to call it Fate, as some scholars tend to do. It is the power and purpose of God.”

Similarly, Kreeft makes an important distinction between providence (a divine will providing for creation and guiding it) and the polytheistic notion of fate (overarching power that is inescapable and above the gods) and chance (random occurrences that even the gods cannot know or predict).

Tolkien’s Christian theism holds that there is an omniscient and omnipotent God who cannot be surpassed by a power of fate and who cannot be surprised by chance. Thus, Christian providence is the only proper way to understand things that are meant to happen in this novel.

Well, if we accept that what is at work in Middle-earth is providence, then how does one go about proving it? Kreeft explains that we cannot logically prove providence, but it is knowable and apprehended through hindsight. Once we understand that there is a God who is in control and who is sovereign over the universe he created (and this fact is revealed to us through natural revelation and through special revelation), then we can properly and more fully understand events in life as following a larger narrative written by the Divine. Things happen a certain way not by random chance but because, in Tolkien’s phrase, they were meant to happen. And, things can only be meant to happen if there is an omniscient intelligence who designed the

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21 Kreeft, *Philosophy of Tolkien*, 57.
22 Ibid., 58.
intentions and who is omnipotent to bring his intentions to fruition. Yet, it is not slavish fate, for he has created humans with freewill as discussed earlier, and thus we act within the created order freely yet always moving toward intended goals for God’s glory and for our own ultimate good. We see this same theological principle at work in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

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Early in the novel, after Gandalf reveals that Bilbo’s ring, which Frodo now possesses, is the Ring of Power created by Sauron for the purposes of oppressing, dominating, and controlling the wearers of the other rings and thus to rule all of Middle-earth tyrannically, Gandalf explains that Sauron’s will is not the only one operating: “‘Behind [the will of Sauron] there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought.’”23 Up to this point, Gandalf has been discussing the powerful will of Sauron, and how the Ring seeks out its creator, moving from person to person trying to get back to Sauron. It seems that Evil is in control and is calling the shots. But, Gandalf reminds Frodo that the only way to explain the recent turn of events—that the Ring found its way into the hands of the most unlikely of characters in such a way that complicates and may even undermine the will of Sauron—is to consider that another will is at work, that of a benevolent Providence. Moreover, Gandalf makes clear that the presence of Providence in our lives is a comfort, not a curse. Our rebellious natures tell us, wrongly, that sovereign influence in our lives must be oppressively restrictive, but Gandalf reveals that providential workings bring an abiding spiritual serenity: there is a higher, benevolent power who intends things for our good, and we can experience a deeper sense of peace knowing that

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23 Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 54-55; Tolkien’s italics.
these strange and sometimes painful events are meaningful and serve a greater, ultimately good purpose.

Yet, working within the sovereign limits of a benevolent Providence is not always, in itself, peaceful. It is comforting to know that no matter how dark and evil things become in our lives, there is a good and wise sovereign God in control, working all things for a greater good purpose. But, sometimes the experiences leading up to the eventual good are very dark and difficult indeed. Tolkien was not naively Pollyannaish in his worldview. Having been orphaned and also surviving battle in World War I, Tolkien understood that there is Evil in this world, just as there is Good, and that sometimes Evil seems to get the upper hand. But, he fully trusted in the ultimate triumph of Good and that each person was responsible for making the best possible use of his or her life in the service of the Good. He believed that Providence gives us our life and intends us to be born at certain times in history to do certain things, and it is our responsibility to use that time wisely, that is, according to the will of God, not our own selfish desires. We see a glimpse of this notion when Frodo is coming to terms with the reality of the Ring of Power and what it will mean for his life to try to destroy it:

“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo.

“So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us. And already, Fordo, our time is beginning to look black. The Enemy is fast becoming very strong. His plans are far from ripe, I think, but they are ripening. We shall be hard put to it.”

Sauron is planning evil machinations to conquer and rule all of Middle-earth, and it seems he is slowly winning. Darkness is spreading across the land, evil creatures are roaming areas they

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24 Ibid., 50.
hadn’t approached in hundreds of years, races of men are answering the evil call to serve Saruman and Sauron, and it seems as though Evil may triumph. Yet, Frodo is meant to have this ring, because the eternal Good also has its plans, which will confound the wisdom of Evil:

“I do really wish to destroy it!” cried Frodo. “Or, well, to have it destroyed. I am not made for perilous quests. I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?”

“Such questions cannot be answered,” said Gandalf. “You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have.”

Frodo rightly wonders why he was chosen, why such things are happening to him. We all ask such questions sometime during our lifetime when tragedy or hardship comes our way. Gandalf explains that we cannot answer such questions, because only the infinite mind of the Illuvatar (God) knows the beginnings from the ends. Yet, Gandalf also notes that Frodo was chosen not because of any merits but because of the grace of a wise Sovereign Lord. There is a reason that Frodo was chosen, and at this point he (and the readers) may not know why, but there is truth and comfort in knowing that there is a reason for the choosing. Ultimately, what we discover as the novel unfolds is that the wisdom of the Good is foolishness to Evil, and this wisdom is victorious in the end. The powerful Sauron is so proud that he never thinks a Halfling like Frodo could ever be instrumental in his downfall. Such pride is also Saruman’s weakness, and it is the undoing of them both. Providence’s plans will require much sacrifice and even death, and all those called to the purposes of the Good shall be “hard put to it” as Gandalf points out, but this is

25 Ibid., 60.
all meant to happen, determined for an ultimately good and victorious end—therein lies the true comfort and consolation of Tolkien’s mythic fantasy.

The theme of Providence in *The Fellowship of the Ring* can also be witnessed in the various instances of dreams and visions experienced by Frodo and others. One way that the power of Providence can know all that is happening, has happened, and will happen while at the same time guaranteeing the exercise of freewill is that He is quite literally outside of time. Here, Tolkien again borrows from his Christian theistic understanding of the workings of the universe. God is the eternally existent First Cause, the uncaused Necessary Being that brought all of our reality into existence, and this includes time and space. Since time is God’s creation, he must be above and beyond it, outside of time. Therefore, all events—past, present, and future—are a singularity to God. We experience history as a progression of experiences through time, but God apprehends all history as a singularity. He knows what will happen for us and what we will do, not so much because he predetermines and thus pre-causes it, but, rather, because for God, our future simply is, it always already has been. If there is evidence of this kind of providential vision—seeing the past, present, and future as a singularity of experience—then there would be more proof of the existence of Providence and thus a justification for interpreting what seems to be chance as actually being the acts of Providence. Visions and dreams in *The Fellowship of the Ring* serve as this evidence for the existence of providential vision and, thus, Providence.

Amy M. Amendt-Raduege argues that Tolkien drew from his knowledge of medieval literature and theology to incorporate medieval dream theory into his fantasy literature. In the Middle Ages, dreams were believed to function as a mechanism for gaining knowledge the dreamer did not already have and for receiving visions of a higher moral or prophetic order.26 In the novel, Frodo is the recipient of these kinds of visions and dreams, further demonstrating the

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workings of Providence in their lives. When he is resting in the blessed house of Bombadil, Frodo has a rather disturbing but prescient dream: he dreams of a tall, dark tower, on top of which there stands a lone figure of a man. The moon is bright in the sky, wolves are howling and creatures are screeching below, and suddenly a large eagle appears on the sky and sweeps the man away. Then Frodo dreams of the Black Riders, and he wakes up in dread. At this point in the narrative neither Frodo nor readers know what this scene is all about; however, at the Council of Elrond when Gandalf explains the treachery of Saruman, the attentive reader recalls this earlier dream of Frodo and realizes that Frodo had received a premonition, a prophetic vision in a dream that gave him a glimpse of what was happening to his dear friend and guardian Gandalf, who had been captured and tortured by Saruman, later to be rescued from the top of the Tower of Orthanc by the great eagle.

After Gandalf sacrifices himself to defeat the Balrog and the remaining members of the fellowship reach Lothlorien, both Frodo and Sam have an opportunity to peer into the magical Mirror of Galadriel. She explains to Frodo the mysterious workings of the mirror:

“Many things I can command the Mirror to reveal,” she answered, “and to some I can show what they desire to see. But the Mirror will also show things unbidden, and those are often stranger and more profitable than things which we wish to behold. What you will see, if you leave the Mirror free to work, I cannot tell. For it shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be. But which it is that he sees, even the wisest cannot always tell. Do you wish to look?”

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27 Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 125.
28 Ibid., 352.
When the Mirror is made to simply provide satisfaction of wish-fulfillment, it is merely serving the selfish desires of the individual. However, if it is allowed to freely work, then it links the individual’s consciousness to that of the providential Mind, showing all things—past, present, and future—as a singular experience, and thus giving the individual glimpses into deeper realities beyond normal perception. However, the challenge is to know what one is looking at, for the visions do not include footnotes explaining what is being seen. Clearly, Providence exists in Arda, for this magic Mirror offers glimpses into the absolute perspective of Providence that resides outside of time.

Both Sam and Frodo are offered opportunities to gaze into the Mirror and to see what they can see. Sam receives a premonition of their perilous journey across Mordor toward Mount Doom, and he also perceives glimpses of the Shire’s ruination. Both of these events are narrated in *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, but at this point, the providential vision only fills Sam with dread. He does not know what it all means, for even the wisest often cannot know. Frodo also receives equally curious visions, one involving a white wizard, who later turns out to be the resurrected Gandalf returned to replace Saurman and to guide the hobbits, elves, dwarves, and men to final victory, and the other vision revealing the dread power of the searching Eye of Sauron.\(^\text{29}\) These images, dreams, and visions do not directly aid Frodo and Sam on their quest to destroy the Ring and to save Middle-earth. If nothing else, these magical visions simply fill them with fear, and remind them of the true gravity of their quest. If they fail, then Evil wins and Middle-earth is destroyed. However, and more importantly, these visions also reveal that Providence is real, that the power of Evil is not the only force making plans and determining actions. The truth is far more glorious: even as Evil plots to destroy that which is good, right, and true, the pre-existent Good is also planning the ultimate victory, using his creatures to work His

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 353-55.
good will within history to bring about the final defeat of Evil and the victory of Good. While Evil seeks to dominate and oppress those whose wills he dominates, the eternal Good, the Creator of the universe, holds back on His power, does not dominate the will of others, and mysteriously achieves His good designs through the free action of his creatures. He accomplishes His purposes while preserving and guaranteeing liberty of thought and true freedom of action. Now that is a grand hope and a truly divine mystery of reality.

[Slide 7]

Conclusion

We can learn much from this Hobbit of Oxford, as his novels remind us that there is such a thing as Good and Evil and that Good is the pre-existent absolute Causal Agent, whereas Evil is merely that which militates or rebels against the Good. Tolkien shows us that morality is best understood through natural law theory. He reveals to us that the true meaning of love must involve selflessness and self-sacrifice, and that we ought not to reduce all expressions of love to mere lustful eroticism. And, most of all, Tolkien’s fiction proves to us that high fantasy is characterized by escape from the mundane that is not mere escapism but that, instead, leads to a recovery of lost truths, a restoration of proper vision allowing us to understand things as they truly are. Such knowledge offers consolation that stems from a deeper comprehension of “eucatastrophe”—the joy produced by the sudden turn of events from tragedy to happiness, and the peace derived from finally knowing that all things work for the good of those who love God and who are called according to his purposes.
Bibliography


Today marks the 80th anniversary of the publication of J.R.R. Tolkien’s classic fantasy novel *The Hobbit*, or *There and Back Again*. The *Hobbit* has never been out of print since. Tolkien’s story and its sequel *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) have delighted children and adults of all ages for eight decades now, their popularity only growing with the turn of the millennium thanks to Peter Jackson’s three-film adaptations of both books, *The Hobbit* cycle filmed more recently (2012-14) and starring Martin Freeman, Ian McKellen and Richard Armitage. Martin Freeman as Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit* (AFP/Getty). Other locations in both *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* were inspired by real places. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, being the first part of *The Lord of the Rings* is the first of three volumes *The Lord of the Rings*. It is followed by *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*. *The Fellowship of the Ring* was originally released on July 29, 1954 in the United Kingdom. The volume is divided into two books, Book I and II. The first book sets the stage for the adventure and follows Frodo Baggins as he flees from his home in the Shire to escape the minions of the Dark Lord Sauron. Sauron seeks