Humanities/Philosophy 3305
Philosophy of Middle-earth

Study Guide

Fairleigh Dickinson University
Vancouver · Teaneck · Madison · Wroxton
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Course Description & Objectives

The recent popularity of the film version of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* has renewed interest in this widely read work set in the realm of Middle-earth. A careful study of Tolkien’s work can be used to raise several philosophical questions, particularly in the area of ethics. This course will examine such questions, also considering topics from political philosophy, cosmology, and literary theory. Brief mention will be made of Tolkien’s colleague C.S. Lewis.

HUMN/PHIL 3305 equips students for the critical exploration of ethics, epistemology, subjectivity, history, and theology. Through a series of essays and formal assignments, students will also improve their understanding of persuasive academic research and communication.

WebCampus

Each Unit within the course will be presented through WebCampus. Students will have access to the Study Guide (this document) in a PDF format. Videos and Podcasts will only be available through WebCampus. Some of these video and audio materials will be required while others will be optional. Moreover, some have copyright secured by FDU or are available under Creative Commons licenses – these will be presented within WebCampus itself. Other materials are available to the public but have copyright held elsewhere, and these will be linked from within WebCampus.

Students are strongly encouraged to use the Discussion Board to post questions, especially when the course readings are confusing. While many students may already be familiar (or deeply engrossed in) Tolkien’s legendarium, the range of philosophical traditions and questions with which his work engages or that we will bring to Tolkien can be confusing. You are certain to face challenges during the course, and even seemingly simple questions may lead to unanswerable problems. By sharing your questions, you make your classmates more comfortable sharing their own questions as well.

Each Unit will be opened in WebCampus a week prior to its start date. Try to read ahead as best you can.

Services to Students

Fairleigh Dickinson University’s Metropolitan, Florham, and Vancouver undergraduates, including Petrocelli College’s online learners, can make use of
eTutoring.org, which provides free, professional, online tutoring in writing and other disciplines including math, statistics and accounting. Undergraduates can log in anytime and from anywhere! Metropolitan and Vancouver undergraduates can create an account using the instructions found in the left column to access the three tutoring options available:

1. The eWriting Lab where you can submit up to three drafts of the same paper to a tutor, ask for specific feedback, and receive a tutor’s written response within forty-eight hours.
2. Live Tutoring (or eChat) where you meet online with a tutor in a one-on-one, fully interactive, virtual online session. The subjects currently available are:
   a. Math (from the developmental level through Calc II)
   b. Accounting
   c. Biology (including Anatomy & Physiology)
   d. Chemistry
   e. Information Literacy (and Research Methods)
   f. Statistics
3. Offline eQuestions where you can leave a specific question (such as “how do I cite a DVD as a source?” or “can my thesis sentence be put in the second paragraph?”) for an eTutor and get an answer within forty-eight hours.

Getting Started:
1. Go to eTutoring.org and click on the red “Login Now!” arrow.
2. A pop-up box will open; click on “Northeast Consortium” (because FDU’s main campus is located in the northeast region).
3. A drop-down list will appear; scroll down to Fairleigh Dickinson. When you click on FDU, our eTutoring home page will open.

Logging in:
4. Your user name is your seven-digit, FDU student ID number.
5. Your password is your birth date in eight-digit format; for example, if you were born on April 9, 1991, your password would be 04091991.
6. You will be asked to type your student ID twice more to confirm, and you will need to accept the terms of the site by checking the box and clicking the “Update Your Profile” bar at the bottom.

Reading, Listening, & Viewing Assignments

Not all course readings and contents are accessible through WebCampus.
Required Texts

*Coursepack:* HUMN 3305 / PHIL 3305, Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2019. (in WebCampus)


NOTE: All readings except for *The Hobbit* and the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* are available via institutional subscriptions through WebCampus. You will be prompted for your email login to access library subscriptions. You may use other editions of Tolkien, but this is the least expensive set at present. Where possible, citations will include book and chapter information for students using other editions, but please note for used copies that there are distinct editions, and Tolkien revised *The Hobbit* twice after its first publication.

Written Assignments & Writing Essays

In addition to the Discussion Board for each Course Unit and the final examination, your coursework will include two written essays and an annotated bibliography that demonstrates your capacity for academic research. Your essays should conform to the MLA Style Sheet (guides are available on WebCampus or in any standard writing guide book) and should have a level of correctness and creativity appropriate to an advanced writing course.

Please review the course syllabus or the “Assignments” section in WebCampus for detailed descriptions of each essay assignment and its deadline for submission. Each essay must be submitted in WebCampus through SafeAssign. Direct submission to your professor by email will not be accepted. Essays are evaluated based on the accuracy, clarity, and persuasiveness of the writing as well as their capacity to demonstrated completion and comprehension of the course materials. The capacity for creative thought and engagement in a critical dialogue are also important.

The Annotated Bibliography assignment can be used as preparation for your final essay. The Bibliography is evaluated based on your ability to provide
a correct MLA Style citation for each entry, the grammatical correctness of each annotation that describes the scholarly work you have cited, and your demonstration of the ability to recognize the kind of work you are citing as well as its potential usefulness.

Writing Essays

Your essays should conform to the MLA Style Sheet (guides available on WebCampus or in any standard writing guide book). Please submit all essays using Safe Assign in WebCampus using either the “.doc” or “.docx” MS Word format or the “.pdf” Adobe format. You can write your essay in any word processing program you like (Mac Pages, OpenOffice, MS Word, etc.), but submit the actual file saved as a “.doc,” “.docx,” or “.pdf” document.

Essay Structure
The specific outline for an essay will change depending on the topic, genre, and audience, but general guidelines are useful, especially as you shape your raw notes into a crafted argument. An essay is a holistic work, so it will not contain extraneous or unnecessary materials. You should make sure every sentence and paragraph counts and contributes to your purpose – if the relationship between an idea and your thesis is unclear, either cut the material or make the relationship clear.

Introduction:
1. You must introduce the purpose and topic of your essay.
2. You should have a clear thesis. Typically, this is one sentence that states your purpose and intent, though it may be longer for some essays. Be as specific and direct as possible. While it is not graceful, “This essay does X, Y, and Z using R and S” is clear.
3. Do not rely on broad generalizations! While you might need to establish context for your introduction, cut all materials that do not directly relate to your purpose.
4. For shorter essays, you can introduce the specific points your essay discusses.
5. By the end of your introduction, your reader should know your purpose, how you will pursue your topic, and the general materials you will use or consider.

Body:
1. Begin by sketching the order of the points you need to make (this may change). It may be useful to lay out quotations and references to
critical materials while sketching – if you are responding to other texts, this may clarify the sequence that your own argument will take.

2. While writing the body of your paper, be willing to change paragraph order. Each topic (which may cover more than one paragraph) should appear in the order that best supports your argument.

3. Only summarize in order to establish the background for your audience. Your paper is an argument and not a list.

4. Be sure to establish the relationship between paragraphs very clearly. If you cannot use “therefore” or “furthermore” to clearly demonstrate the development from one paragraph to the next, you have likely skipped a step or are moving into a topic that does not relate directly.

5. Ensure every paragraph relates clearly (not just implicitly) to the thesis.

Conclusion:

1. You must summarize the purpose and topic of your essay, followed by a general sense of its significance or context (i.e.: restatement of your thesis followed by a conclusion).

2. Again, do not generalize. Be specific! If it does not relate to your thesis, cut it.

Your conclusion should make sense of the preceding materials and give your reader a summary of what your paper has done, as well as offer a direct statement of the conclusion that your evidence leads you to.

Final Examination & Discussion Board

The final examination for this course will be conducted as a viva voce exam (interview format) online through Skype, telephone, or other audio or video communications (this is subject to change) as well as face to face. Students must have access to either a telephone or computer system that supports audio/video conferencing or Skype. The exam will consist of an oral defense of your final essay as well as a discussion of the course materials. Students are evaluated on three criteria ranked in order of importance: (1) demonstrated completion of the course of studies, (2) demonstrated understanding of the critical concepts of the course, and (3) the capacity for creative or innovative thought.

For each week, you will have an online Discussion Board to confirm your understanding of the key points. You may post your comments at any time across the week before the deadline (normally Sunday, midnight, at the end of the week). Each week will feature a starter post as a “Critical Summary” by a classmate for the philosophical text and the section of The Lord of the Rings that we are reading. Early completion is advisable. Discussion
Board postings and the Final Examination will cover both the primary readings as well as secondary lecture, video, and reading materials provided online through WebCampus, including this Study Guide.

Study Guide

This course is designed to offer you an introduction to philosophical issues related to or helpful for approaching Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings. This means that we are reading Tolkien’s works as a literary text in its own right, not simply as a popular culture product helpful to understanding critical cultural theory, and in addition we are using Tolkien to introduce major trends in philosophy, in particular ethics. Each Unit covers one week in the course and a specific text or set of texts. You should read the Study Guide materials first then proceed to the primary texts, though you can certainly read ahead in the primary materials if you wish, unless the Study Guide directs you otherwise. Audio and video materials, as well as print materials, will be made available through WebCampus.

Recordings and videos of lecture materials or similar resources will be available through WebCampus or linked from WebCampus.

Each Unit (or week) will open in WebCampus the week before it begins and will offer a Study Guide chapter. The Study Guide will keep you on track, remind you of upcoming assignments, and will lead you through the difficulties of the readings. You may wish to keep the print copy in a binder, and an electronic version will be in WebCampus as well, including hyperlinks to explanatory materials in FDU’s Online Library resources.
Week 1: Introduction & Hermeneutics

Objectives

1. Recognize our reading of any text as a hermeneutical activity.
2. Identify our textual “witness” for *The Hobbit*.
3. Relate hermeneutics to our unique position as specific readers.
4. Define philosophy as an activity.

Reading Assignment

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. Del Rey, 2017. (chapters 1–9)

Commentary

As we first approach an author like J.R.R. Tolkien, we must clarify our purpose. Taken together, *The Hobbit* and three books of *The Lord of the Rings* form one of the bestselling works of all time, and their adaptations to film are likewise among the highest grossing films of all time. In short, Tolkien is popular on a global scale, and a great many of the studies of Tolkien focus on a critical cultural studies methodology that assumes the popular works of a given culture are valuable for understanding how commercial entertainment and cultural reproduction work and how they can elucidate culture itself. However, this is not to say that Tolkien’s works are merely popular pulp, forever excluded from the realms of “literature” or “art.” Tolkien was at the same time a respected philologist and Merton Professor of English Language at Merton College of the University of Oxford. His scholarly work included a study of the Old English poem *Beowulf*, a critical edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and contributions to the stalwart professional journal *The Year’s Work in English Studies* (the author of this Study Guide has been contributor and chapter editors for the same publication for the past decade). In other words, Tolkien was also a scholar doing all the kinds of work you are familiar with in the university classroom, so his popular books are never distant from his professional scholarly concerns.

For our purposes in this course, we take Tolkien’s legendarium (the term he used for the mythical world he constructed across many published and unpublished texts) as a reflection of several philosophical traditions as well as a problem posed to philosophical movements he could not have anticipated. We as readers will seek a balance between Middle-earth as an emblem for the tastes and predilections of mainstream modern Western literary culture, Middle-earth
as a literary object of study, and Middle-earth as an entry point to philosophy.
Tolkien's Ring is clearly an intentional echo of Plato's Republic, as we will see in Week 3. While intentionality would be less likely, the humorous puzzle Gandalf sets Bilbo Baggins early in The Hobbit, “What do you mean?” (119), opens for us the more formal issue of logical propositions in Week 2 – what happens to our questions when we attend carefully to what our questions actually mean, or even more importantly, how they come to have (or not have) meaning? Finally, leaving Tolkien's intentions entirely aside, we also turn to Materialism, Existentialism, and finally Green or Ecological Philosophy to ask how we might use Tolkien to better understand these ideas or to challenge our own biases.

As we read across The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, we will look backward to works Tolkien may well have drawn on as inspiration for his work, and in doing so we will better understand Middle-earth as literature. However, we will also use Middle-earth as leverage to explore philosophical questions that are more urgent for our modern world than they could have been for Tolkien.

**Hermeneutics of The Hobbit**

The first two weeks of the course will cover The Hobbit. For Week 1, this is your only assigned reading. As a starting point, we should recognize that the text of The Hobbit has been subject to significant revision. Tolkien first wrote it without envisioning The Lord of the Rings as it would follow. For that matter, even the series was intended as a single book composed of six volumes, which the publisher insisted be published as a trilogy. Because of this, as Tolkien later wrote The Lord of the Rings, he suggested revisions to The Hobbit that the publisher integrated, and he then made further revisions again. He embarked on a major revision to the novel to bring it in line with the style and form of The Lord of the Rings but then abandoned this project. Because of this recursive bibliographical history, our approach to The Hobbit begins by simply asking which book we are actually reading?

Our assigned edition is the final textual state approved by Tolkien, not including his abandoned major revisions. As readers, which vision do we value most? The first, the final, or the intended? Do we trust an author's plans prior to commercial success, or do we give more merit to his decisions after it? Is any version of the novel more “authentic” than any other, and is authenticity even a useful measure for literary works. We may do well to remember that Shakespeare’s plays have a very confused textual history, and it is unlikely we have any in the final form Shakespeare himself would have intended (presuming he would even have been concerned with such a concept). However, keeping this in mind also means that our ethical concerns when Bilbo plays his riddling game with Gollum must confront Tolkien’s revisions. Did Bilbo lie? Was the riddling game even fair? Our answers depend on the version of the text we choose to read since they differ significantly (and ethically) depending on the copy we
have in our hands. If we are not aware of this, can we claim to be making an informed decision, or has the publisher (or bookstore clerk selling you the book) predetermining your choice for you?

Answering this question is a matter of “hermeneutics.” Hermeneutics is the study of textual interpretation, and as such it has a longstanding connection to religious texts and the interpretation of various scriptures. For example, with regard to the interpretation of Christian texts, a conflict has revolved around whether a text like the Bible must be interpreted only in relation to itself or in relation to its historical and social context. This may seem like a superficially simple problem to resolve, but it quickly leads to problems such as the intentions of an author and whether or not we may know them. In the case of religious texts, by asserting an interpretation based on intentions, is one claiming to know the mind of God? While Tolkien insisted that *The Lord of the Rings* was not an allegory for World War I and World War II, are we as readers wrong to place the books in their historical context and to read them in relation to the wars? Could Tolkien have been mistaken about his own books? Could he have been lying, like Bilbo originally did? Can any hermeneutics ignore “ontology” (the study of the nature of being)? Asked in another way, can we interpret anything without also locating ourselves in relation to it as readers? Does our situated position in relation to a text alter its meaning or interpretation? These are perhaps too many questions, but they open up the complexity of our choices (often our unexamined choices) whenever we begin to interpret any text, from one of the best-sellers of all time to the back of a cereal box.

Of course, in our case, the hermeneutics of Hobbits is further complicated by Tolkien having left us with multiple textual states. Can an author change his or her mind? Do we trust original inspirations more than later emendations? Is it wrong to read every textual state (each is a “witness”) that is available? Can a scholar “curate” a specific eclectic edition that combines various textual states (this is what we have for Shakespeare, for example)? Given the extent of Tolkien’s legendarium and the decades of posthumous publication of his various drafts, of which the 1977 publication of *The Silmarillion* is the most important, we have make decisions to make about our process of interpretation.

In the first publication of *The Hobbit* from 1937, when Bilbo wins the riddle-game with Gollum, the narrative voice tells us something specific:

“Both wrong,” cried Bilbo very much relieved; and he jumped at once to his feet, put his back to the nearest wall, and held out his little sword. But funnily enough he need not have been alarmed. For one thing Gollum had learned long long ago was never, never, to cheat at the riddle-game, which is a sacred one and of immense antiquity. Also there was the sword. (91)

The revised version of the text profoundly changes Gollum in a negative way to
construe him as more threatening than he had originally seemed and as dishon-
est in a way that the narrator originally denied:

“Both wrong,” cried Bilbo very much relieved; and he jumped at once to his feet, put his back to the nearest wall, and held out his little sword. He knew, of course, that the riddle-game was sacred and of immense antiquity, and even wicked creatures were afraid to cheat when they played at it. But he felt he could not trust this slimy thing to keep any promise at a pinch. Any excuse would do for him to slide out of it. And after all that last question had not been a genuine riddle according to the ancient laws. (79–80)

How do we reconcile these major differences in the text? Tolkien, after all, wrote *The Hobbit* without knowing that *The Lord of the Rings* would eventually be written nor even what such a book might be, so his revisions to bring *The Hobbit* more into agreement with the subsequent epic adventures of Frodo could not have been any part of his original plan. In effect, he changed his mind, but this does not mean that we as readers must also do so. We are perfectly free to choose the edition we read and interpret.

This is then our first philosophical question. Do we expect fiction to be “authentic” or somehow real to itself? Do we have expectations we do not fully understand or recognize in ourselves (or that may even surprise us when we do finally recognize them)? Do we somehow better understand the “real” novel *The Hobbit* not by having a single instance or “witness” of it but by having all existing versions? If no such combined book actually exists (what we would call a diplomatic edition), are we inventing a metaphysical or unreal imaginary book by knowing the differences between the different editions as we read or by at some future date preparing a diplomatic edition for scholars and students. After all, diplomatic editions are foreign to Tolkien – he had prepared his own scholarship edition of *The Green Knight* and as he used such tools regularly in his scholarly research.

**Philosophy**

For our purposes in this course, which is neither a survey nor an introduction to philosophy as a discipline nor a specific reading of Tolkien through a single philosophical system, we will take “philosophy” at face value: the love of wisdom. Philosophy (φιλοσοφία) is composed of two Greek words: “philia” meaning love and “sophia” meaning wisdom. More specifically, “philia” is a form of love that is brotherly or dispassionate, as distinct from charitable, erotic, tender, or affectionate love. By the same turn, “sophia” means cleverness and wisdom, as distinct from knowledge, information, and mindfulness or even wit. For us,
philosophy is the love of wisdom, distinct from knowledge of specific bodies of information. Our key concerns will then come from our loving wisdom for the human condition and some of its perennial concerns that Tolkien explores in his novels: ethics (how we live with others), theology (how we contemplate the divine), materialism (how we are shaped by the forces around us), existentialism as a form of ontology (how we learn to be in the world), and finally ecology (how we live in our home).

Questions for Self-Review

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for responding to a classmate’s comment.

1. How would you personally define Philosophy?
2. How is philosophy different from other pursuits of knowledge, such as science or history?
3. Is The Lord of the Rings literature and why?
4. Which version of The Hobbit most interests you and why?
5. Is The Hobbit made any different by knowing Tolkien was a professor of the English language who did the same job as the faculty around you?

Works Cited & Supplemental Reading


Week 2: Propositions & “What do you mean?”

Objectives

1. Define propositions as distinct from ideas or puzzles.
2. Recognize the form of propositions, including obversion.
3. Describe propositions and puzzles in *The Hobbit*.
4. Identify plurisignification in *The Hobbit* as a literary and philosophical trait.

Reading Assignment

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. Del Rey, 2017. (chapters 1–9)


Commentary

This week we complete *The Hobbit* and begin to ask what philosophy is and what kind of propositions and questions it asks. Our attention is guided to carefulness over terminology, and the most obvious relationship to Tolkien is in Gandalf’s puzzling question for Bilbo, “What do you mean?” (119). Westphal will offer us ways of encoding this query to better understand why Gandalf would pose this Socratic question to Bilbo. We will consider briefly some of the potential restatements of Bilbo’s proposition with particular attention to “obversion” as a way of removing what Westphal calls “puzzles” as distinct from genuine “problems.”

Puzzles or Problems?

Westphal’s chapter introduces us to logical approaches to philosophy based on propositions – this is a starting point for us to distinguish between literature and philosophy. In a simplified sense, he presents philosophical problems as distinct from “puzzles,” which we will generally consider as literary matters rather than philosophical ones. This means that while we may have much attention and interest dedicated to a philosophical problem (ie: “What is the purpose of life?”), this is different from a puzzle that may be clarified simply by
restructuring or reorganizing the proposition itself without changing its logical meaning. The restructuring allows us to notice more readily the difference between an actual proposition and an idea. Our goal is to remove puzzles so that we may give our philosophical attention to the actual problems that merit sustained attention – in contrast, the puzzles are for Westphal merely misunderstandings or are even without philosophical meaning due to poor expression or unclear purposes. While we may enjoy and value these puzzles, especially if they are literary, they are distinct from philosophical propositions.

In logic, Westphal is introducing us to inferences as a way of drawing out or eliminating a puzzle. His simplest example is “obversion.” Obversion is the repetition of a statement in negative (or positive) terms with the same logical meaning – “no trees are purple” in an obversion becomes “all trees are not purple.” Without actually interrogating the truth of this proposition, we are able to manipulate it through immediate inferences via obversion. The “converse” proposition would be another such immediate inference: “no purple things are trees.” Traditional logic is not our purpose in this course, but this gives us a starting point for distinguishing philosophy and literature in our readings. In effect, the elimination of a puzzle by inference gives us a way to approach Tolkien’s Gandalf. In Westphal’s argument, when a given statement is put through obversion or conversion, we can determine if it is a proposition or something else entirely. For instance, the opening line of The Fellowship of the Ring differs in its nature from the opening line of Peter Pan: “When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton” (Tolkien 1) versus “All children, except one, grow up” (Barrie 1). If you try to write the obversion of each, you will have a very different experience.

“What do you mean?”

In The Hobbit, Gandalf is greeted by Bilbo with the courtesy of “Good morning” (4). Gandalf’s response my seem humorous but is also at the heart of this kind of philosophical enquiry:

“What do you mean? Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not; or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good on?”

(4)

These riddles repeat across the novel, but Gandalf’s quick query is followed by Bilbo’s wishing him a “Good morning” meaning that the conversation is finished and he wished that Gandalf would move along and be gone (5). This is a plurisignification. Literary texts may find their actual meaning by holding
several meanings at the same time, and a literary meaning may hold contradictory meanings as both necessary. Philosophy is concerned with very different kinds of meanings, and in this sense, a literary truth may have nothing to do with a philosophical proof – they are not of the same category. Confusing them would be a “puzzle.”

The query from Gandalf “What do you mean?” seeks to resolve such a puzzle. It is unlikely that Bilbo means all of these things at the same time, so his is not a fully literary meaning rich in multiple interpretations, so Gandalf treats it as a proposition that can be clarified by the kinds of restatements Westphal models for us. Nonetheless, this is precisely what Bilbo claims when he answers Gandalf “All of them at once” (4). In literary terms, we would use the poet John Keats’s term “negative capability” as an example of a poet’s ability to dwell in ambiguities and plurisignification, such as the opening of his poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “Thou still unravished bride of quietness” (Keats 203). For Keats, the word “still” holds multiple meanings, such as “not yet” or “not moving.” The image of the bride on the urn is both unmoving and not yet ravished, and “negative capability” of the reader to hold both (or more) meanings at the same time is an essential trait to poetic reading. The literary purpose is to hold both meanings together in the mind at the same time. Gandalf, however, seeks the logical clarification, which is a different purpose. In this, we have two forms of meaning: the literary and the philosophical. For Westphal, if we cannot put a given statement through a process of obversion (or other logical transformations), then we can set it aside as unrelated to philosophical meaning.

For our concerns, if we take Gandalf as modelling philosophy, we see him as loving and pursuing wisdom and truth. We make no such mistake for Bilbo, for whom the truth of beauty is more relevant – this is even Keats’s ending his poem: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” (204). It is a rejection of philosophy for literature, which we see modelled in Bilbo. Where Gandalf would seek to resolve the plurisignification of Keats’ “still” in order to avoid a puzzle, Bilbo would revel in the ambiguity and forking paths of truths that emerge from it, as does Keats. We might illustrate it using Westphal like this:

Good Morning! → Hello!

“Hello” is not a proposition, so philosophy is uninterested in it.

Alternatively, we might say:

Good Morning! → This is a good morning

This morning is not evil
This second revision would clarify what “good” means (does it mean pleasant or does it mean the ethical good?). In the context of the coming adventure, the ethical goodness of the morning may be particularly important to Gandalf and Bilbo, and much more important than its pleasurableness. We might, also, from that clarification through obversion begin to query the difference between good and evil as well as how a human and a non-human designation of time such as “morning” could express an ethical value. We may perhaps mean that there is no evil occurring in this morning, and instead there is goodness happening somewhere, perhaps in Bilbo and Gandalf’s meeting each other, but that is moving into the more literary realm of puzzles rather than philosophy. Across the course, we will use both forms of analysis, the literary and the philosophical, but Westphal’s shorthand for clarification will help us to pay attention to which form we are engaging with at any particular instance.

Analytic Hermeneutics

We learned last week about hermeneutics as the study of interpretation, in particular as the study of how we go about the activity of interpretation. We might further refine this as the branch of philosophy not necessarily concerned with knowledge itself (which is “epistemology”, as we will discuss later) but rather how the process of interpretation is practiced. This means we must recognize interpretation as a practice unto itself. In this week’s questions, by asking how we might parse the statement “Good morning,” we have engaged in an analytic hermeneutics. Analytic philosophy seeks to refine philosophical concerns to those things that are most properly philosophical rather than merely “puzzles,” as in the above section (the wish “Good morning” being outside the realm of the philosophy while the proposition “This morning is good” being open to inquiry, if we accept the vagueness of the word “good” as viable). However, hermeneutics in general as a branch of philosophy would be concerned with all of the possible ways of interpreting “Good morning,” not only those that contain a philosophical proposition. Propositions may be tested by logic, and this is analytic philosophy’s domain. However, we should recognize that this is itself already a choice made about using one form of hermeneutics (analytic hermeneutics). We will concern ourselves with choices at many points the course as well, beginning with ethics and eventually moving through determinism to authenticity and existentialism. Later, we might consider how Nietzsche’s concerns with truth might guide us to make a different choice than “I will interpret this using analytic hermeneutics.” Other options also exist, such as locating ourselves as readers with particular habits of interpretation and particular uses of language. We would call this ontological hermeneutics – “ontology” is the study of being, so ontological hermeneutics is the study of interpretation based on how we exist in the world as readers who interpret texts. Roy Howard loosely distinguishes between analytic and “Continental” (European) hermeneutics on
this basis (Howard 37), and this convenient distinction will also help was we move through different and conflicting philosophical traditions. When we reach Marx, for instance, we may be far more interested in the circumstances in which choices are made than their analytical truth.

Questions for Self-Review

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for responding to a classmate’s comment. Beginning this week, you will have two classmates initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sentences from Tolkien and a few sentences from Westphal.

1. Does Bilbo actually mean anything at all when he says “Good morning!” to Gandalf?
2. Can literary and philosophical truths or meanings co-exist together?
3. Do Gandalf’s and Bilbo’s very different perspectives on the world manifest at other points in the novel?
4. How and why are riddles important to *The Hobbit*, apart from their entertainment value?
5. Is Bilbo and Gollum’s riddle game amenable to the same kind of analysis Gandalf brings to his questions?

Works Cited & Supplemental Readings


Week 3: Ethics & “The Ring of Gyges”

Objectives

1. Recognize the ethical problem of power in Plato’s Republic.
2. Relate Tolkien’s Ring of Power to Plato’s ring of Gyges.
3. Describe ethical choices in Plato and Tolkien.
4. Identify and compare justice as a concept in both Tolkien and Plato through the actions of power.

Reading Assignment


Tolkien, J.R.R. The Fellowship of the Ring. Del Rey, 2017. (Book I, chapters 1–6)

Commentary

This week we begin our fellowship… We have our first primary philosophical text and we begin The Lord of the Rings with the first six chapters of The Fellowship of the Ring. While most Tolkien readers already know about the relationship between Tolkien’s Ring and the ring of legends such as Der Niebelungenlied (the German Song of the Nibelung) that also was the basis for Wagner’s Ring Cycle operas, we are looking back further. Plato’s story of the ring of Gyges from The Republic presents us with ethical questions in relation to power.

Power

We are familiar with the simple phrase “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” This is the problem we encounter in Plato. The Republic is concerned repeatedly with power and how a community (the city state of
Athens in this instance) can organize itself to best deal with the competing demands of the group and the individual. Another often voiced query is “Who watches the watchmen?” The first phrase comes from the Roman poet Juvenal but is often seen as originating in Plato’s *The Republic*. However, they have different answers that reflect how we consider the second question. If power corrupts, then those entrusted with defending power must also be corrupted by it. Plato suggests that the watchmen must be raised correctly and morally to be ethical in their souls. Juvenal is more cynical, although his context was guarding marital fidelity rather than the running of the state – his implication, however, is that everyone is corruptible.

This is the problem we find in Plato’s tale of the ring. If the ring of Gyges can render whoever possesses it invisible, what force would constrain that individual from doing evil or acting selfishly? If justice itself, as a concept, does not supersede other interests, what can one do to respond to Glaucon’s assertion that there are many people who “think that justice is to be reckoned in the troublesome class, among goods which are to be pursued for the sake of rewards and of reputation, but in themselves are disagreeable and rather to be avoided” (Plato 2)? That is, how do we pursue justice in a society when members of that society regard justice as a tool or instrument for their person gain and not as a virtue unto itself?

To test this assertion, we are given the story of Gyges and his ring, which makes him invisible (Plato 4). Glaucon asserts that if “there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other; no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice” (4). In other words, the just and the unjust alike would turn to injustice. If there were to be no consequences, then all people of the world with abandon justice and commit crimes freely. Furthermore, for the unjust who bear such a ring, Glaucon further asserts that we cannot assume they would appear unjust but rather that they would present themselves to the world as the most just and ethical person possible (5). The distinction, then, would be that the unjust would be happy in their crimes and the just would feel guilty yet still be criminal, and on the basis of happiness being the only difference, we should grant superiority to the unjust. Justice itself is then merely a tool of society and not an end unto itself. The unjust will always be happier than the just.

Our excerpt ends at this point, although Plato does later tell us that the rewards of justice are more extensive, although he cannot bring Glaucon into agreement. Plato also makes recourse to the gods to make this argument, so his discussion of ethics eventually turns to a question of theology and metaphysics. However, since Tolkien does not include a clear sense of an afterlife in his Middle-earth, nor a clear vision of clergy, the holy, or of theological consequences, we must ask different questions in relation to *The Fellowship of the Ring*. For instance, if Gandalf will resurrect if he dies, as will Sauron, on what basis do they remain just or unjust in the world? If the elves, who are presented to us as
readers as an ethical community, do not perish when their body dies but rather continue on in the world for all of eternity, on what basis do they find a benefit to justice rather than injustice?

**Bilbo Gives Up the Ring**

When Bilbo finally surrenders the Ring to Gandalf, for it to be transferred to Frodo, have we seen a victory of justice over injustice? Has Bilbo overcome the temptation of the Ring to do evil rather than good? When Bilbo offers Gandalf the Ring of power, we see Tolkien rehearsing an argument much akin to Glaucon's from Plato's *The Republic*:

“You are wise and powerful. Will you not take the Ring?”

“No!” cried Gandalf, springing to his feet. “With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly.” His eyes flashed and his face was lit as by a fire within. “Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength. I shall have such need of it. Great perils lie before me.” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 67)

This is a new paradigm from Plato’s. Gandalf does not see himself as being corrupted by the desire for injustice or his yielding to the temptations of his desires, but rather precisely because his good ethical position would lead him to pursue the ethical good through the Ring’s power. This alters Plato’s argument by suggesting that even if the just believe that a theological view grants them greater happiness by being just and good, they would still be tempted by Gyges’s Ring because through exercising the power of the Ring they would interfere with the world with the intention of doing good but, by virtue of acting upon others through this power, would eventually commit evil.

Similar language recurs when Frodo holds the Ring. While he is in The Prancing Pony Inn, he experiences a temptation very much like Gandalf’s with the Ring:

He felt the Ring on its chain, and quite unaccountably the desire came over him to slip it on and vanish out of the silly situation. It seemed to him, somehow, as if the suggestion came to him from outside, from someone or something in the room. He resisted the temptation firmly, and clasped the Ring in his hand, as if to keep a hold on it and prevent it from escaping or doing
any mischief. At any rate it gave him no inspiration. (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 179)

The language of “desire” and “temptation” should guide our interpretation here. We might also ask how we as readers are guided morally and ethically by reading of how Frodo “resisted the temptation firmly.” Does this give us a model for ethical conduct that implicitly resists temptation and replaces it with reason and care? Furthermore, the Ring’s “suggestion” comes from outside of Frodo and even from outside of the room. Does this suggest that evil is external to people, who are intrinsically good? Is evil something that comes to us rather than being a part of us? This may reflect Tolkien’s religious faith, but it is also a central question for how we distinguish between Socrates and Glaucon or how we might imagine encouraging a society to support justice rather than injustice.

**Questions for Self-Review**

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for responding to a classmate’s comment. This week, you will have two classmates initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sentences from Tolkien and a few sentences from Plato and Katz.

1. Is Gandalf’s response to the Ring the same as Frodo’s, or are there differences between them?
2. Whose argument, Socrates’s or Glaucon’s, do you support for justice? Why?
3. What might you offer today as an example of temptation akin to the Ring?
4. If temptation comes from “outside the room” and is external to Frodo (or Gandalf, or even us), are we actually unethical if it compels us to unethical actions?

**Works Cited & Supplemental Readings**


Week 4: Ethics & Virtue

Objectives

1. Distinguish between justice and virtue as concepts.
2. Recognize virtue in select characters in The Fellowship of the Ring.
3. Describe virtuousness in a character’s actions.
4. Identify instances of justice and virtue in The Fellowship of the Ring.

Reading Assignment


Tolkien, J.R.R. The Fellowship of the Ring. Del Rey, 2017. (Book I, chapters 7–12)

Commentary

We continue from the question of justice in Plato’s The Republic, which is essentially a social or community issue, to the individual problem of virtue. To be virtuous is a trait of a character or a person, whereas justice is a matter of concern for a community. I may remain virtuous even without a community, but justice only relates between the individual and the group. Skoble broaches the question of “virtue ethics” for us, and we will use this to compare and contrast the characters we have seen so far in The Hobbit and The Fellowship of the Ring.

Virtue Ethics

In The Republic we encountered the Ring of Gyges and the temptation that any just person might experience when offered the freedom of action without consequence. Glaucon has argued with Socrates that the only difference between the just and the unjust in such a situation is happiness—the unjust will be happy in their crimes while the just are not, but both will commit injustices when they have no consequences for their actions. This week, we turn to a distinct concept, “virtue,” to further elaborate our discussion so far. In a classical sense, there are three questions being raised, and each has a distinct term in Ancient Greek. For this reason, we find ethics are discussed differently among Ancient Greek
philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle. We have “arete” (ἀρετή, meaning excellence or virtue as in our readings this week), “phronesis” (φρόνησις, meaning practical or moral wisdom closely related to “prudence”), and “eudaimonia” (εὐδαιμονία, meaning flourishing or happiness). The concept of eudaimonia is what Glaucon draws on to argue that the difference between the just and the unjust is happiness, since both will be tempted when offered Gyges’s ring of invisibility. We will later discuss this in relation to utilitarianism, which emphasizes the greater good or happiness in a consequentialist philosophy (goodness relates to consequences rather than any intrinsic value to an action). When we propose a theory of ethics based on virtue, it is through “arete,” for which the ethical value inheres in the character or state of persons themselves.

Aristotle, in distinction from Plato in his Socratic dialogues, emphasizes “arete” whereas Plato had presented virtue as arising from justice. Virtue, in Aristotle’s vision, is not merely derived from justice but expresses the essential nature of a human being or a human soul. A person who is unjust or evil but does a good deed is not miraculously virtuous by doing so—such as person has made a calculated decision, perhaps for justice, but not because they are themselves good. In contrast, a virtuous person does good deeds as an expression of their genuine being. They are good in their character and hence virtuous. For example, while Gollum may lead Bilbo out of the caves, he does not do so out of virtuousness (although the specific edition of the text may muddy our evaluation of Gollum…). In contrast, Sam Gamgee is faithful to Frodo and helps him as a way of expressing his own essential virtuousness. In contrast, Glaucon, in our previous readings, appears to either dismiss or simply be uninterested in any concept of essential traits of character.

Virtue also has a long literary history. What we call “didactic fiction” (fiction aimed at teaching the reader) plays a large role in literature, and we can look to works such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* or sentimental narratives such as Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. For *Pamela*, there is a double meaning at work—the protagonist’s virtue is both “virtuousness” and her virginity, which is an emblem for virtue. The purpose of the novel was to guide young men and women to a virtuous character by helping them to identify with the virtuous and dislike those who engage in vice or evil. This can be explicit in a literary work or implicit in its plot, such as when good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. As the Irish author Oscar Wilde reminds us, this outcome is pure fiction… *Pamela* trains readers to be virtuous by telling them that virtue is rewarded and by modelling virtuous behavior as normal and superior. Frederick Douglass has a different model when he employs the traits of “sentimental fiction” in his narrative. In this paradigm, he seeks to train the reader’s feelings and emotional responses, or what we call and education of the sentiments. This is intended to alter the reader’s virtue by coaching us to feel appropriate responses when good or bad things happen to those who are virtuous or evil. We feel sympathy when
the virtuous hero suffers, and we feel triumph when the evil villain is defeated. We find this in almost all narratives today, implicitly supporting the heroes and heroines in *Harry Potter* or disliking the villains in *Star Wars*. In both instances, we also see the virtuous eventually succeed and the evil eventually defeated, which reinforces the ethical and moral stance of the narrative.

**Place, People, & Virtue**

We have a great many instances of virtue and character in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, but Tolkien also makes it an essential trait of place. He reminds us that such was the virtue of the land of Rivendell that soon all fear and anxiety was lifted from their minds. The future, good or ill, was not forgotten, but ceased to have any power over the present. Health and hope grew strong in them, and they were content with each good day as it came, taking pleasure in every meal, and in every word and song. (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 307)

This underscores a critical component of virtue. It is intrinsic. Rivendell, which is a place rather than a character, cannot help but be what it is: virtuous. Notably, the virtue of Rivendell emphasizes this intrinsic quality to the goodness it bestows by denying or refuting other models of ethics. When Glaucon considers what course of action will bring about the greatest happiness in relation to Gyges’s ring, this is a “consequentialist” evaluation. The goodness or justice of an action is based on what it causes or leads to, not the intentions of whoever does it nor their feelings while committing the action. Not so for Rivendell. Rivendell dispels “the future” (307) so that all that is good proceeds from the present state of being. The essential virtue of a person or place is based on its *being* and not on the consequences of its actions. You can commit justice or injustice, but you must be virtuous or without virtue. The former is an activity while the latter is an ontological state of being.

With this *being* in our minds as an essential component of virtue, we can then consider our characters. How, for example, do we contrast Aragorn and Frodo when the Nazgûl attack them? Frodo experiences temptation to use the Ring and yields to it out of fright and desperation. Does this make him less virtuous than Aragorn, who defends him despite the dreadfulness of the Nazgûl? Frodo’s action endangers their quest, but is it an act of an unvirtuous person? More obviously, how might we contrast the *being* or essential traits of the Nazgûl themselves against Frodo, Aragorn, or Glorfindel?

For virtue, however, we likely have no better character study in *The Lord of the Rings* than the contrast between Gollum/Smeagol and Samwise Gamgee. Sam commits questionable actions, such as eavesdropping or spying on Frodo, but we regard this as ultimately an expression of his virtuousness. In contrast,
Gollum may assist Bilbo in *The Hobbit* as we have seen, but this does little to secure a sense of his being a virtuous character whom we would wish to emulate. Lastly, we face a challenge for ourselves. How do we as readers recognize Tolkien’s didactic work in his legendarium and its attempts to teach us to be just and virtuous? Once we have recognized this didactic quality, we have a second challenge. How do we recognize when Tolkien seeks to train our emotional responses to the ethical conflicts his characters face? This entails recognizing Tolkien’s work as both didactic and sentimental.

Questions for Self-Review

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for responding to a classmate’s comment. This week, you will have two classmates initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sentences from Tolkien and a few sentences from Skoble.

1. Is there a difference in virtuousness between Frodo and Aragorn, even if there are different consequences for their actions?
2. What are the three Greek concepts for ethics, and how do they differ?
3. Why is justice related to what one does and virtue to what one is? What is the difference?
4. Does Tom Bombadil’s immunity to the Ring’s influence our interpretation of his ethics? Would be do best to understand Tom Bombadil through his actions or his state of being?

Works Cited & Supplemental Readings


Week 5: Ethics & Utilitarianism

Objectives

1. Define utilitarianism as an ethical philosophy.
2. Define deontology as an ethical philosophy.
3. Distinguish between essentialist and consequentialist theories of ethics.
5. Identify the preponderance toward deontological or consequentialist ethics in The Lord of the Rings.

Reading Assignment


Commentary

You may already have been introduced to utilitarianism through readings in the University Core across UNIV 2001 and UNIV 2002. The most overt consideration of utilitarianism in these courses is Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” which challenges readers over an ethical choice: to accept the suffering of others if it creates a greater good (consequentialist ethics) or to reject such suffering even if doing so does not matter (essentialist ethics). We have seen this contrast already through Plato and Aristotle in the concepts of justice and virtue. This week we continue on the Ring’s journey South by considering utilitarianism as an ethical model based on consequences that lead to the greatest good or happiness possible. You should read John Stuart Mill and then William James after completing this Study Guide chapter.

Bentham, Mill, & Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) was a British reformer and philosopher with a
wide range of influences on social reform, prison reform, law, and education. He contributed to the founding of University College London where his body famously remains on display (in 2018 he visited New York City as a display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art). He is the modern founder of utilitarianism and was John Stuart Mill’s teacher. We are reading Mill’s refinement of Bentham’s arguments for utilitarianism.

Mill (1806–1873) wrote *Utilitarianism* as a series of three articles for *Fraser Magazine* in 1861. We are reading only the second chapter of the book, “What Utilitarianism Is,” in which Mill, from Bentham, argues for the principle of the greatest happiness as an ethical good. This should remind us of the distinction we found in Plato and Aristotle between virtue and justice. Virtue is an essentialist form of ethics based on a person’s character or being—in contrast, justice is a social and consequentialist form of ethics based on actions. Virtue requires a state of being while justice demands actions. Mill’s utilitarianism falls clearly on the consequentialist side of this paradigm and goes further by demanding that ethical choices not engage in a virtue ethics argument for deontological ethics. “Deontology” is the understanding of ethics as based in the rightness or correctness of the choice or state of being unto itself, regardless of its consequences. Bentham used the term in a more limited sense to mean following a moral or legal code, whereby any permitted action or required action was itself already *de facto* ethical (Bentham 7–20). Our modern sense of deontology is, like virtue ethics, concerned with the rightness or ethical nature of a thing unto itself, distinct from a consequentialist concern with outcomes. Mill and Bentham base utilitarian ethics on the principle of the greatest happiness, and for this any ethical action is to be judged on a consequentialist basis. This also means that choices we might otherwise not regard as ethical, *per se*, are ethical concerns under a utilitarian paradigm. For example, a religious foundation of ethics (essentialist) may not be concerned with a healthy diet, but a utilitarian ethics (consequentialist) may be.

This principle of the greatest happiness follows on the concept of eudaimonia discussed in the previous week. It is a paradigm distinct from virtue ethics. In many respects, we may simply regard utilitarianism as a further development of theories of eudaimonia as an ethical philosophy. Our previous readings emphasized moral character and virtue as the pathways to ethical conduct, and hence to an ethical state of being. Prior to this, we also saw Glaucon arguing in *The Republic* that the only distinction between the just and the unjust is that the unjust are happier without their contribution to social justice being any different. Utilitarianism is distinct from both. We have in Mill and Bentham an argument about social consequences and in which they grant those social consequences priority. Happiness is to be assessed for the community, not only the individual, and in an Epicurean sense. This gives a simple principle for evaluating all ethical choice: that which reduces suffering and produces happiness is the greatest ethical good.

On this basis, Bentham argued for a range of socially progressive issues ranging from ending animal cruelty to abolishing prohibitions on
homosexuality, all from the perspective of attaining the greatest happiness. On the same basis, he campaigned against cruel punishments in prison reform on the basis that the suffering did not lead to a greater increase in the community's happiness. Many of these issues are alive and actively part of our civil discourse today. You may wish to compare various public figures and their positions on social reform based on whether they hold to deontological or utilitarian methods of evaluating ethics.

For instance, prison education programs are proven to reduce recidivism, which means it reduces the rate at which former prisoners reoffend as well as the seriousness of subsequent offences (Vacca 297). However, many people also feel that investing in free education for convicts is immoral. This is a clear conflict between ethical modes of thought: the deontological and the utilitarian. A deontological argument is made on one side that granting free education to criminals while law-abiding citizens must pay for education is immoral. The consequences may clearly benefit the community, and the reduction in crime may create far more fiscal savings than the cost of education programs, yet those holding to this deontological position regard it as immoral (note: others might also argue that educating criminals is an ethical good unto itself as charity). The utilitarian argument is based on the principle of the greatest happiness, in which the community has a greater level of happiness based on reducing crime rates as well as reducing the taxation necessary to keep criminals in prison—the ethics of free education for criminals while law-abiding citizens pay for education has no basis for evaluation unto itself, only in its consequences.

James Against Utilitarianism

William James (1842–1910) may already be familiar for having furnished the ethical dilemma of a suffering child whose pain grants great happiness to an entire community—this is the basis for Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas,” which combines James’s thought experiment with Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor from The Brothers Karamazov who argues that humanity should not be granted free will since this would only permit evil to occur. Also, we are reading James for his thoughts on ethics, but he is primarily regarded as a philosopher for his contributions to epistemology (the study of the nature of knowledge) and pragmatism. Pragmatism sought to set aside concerns with absolutely truths by evaluating whether or not a question or its answer is of use. Hence, ethics should stray away from absolute statements and concern itself with actual demands that people face and must act upon. This is based on the problem of epistemological skepticism, which may be roughly expressed as the argument that humans can have no absolute truths without doubt, but at the same time we must accept some truths of which we are skeptical in order to make practical decisions in the real world. In a pragmatist paradigm, whether or not we regard something as “true” depends on the value we derive from it. Furthermore, while absolute truths may exist, we can never possibly know them with certainty, hence while we must adopt some things as true, we should also
always remains ready to abandon or revise these beliefs because all of our beliefs always contain at least some elements of error.

James is not a utilitarian but is also not willing to cede to deontological thought the argument that an ethical good can stand entirely on its own, preceding the community as an absolute truth. Such an ethical good may exist, but we cannot possibly know it. James’s argument from a position of skepticism is that we cannot know any absolute ethical rules in a deontological sense since we have not run the full course of history to refine our culture’s ethical ideals. While we must adopt the ethical ideals of our day, we must also work to refine and improve upon them, and even revise them fundamentally when we find them lacking. Because we cannot know a true deontological ethical demand, for James, we must use a utilitarian method to find ever more refined truths.

James offers an abridged summary of his argument by claiming there are no absolute evils, and there are no non-moral goods; and the highest ethical life—however few may be called to bear its burdens—consists at all times in the breaking of rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case. There is but one unconditional commandment, which is that thou shalt seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which thou canst see. (James 349).

We must also pair this with James’s attempt to build a compromise between the deontological theory of ethics with the ontological concerns of virtue ethics with states of being. James closes his lecture, which formed the basis for the article we are reading, by returning to virtue ethics. He is specifically focused on how virtue ethics turns to utilitarian processes based on the skepticism that makes absolute ethical rules impossible to know. When compelled to make an ethical choice between good and evil, and specifically a choice so that we may continue to flourish in life,

it is simply our character and total personal genius that are on trial; and if we invoke any so-called philosophy, our choice and use of that also are but revelations of our individual aptitude or incapacity for moral life. From this unsparing practical ordeal no professor’s lectures and no array of books can save us. The solving word for the learned and the unlearned man alike lies, in the last resort, in the dumb willingnesses and unwillingnesses of their interiors, and nowhere else. (James 354).

This closing may seem suspiciously close to virtue ethics, but given the problem of skepticism and the universality of some element of error in all of our beliefs, we have a subtle difference. His argument is that we must use a utilitarian process to establish ethical rules that resemble a deontological position; however,
since we know that these rules will always include some degree of error and hence always be to some degree unethical, we must also continuously challenge and revise them.

Tolkien and Consequences

Rosebury argues a clear situation of deontological and consequentialist ethics in *The Lord of the Rings*:

When the Warden of the Houses of Healing laments the injuries of war and hints at a criticism of the Gondorian élite, Éowyn replies that, “It takes but one foe to breed a war, not two, Master Warden... And those who have not swords can still die upon them” (*RK*, V, v, 236). This implies, not a defence of revenge, but what moral philosophers call a “consequentialist” or utilitarian argument: the total quantity of human suffering would have been just as great, or greater, if Gondor and Rohan had opted for non-resistance. It is a classic anti-pacifist argument, omitting only the implicit claim (which the reader can take for granted) that there is a chance of reducing total suffering if the aggressor can be defeated and future aggressors deterred. (Rosebury 4).

This is a consequentialist argument weighing *not* the ethics of the thing itself but rather the degree of happiness each pathway would produce.

We see the same kind of thought at work in the conflict between Gandalf and Saruman. Saruman, by assuming the triumph of Sauron, argues for joining with the Dark Lord with the hope of shaping his victory to reduce the harm it may bring and, over time, to use evil deeds to eventually turn to a greater good that would not otherwise be possible. This is clearly a consequentialist argument with a utilitarian ethic at work:

“A new Power is rising. Against it the old allies and policies will not avail us at all. There is no hope left in Elves or dying Númenor. This then is one choice before you, before us. We may join with that Power. It would be wise, Gandalf. There is hope that way. Its victory is at hand; and there will be rich reward for those that aided it. As the Power grows, its proved friends will also grow; and the Wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it. We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order; all the things that we have so far striven in vain to accomplish, hindered rather than helped by our weak or idle friends. There need not be, there would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means.”
Boromir echoes similar utilitarian values after he hears of Saruman’s treachery and imprisonment of Gandalf. Boromir argues during the Council of Elrond that they should use the Ring to defend themselves against Sauron:

“Saruman is a traitor, but did he not have a glimpse of wisdom? Why do you speak ever of hiding and destroying? Why should we not think that the Great Ring has come into our hands to serve us in the very hour of need? Wielding it the Free Lords of the Free may surely defeat the Enemy. That is what he most fears, I deem.” (Tolkien, Fellowship 300)

Rather than answering their queries, we may as readers instead ask what form of ethics the novel teaches us. Like the sentimental novel that educates our feelings and the didactic novel that teaches us virtue ethics, what form of thinking does Tolkien urge us toward? The answer may lie in the way that both Saruman and Boromir are corrupted by their utilitarian thinking. By witnessing their harm and destruction brought on by their reliance on utilitarianism, we may as readers be influenced to value a deontological position that is more in line with Tolkien’s Catholicism.

Questions for Self-Review

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for responding to a classmate’s comment. This week, you will have two classmates initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sentences from Tolkien and a few sentences from James and Mill.

1. What are the merits of Saruman’s utilitarian argument for minimizing the harm of Sauron’s victory?
2. How would you interpret Boromir using a utilitarian method?
3. Does James’s pragmatism revise the validity of Saruman’s utilitarian argument for joining with Sauron?
4. Do the elves and Gandalf embody a virtue ethics or a deontological ethics?
5. Do the hobbits embody a virtue ethics or a deontological ethics?

Works Cited & Supplemental Readings

https://tinyurl.com/yagmhj3a
[https://tinyurl.com/y77s5hq7](https://tinyurl.com/y77s5hq7)


[https://tinyurl.com/ycz729sl](https://tinyurl.com/ycz729sl)

[https://tinyurl.com/ybm4yuwt](https://tinyurl.com/ybm4yuwt)


Week 6: Theology & Hope

Objectives

1. Define theology as a field of philosophical inquiry.
2. Identify different eschatological “endings” in theology.
3. Contrast the conflicting eschatological “endings” in Tolkien & his sources.
4. Identify ethical elements of Armageddon and Ragnarök as eschatologies in relation to Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings.

Reading Assignment


Commentary

This week’s shift to theology (the study of the nature of the divine) also comes with a focus on endings. While we have not finished The Lord of the Rings, we may take the ending of The Fellowship of the Ring as our case study. We have in this ending something that feels far from “happy” or what we had expected. Part of the contrast of feelings is that we see Tolkien as a Catholic author invested in Christian eschatology (the study of endings, principally the end of the world), which most people assume should be a happy ending. In fiction and film, we certainly expect this. However, the book’s mythos derives largely from Scandinavian Pagan traditions, in which there is also an eschatological worldview culminating in a form of Armageddon called Ragnarök. However, this Nordic eschatology is not a “happy” ending but rather a failure. How we combine these seemingly incompatible worldviews is part of our concern with theology.

The Sense of an Ending

Every narrative has an ending, whether it concludes or simply stops, just like
our own lives. How we understand and interpret those endings can be a key element of our hermeneutics (how we interpret). Does an ending affirm a purpose or meaning to the narrative’s existence, or does it point to the futility of story-telling? Theology, as the study of divinity or of the nature of the divine, is often linked to endings. A key concern in most religious forms of thought is what happens after an ending. Are endings absolute? Does anything continue after an ending? If a narrative ends, does it cease to matter that it happened at all? Are our lives any different from narratives in this sense?

Tolkien was particularly concerned with endings, and Davenport reminds us that Tolkien focused extensively on endings in his famous essay *Tree and Leaf*. Tolkien coins the word “eucatastrophe” to describe fairy stories. The word is a portmanteau of the Greek word “Eu” for “good” and “catastrophe,” to suggest that some catastrophes may actually provide a happy ending that provides meaning and purpose. In this sense, the ending of *The Fellowship of the Ring* may be a “eucatastrophe” for the novel series. It is a failure but affirms the purpose of the quest and provides the characters with purpose and meaning.

With this focus on endings, we also have a sense of purpose or destiny. We should also keep a helpful limitation on this first week dedicated to Theology: we are approaching the topic as an academic area of study. For example, as with Religious Studies as an academic discipline, the Philosophy of Religion is not necessarily related to religious faith itself, just as the Philosophy of Science is not itself a scientific field of study. Our interest is in a philosophical consideration of how people engage in religious thought or contemplate the divine.

**The Völsunga Saga & the Nibelungenlied**

Much has been written about Tolkien’s sources for *The Lord of the Rings*, which range from the Norse sagas to Medieval Germanic texts and the modern collection of Finnish folktales *The Kalevala* (Tolley 38–62; Hunter 138). Each of these reflects specific traditions. *The Kalevala*, for example, is a collection of largely pagan folktales drawn together during the Russian Empire’s colonization of Finland. Hence, *The Kalevala* is a pagan text from a Christian community that expresses a profoundly nationalist ethos for its independence movement. It is deeply political and engaged with conflicting theologies. Similarly, both the Norse and Germanic sources on which Tolkien draws reflect the tension between pagan traditions and the Christian period during which they were written.

This overlapping of traditions may strike modern readers as unusual, but it should not. In the English language, we still have much of this history visible to us. Our days of the week, for example, come from the same Norse traditions, and any speaker of a Scandinavian language can quickly identify Monday as Moon-day; Tuesday as Týr’s day (a god in the *Poetic Edda*, to which Tolkien refers); the gods Woden/Oden, Thor, and Frigg as Wednesday through Friday
respectively; the Roman god Saturn; and Sun-day. We, as English speakers, are still awash in paganism that lingers on in our everyday speech and customs despite the end of pagan theologies long ago.

We also know that Tolkien was fully aware of this pagan legacy in the modern English language and even the pre-Christian or “heathen” and pagan legacies that live on in contemporary Christianity. We also know that he was aware of it even in his own Catholic faith and in the English language. John R. Holmes elucidates how these overlapping theologies become entangled closely with the language of religious faith:

The other word that Blackburn cites as merely a gloss for ‘God’ is *metod*. But as Tolkien suggest in [his] lecture [*Tree and Leaf*], the word has a heathen past not often recognized even by Old English scholars. The literal meaning of the word, ‘measurer,’ suggests the Judeo-Christian creator-god, described in Genesis.... Tolkien mapped the trajectory of the English word’s pre-Christian meaning in his notes to Bede’s account of Caedmon. From the idea of ‘measure,’ it comes to refer to ‘personal providence’ (that which is measured out to the individual), i.e., fate. (Holmes 131)

Holmes adds further detail to this,

To Tolkien, however, the most remarkable thing about the layering of Christian upon heathen in religious words is the very fact that the heathen words survived in English. Although many ecclesial words in modern English (including the word ‘ecclesial’) are borrowed from Greek (church, eucharist) or Latin (altar, communion), Tolkien notes that most common religious terms carried over from pagan associations rather than using new words for new things. (Holmes 132)

To further this point, Holmes quotes Tolkien directly on these etymologies. Tolkien’s own comments in *Tree and Leaf* also show how closely he considered the pagan elements of the language of Old English as living on in the Christian traditions of modern English:

It is remarkable how many of the primary words of the Christian religion were in Germanic, but especially in Old English (the earliest after Gothic to be Christianized) of nature, and therefore ultimately ‘heathen’ origin. In [Old English] the words for God, heaven, hell, sin, redeemer, savior, cross, paradise, Easter, Lent, holy, saint, eucharist, baptism, and so on, are all native [god,
For our purposes in this course, this recognition is remarkable. It means that literally we live in a modern world (and for Tolkien a predominantly Christian world) in which the days of the week are still named for pagan deities and our words for “God” and “holy” are literally the pagan pre-Christian Old English words “god” and “hœlig.”

Tolkien came to much of this material through his scholarly work on Old English and the history of the English language, and in particular his work on the Old English epic poem Beowulf. As with The Kalevala’s connection to contemporary political life in Finland (despite being a collection of folk materials partly written to establish a national literature), Tolkien’s readings are also connected to more contemporary movements. He first read the Völsunga Saga in the English translation by William Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon (1870), which presaged Morris’s fantasy novels that directly influenced Tolkien. Morris’s novels The Wood Beyond the World (1894) and The Well at the World’s End (1896) both draw on the Norse epics to write new narratives set in fantasy worlds, but they also reflect his activist work and his founding of the Socialist League in 1884. For Morris, the recuperation of myth was intimately connected with his profound contribution to the Arts & Crafts Movement that preserved traditional craft skills that had declining with industrialization. You can envision this as deeply bound up with Morris’s work on labor rights and the conditions of labor under industrial capitalism.

When the same Norse influences manifested in Tolkien’s contemporary Poul Anderson, it led to the less Christian and more Nordic novel The Broken Sword (1954), published just prior to The Fellowship of the Ring in the same year. Anderson’s use of the same materials emphasizes the darker failure in the concept of Ragnarök, which is not a happy ending. For the Norse vision of the world’s end, failure rather than success dominates the story. Comparing Tolkien and Anderson makes this difference more visible and thereby shows how Tolkien subverted his source materials to impose a Christian eschatology. In Anderson, the heroes are impure and corrupt, and the world eventually fails. Rather than understanding our world as a temporary stage of history before a perfect triumph that ends the world, the Norse mythology casts the world as a temporary existence before chaos returns and the creation of the gods comes to its inevitable end. We read profoundly different endings.

Questions for Self-Review

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for
responding to a classmate’s comment. This week, you will have two classmates initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sentences from Tolkien and a few sentences from Davenport.

1. Does the ending of *The Fellowship of the Ring* relate more to a pagan or Christian mythological paradigm?
2. Does the ending of *The Hobbit* relate more to a pagan or Christian mythological paradigm?
3. The reception and use of Tolkien’s source materials changed over time, such as *The Kalevala*. How has the reception of Tolkien’s work changed since it was published? What do his endings mean for us today?
4. Are happy endings an ethical necessity?
5. Does the shift from Ragnarök to Armageddon, leave traces of a conflict in Tolkien’s novels? Do you see similar conflicts around us today?

**Works Cited & Supplemental Readings**


Week 7: Theology & Providence (General & Special)

Objectives

1. Distinguish between providence and determinism as concepts.
2. Relate providence to ethics in *The Two Towers*.
3. Compare providence to utilitarian ethics.
4. Identify providence as a theme in *The Two Towers* and *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Reading Assignment


Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Two Towers*. Del Rey, 2017. (Book III, chapters 1–5)

Commentary

This week we complete our course section on theology in *The Lord of the Rings* through the concept of providence. As with our discussion of eschatology, we will find that Tolkien complicates any easy reading. A key theme for providence in Tolkien is distinguishing it from the mainstream concept of “Fate.” General providence is the interpretation of the world as expressing God’s intentions, which is to say that the world was created to unfold along a plan predetermined by God as an omnipotent and omniscient creator. Such a world does not require any divine interventions to solve problems or right wrongs since everything is already according to providence. Special providence is distinct and marks an intervention in the world or in relation to the individual. Miracles and, some might argue, even Christianity itself, can be sometimes seen as falling under Special providence, although not all theologians are in agreement on such interpretations. Regardless, providence is a theological concept and reflects a way of understanding the world based in the contemplation of the divine. After Spring Recess, we will turn from the theological to the materialist, which will be a profound shift in our approach to Tolkien and to philosophy.
According to Plan…

William Dowie argues that “certain ontological implications in The Lord of the Rings also belong to… [the] Christian tradition. These include notions of fellowship, kingship, providence, prophecy, prohibition, festivity, and eucatastrophe” (278). Colin Gunton links Tolkien’s novels to providential history (132–133), as Paul Kerry has noted (21). Whichever way we approach The Lord of the Rings, the concept of providence and purpose is everywhere in the text for us to consider. Thomas Hibbs’s chapter gives particular attention to Gollum in this respect, making the specifically Christian argument that good may come from evil (and hence the rationale for evil in a world made by a perfect and good God). The best example of evil leading to good may be how Gollum comes to serve a purpose in the unfolding of history in Middle-earth (fulfilling Gandalf’s suspicions). The opposite, of good leading to evil, is regarded as impossible in this model of providence, and Kerry specifically argues this in his approach to reading Tolkien.

We find throughout Tolkien a Christian and specifically Catholic ethos, just as his colleague and friend C.S. Lewis made his Chronicles of Narnia a clearly Christian allegory. For Gunnar Urang,

*The Lord of the Rings*, although it contains no ‘God,’ no ‘Christ,’ and no ‘Christians,’ embodies much of Tolkien’s ‘real religion’ and is a profoundly Christian work. Tolkien requires no ‘God’ in this story; it is enough that he suggests in it the kind of pattern in history which the Christian tradition has ascribed to the providence of God” (Urang 122)

Nils Ivar Agøy argues something similar to Urang, but distinct in that he thinks the expectation of a clear statement of providence is unreasonable. In his approach,

divine providence as such does not form the basis of specific actions for characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. But should we expect it to? The basis for ‘correct’ action in that book is quite explicitly a set of nonnegotiable moral norms (incidentally coinciding with the ones Tolkien the Catholic believed to be universally valid). (Agøy 80)

To this Agøy adds the observation that “‘Good and ills have not changed since yesteryear,’ as Aragorn tells Éomer, ‘nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves, and another among Men.’” (Agøy 80). This is an argument for deontological ethics. For both Urang and Agøy, then, we see the ties to providence as deeply connected with our previous discussion of ethics.
Chance or Providence?

Hibbs details providential concepts in *The Lord of the Rings* as the primary concern in his chapter, and we see his attention to how good may emerge from what appears to be evil, eventually, in order to bring about the eschatological “happy ending” we have already discussed. According to Hibbs,

providence first appears under the guise of chance, of seemingly fortuitous events that turn the tide for good and against evil. These events, which often bring good out of intended evil, occur contrary to the will or at least outside of the intention of those who cause them. But providence is more than simply one or more fortuitous events; it involves the orchestration of an entire sequence of events; whatever glimmer we have of the workings of providence can generally be seen only in hindsight, the discernment of an order or intelligibility in what initially appeared to be merely a sequence of chance events. (Hibbs 181)

In this, he expresses a profoundly theological belief in a divine Creator who has set the universe in motion in order to achieve a plan. Hence, we may think that the unfolding of history (as modelled in the novels of *The Lord of the Rings*) is deeply religious in nature. This would mean that consequences are a reflection of providence and express the divine, eventually, as good emerges from evil.

Hibbs also breaks down this sequence of events that appear to be chance but reveal, to a theological interpretation, a guiding plan that is inevitable.

First, the role of chance; Bilbo did not enter the cave looking for the Ring, yet he ends up leaving with it. Second, at least according to Gandalf, the Ring itself left Gollum in an attempt to return to its master, but its will was thwarted by the chance arrival of Bilbo. This implies for Gandalf the workings of some other, perhaps higher, power, “beyond any design of the Ring-maker” (*FR*, p. 61). Third, what appears to be chance allows for the possibility that good may now be brought out of evil. Gandalf predicts that the malicious and deceptive Gollum may yet have an important role to play in the events unfolding. He observes that not even the wise know all ends. Thus, fourth, whether and precisely how things will turn out remains unclear until the end of the entire drama. (Hibbs 182)

To make this point, that the books do not depict chance but rather show providence at work, Hibbs then quotes from Gandalf: “I can put it no plainer than
by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker…” (FR,
p. 61).” (Hibbs 182). Said simply, the Ring has its own intentions, as does Sauron, but those evil intentions themselves already exist within a divine providence that will draw good out from evil. This is a direction for history. Just as the second law of thermodynamics defines the forward flow of time by the increase in entropy for any given system, in this theological framework the emergence of good from evil defines the forward motion of history. We should also recognize this in contrast to the materialist theory of history we will see in the next unit. We can call this direction for history a “teleology” or “teleological.” Teleology is a way of explaining things based on their purpose or end. For eschatology, the purpose of the world is its climax or ending, or for *The Lord of the Rings*, the teleology of Gollum is his role in the climax of *The Return of the King*. These purposes can be either extrinsic (coming from outside of the thing, typically meaning they are imposed by human demands) or intrinsic (of the very nature of the thing itself). Theology frequently relies on intrinsic teleologies, and providence is a good example of this. In contrast, scientific analysis is exclusively concerned with extrinsic teleology that sees purpose as a human creation (i.e.: the purpose of evolution and natural selection may appear to lead us to intrinsic things like “dogs grew fur to stay warm” even though the scientific explanation would see such an explanation as human-created and not genuine, instead preferring extrinsic explanations such as “dogs that grew fur stayed warm and hence outbred other dogs”).

The eschatological ending with the triumph of good is then the ultimate example of providence in Tolkien’s work and its teleological sense of purpose and design, although Hibbs also notes that “the mysterious, incomprehensible designs of providence underscore the importance of human effort, a sense that, in spite of the apparent odds, one must press on to do one’s duty in the fight against evil” (Hibbs 183). This is an important feature showing the importance of individual contributions to the fulfillment of providence. Hence, providence may be inevitable yet requires effort to achieve, just as one must (in this paradigm) work hard to prevent the impossible from occurring. This same question of the impossible and the inevitable will return in our next unit as well. However, according to Hibbs’s argument,

Tolkien underscores the role of providence in bringing about the fulfillment of the Quest not only through Gollum’s role but also through Frodo’s succumbing to the power of the Ring at the last moment. Concerning Frodo’s “failure” at the Crack of Doom, Tolkien writes, Frodo had done what he could and spent himself completely (as an instrument of divine Providence) and had produced a situation in which the object of his quest could be achieved. His humility (with which he began) and his sufferings were justly rewarded by the highest honour; and his exercise of
patience and mercy towards Gollum gained him Mercy: his failure was redressed. (Hibbs 188)

This is perhaps the most explicitly religious sentiment in The Lord of the Rings and the most overt show of Tolkien’s faith. Failure, evil, and chance combine to bring about the eschatological “happy ending” and end of the Third Age and provide a teleology for the history of Middle-earth. However, as with all teleological thought concerning history and the direction of historical growth, we must ask ourselves to what degree our impression of a purpose and design moving toward a specific ending are constructed by ourselves, by the nature of narrative itself (or any form of storytelling), or are intrinsic to the world. Can we even imagine an extrinsic teleology for Tolkien?

Questions for Self-Review

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for responding to a classmate’s comment. This week, you will have two classmates initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sentences from Tolkien and a few sentences from Hibbs.

1. How does the concept of providence differ from chance or fate?
2. Is providence necessarily eschatological?
3. Is Gandalf’s “resurrection” a miracle or form of special providence, or is it something different in Tolkien’s legendarium?
4. How is providence teleological? What is an example of teleology in The Two Towers?
5. Is the teleology of Gollum intrinsic or extrinsic?

Works Cited & Supplemental Readings


Week 9: Materialism & Commodity Fetishism

Objectives

1. Distinguish between Freud’s and Marx’s meaning for “fetish.”
2. Recognize substitution as a form of “perversion” for Freud and Marx.
3. Describe substitutes or objects as substitutes in *The Lord of the Rings*.
4. Identify commodities and money in *The Lord of the Rings* and describe how they function.

Reading Assignment


Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Two Towers*. Del Rey, 2017. (Book III, chapters 6–11)

Commentary

This week we move into ideas from Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx to ask how the Ring works as a substitution. For Freud, this is the process of “substitutive gratification” by which something desired becomes embodied in a replacement, such as an object standing in for victory (a child’s toy sword may substitute for actually winning at something, or a trophy may substitute for actual victory, and so forth). We may even, over time, come to value these substitutes more than the original things that they initially represented but have come to replace. Marx may contradict Freud, but he is also concerned with substitutions, such as money for a physical asset with value, specifically the substitution of a commodity for the labor that produced it, or the use of money to remove a “surplus value” from a commodity or labor. One of our first challenges in reading Milbank’s article will be terminology, so we start here with definitions (you may wish to read the *Study Guide* first this week).

Substitutions for Marx & Freud

Our readings from Milbank puts ideas from Sigmund Freud into conversation with Karl Marx; however, not only did Freud and Marx never meet, their ideas are often understood as deeply conflicting with each other. FDU students for many years read Freud’s *Civilization & its Discontents* as part of the University Core. In that book, Freud sharply critiques Marxism for its economic
determinism. Despite this, several philosophers from Herbert Marcuse to Louis Althusser and Slavoj Žižek have attempted to develop a combination of Marx’s and Freud’s works, most often through Freud’s theory of fetishism set in conjunction with Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism. These are mostly ways of reading Marx through Freud. In contrast, Fredric Jameson, who is mentioned later this week, attempts to bridge them by suggesting that Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis is itself a product of its historical and economic moment (ie: that it is an essentially bourgeois way of understanding the human mind and that its insights are merely expressions of turn of the century bourgeois capitalism in Freud’s Viennese society). Hence for Jameson, the concept of the unconscious in Freud is itself always already political and ideological, and we may historicize it as a product of an economic social structure of a specific place and time.

The first element is Freud’s theory of fetishism and the universality of perversion. These sound like startling ideas, but they are relatively commonplace. For example, in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud points out how human sexuality widely engages with substitutions for the primary biological function of desire: reproduction. He uses an extraordinarily anodyne and medical description to point out how “perverse” even the most common and acceptable parts of human sexuality can be. To do so, he describes kissing by saying

> contact between the mucous membranes of the lips of the two people concerned, is held in high sexual esteem among many nations..., in spite of the fact that the parts of the body involved do not form part of the sexual apparatus but constitute the entrance to the digestive tract. (Freud 305)

Freud’s point is to illustrate the “universality of perversion,” which is to say the majority of human sexuality and sexual desire is composed of various substitutes for actual sexual reproduction. Some of these substitutions are socially acceptable and some are not, but they are all “perversions” of one kind or another. They all pervert the primary aim of reproduction. Simply put, kissing itself has nothing to do with reproduction—as Freud points out, kissing involves digestive organs not sexual organs, yet we regard this specific perversion as completely normal. Furthermore, humans most typically “hold in high sexual esteem” these kinds of substitutes, often and perhaps even typically valuing them more (and finding them more desirable) than actual reproduction.

The project to bring Marx and Freud into conversation usually focusses on this process of substitution, just as money substitutes for value or commodities for labor, so too may a “perversion” substitute for sexual reproduction. In both instances, we grant a seemingly “magical” surplus value to the fetish, taboo, or symbol that surpasses the value we grant to the original thing itself. Marx’s version of the “universality of perversion” comes in the “fetishistic” mistake of believing that value resides in a commodity (or even in money) and not in the labor that makes the commodity.
Commodity Fetishism

For Marx, there are a wide variety of exchange patterns in a capitalist economic system that we need to understand in order to conceive of “commodity fetishism.” These range from the following:

- Commodity \(\rightarrow\) Commodity
- Commodity \(\rightarrow\) Money \(\rightarrow\) Commodity
- Money \(\rightarrow\) Commodity \(\rightarrow\) Money

The first is a barter exchange, such as trading baseball cards. The second is selling things one has made or acquired in order to purchase other different things one needs (you could sell your car in order to get the money you need to buy a bicycle and food). The third is using money to purchase something, like a vintage antique, that one then sells with the purpose of having increased one’s reserve of money itself. Value is accrued when you get more out than you put in, or when \(M\) (a sum of money) becomes \(M'\) (a larger sum) that we conceive as profit. We assume equivalence in exchange, such as Money for Commodity, but we may also speculate on future exchange value, or we may engage in arbitrage (the differences in value in different locations). The point is, in capitalism we seek to extract profit from these exchanges. A capitalist who does not will go bankrupt, and that forces history to move in a particular direction (this is a teleology, as we have already seen in the previous Unit on providence). Consider, for instance, how you likely assume equivalence in barter, like trading baseball cards or swapping toys with a sibling – contrast this to how you conceive of selling a commodity for money or of selling your labor, both of which likely assume or at least seek profit rather than equivalence in the exchange. What creates that profit? Can equivalence and profit co-exist?

Regardless of the manipulations of equivalence, for Marx only labor has the capacity to generate value. Everything else is smoke and mirrors. Modern economists have moved away from this approach, but it remains one of Marx’s integral philosophical assertions. Often, when critics wish to dismiss Marx, they point to this labor theory of value while surreptitiously avoiding the dialectical and conflict-oriented majority of his work (we will consider those next week, but Milbank discusses only commodity fetishism, so that is our starting point). In such a paradigm, commodities and money do not simply accrue value – they rely on shifts to the society (“social formation”) that increase need or else they have value added through labor.

The resulting error, Marx argues, occurs through “commodity fetishism.” Commodity Fetishism occurs when people locate value in the commodity itself rather than the labor needed to produce the commodity, or worse still, we locate value in money itself rather than in labor. This fetishizes commodities (gold…) as substitutes for the labor that makes them. For example, we might
regard money as generating value rather than the labor for which it is exchanged. When Milbank regards the Ring as embodying commodity fetishism, this is what she means. The ring becomes the “precious” rather than a commodity created through labor.

**Objects & Fetishes in *The Two Towers***

If we consider commodity fetishism as a process of substitution in which a substitute replaces its original, we have many suggestive objects to be found in *The Two Towers*. Milbank emphasizes the Ring itself in this regard, but the *palantír* as a magical object is initially a substitute for another’s power that eventually becomes its own distinct fetishized object unto itself. As a larger question about the ontological nature of fantasy as a genre, we might consider how magic (as a literary trope, not as trick or such) works in a process of substitution. Does magic necessarily dissipate the reality of labor? Is magic in this sense the ultimate commodity fetish for Marx?

Fredric Jameson has argued that, in a Marxist paradigm, magic defines fantasy as genre. He uses the term “romance” meaning the tradition we understand as Arthurian Romances or magical stories that evolved into the genre we today call “fantasy.” By “romance” he means the literary mode of the Romance quests, not romantic as pertaining to strong emotions of the heart. Based on magic as the defining trait of fantasy, he argues that magic also defines the genre’s relationship to history, which makes fantasy reactionary and inherently conservative:

> It may, however, also be objected that there are other semantic codes in the romance which are equally as important as that of good and evil; in particular, it would seem that the role of magic as such is considerable, if not indeed constitutive. Yet the belief in good and evil is precisely a magical thought mode, that is, one which springs from a precapitalist, essentially agricultural way of life. It is difficult to imagine a conflict of magical forces which would not be marked in some way as positive and negative, or in other words, ultimately, as a struggle between good and evil, between white magic and black magic. Thus the two systems, that of good and evil, and that of magic, are inextricably intermingled, and may indeed prove simply to be different dimensions of the same ideological phenomenon, that of Otherness directing our attention to the political and social attributes of such a world view, while the formulation in terms of magic rather orients us towards the economic organization of the society in question and the relations it entertains with the world of nature. (Jameson 141)

Jameson’s prose is characteristically thick here, but his emphasis on history (as
will become more important over the next two weeks) ties fantasy to a pre-
modern world, or specifically to the transition from a religious to an aristocratic
form of social organization, prior to the rise of a more trade-based society that
reflects larger economic systems. His focus on magic stresses its religious para-
digm, from which he sees the concepts of good and evil emerging as ways of
justifying the social structure. After all, the evil of social climbing from a work-
ing class to a literate class no longer strikes us as inherently “evil” today, and
very likely as “good” – it may even be your reason for taking this course… This
means Jameson sees the terms “good” and “evil” as reflecting a historical condi-
tion, hence his directive to “historicize” everything.

Do the magic objects, which are plentiful in the closing of *The Two
Towers* reflect this kind of worldview and thereby ideology? Is the *palantír*
inherently bound up with ideological values of class, community, ethnicity, and
faith by virtue of being magical? Is the labor or work done by these magical
objects (without real people needing to sweat to produce commodities we fet-
ishize as having value) always ideological? Can magic ever drive readers to desire
and work for a more equitable world, or does it always console us about the
challenges we face and thereby prevent us from taking meaningful action to
change things? How you answer such questions relates directly to process of
substitution and “fetishes,” and hence the answers can tell you much about your
assumptions and ways of thinking, not only about the answer or question.

**Questions for Self-Review**

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCam-
pus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for re-
sponding to a classmate’s comment. This week, you will have two classmates
initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sen-
tences from Tolkien and a few sentences from Milbank.

1. If the Ring of power is made by Sauron and imbued with his power, has
   it replaced him?
2. Does magic, as a system at work in Tolkien’s books, work like a com-
   modity fetish? Does it replace actual work?
3. Are there “symptomatic” substitutions at work in *The Lord of the Rings*?
   For instance, how do characters show their affection or love for each
   other?
4. Does fantasy, as a genre of fiction, necessarily aim backward toward a
   system of values and social organization that is pre-modern?

**Works Cited & Supplemental Readings**

Freedman, Carl. “A Note on Marxism and Fantasy.” *Historical Materialism*,


Week 10: Materialism & Marx

Objectives

1. Identify the historical context of *The Communist Manifesto*.
2. Define the methodologies behind *The Communist Manifesto*.
3. Distinguish between the Marxist concepts of historical materialism and dialectics.
4. Define “alienation” and “commodity fetishism.”

Reading Assignment


Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Two Towers*. Del Rey, 2017. (Book IV, chapters 1–5)

Commentary

To start with the text itself, there are many different versions of *The Communist Manifesto* available, and each tends to have its own complex history and purpose. Identifying this historical specificity is also a very Marxist approach to a text. Our translation is the 1888 edition on which Samuel Moore collaborated with Friedrich Engels, and this is often taken as the “standard edition” of the text in the English language. Nonetheless, it reflects its period and purpose. In relation to Tolkien, we will also ask how Marx’s attention to class, economic conditions, and culture and society as manifestations of material conditions may change our sense of Tolkien’s Middle-earth. How do we historicize a world that has never actually existed? What does “historicize” mean in this context? As Ishay Landa argues, contrary to our expectations, Tolkien “proposed to replace allegorical writing and reading with historical writing” (Landa 114), a precisely Marxist configuration. Where C.S. Lewis relies on allegory, Tolkien abhors it, and “always historicize” is a signal Marxist phrase – notably for us, the critic who coined it, Fredric Jameson, did so in his book *The Political Unconscious*, the central chapter of which originally closed on Tolkien and Lewis when it was first published as an article (Jameson, “Magical” 161). We saw an excerpt from this article in the previous week, and its final form in his book removes its
comments on Tolkien, Lewis, and fantasy (Gifford 17). Clearly we have much to discuss this week…

**Marx, Marxism, Marxist?**

Marx raises lukewarm eyebrows today… Marx’s historical context is a serious challenge for undergraduate students reading him for the first time today. As a simple example, when Marx makes comments on enslavement of workers, he meant this literally. His news writings in English for the *New York Daily Tribune* from 1852–1861 are, literally, against existing slavery in the United States of America before its abolition in 1865. Factory working conditions in the British Empire are just as difficult for modern readers to appreciate without a contemporary guide book, such as Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour & the London Poor* from the same period as Marx. Instead, most readers come to Marx with the twentieth century Marxist revolutions in the Soviet Union and China in mind, and these are very different circumstances long after Marx’s death. As a philosopher, Marx’s works may seem very different to you from “Marxism.”

For our purposes, we are taking one small component of Marxist philosophy related to history and ontology (being) and phenomenology. This week we focus on the historical component on its own. Marx wanted nothing less than a total overturning of the philosophy of history, and by and large, this did occur. For history, Marx argued that modern industry makes capitalism possible by virtue of urbanization and the centralization of populations into larger cities, which in turn allows for direct competition between workers and more industrialized production. Note how this differs from the concepts of “Providence” and eschatological thought in a theological context. Marx’s history is entirely materialist, and while it may still be deterministic (as with any eschatology), it is based on a completely different, secular, materialist paradigm.

In effect, as the wealthy middle class (the bourgeoisie) acquired power and displaced the rule of the aristocracy (those who had power and property by virtue of birth rather than economic success), a working class emerged (the proletariat). This was a revolutionary change in society as wealth displaced social rank inherited by birth. Marx describes this change as “revolutionary” and casts the bourgeoisie as the most revolutionary class in history to date. To clarify this, “bourgeois” was not an insult, per se. It is just an incomplete stage of history to Marx’s perspective – his own personal life was thoroughly bourgeois. In order for this commercial middle class to effectively compete in the market, it needed more efficient use of laborers who centralized in cities during the Industrial Revolution for factory work and the birth of wage labor. This new circumstance then gave laborers the potential for solidarity through unionization and revolution, based on their larger numbers. For Marx and Engels,
The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. (Marx & Engels, Communist 84)

This is a repeated component of Marx’s vision of the revolution: urbanized workers are no longer isolated and have the opportunity (and increasing propensity) for organization and solidarity with each other, and only thereby do they gain the potential for a meaningful revolutionary change. This is the unfolding of a materialist history in which change occurs because of conflicts among material and economic forces (with culture, beliefs, and philosophy itself arising from those material conditions). Workers centralize due to capitalism, but they are able to organize and revolt due to the same centralization. Without urbanization and the industrialized production of goods, this centralization and radicalization of laborers is not possible. Just as the bourgeois revolution (middle class) arose from the pinnacle of aristocratic social organization (aristocrats could not work, based on social status, and hence needed merchants), Marx and Engels saw the workers revolution growing out of the successes of middle-class capitalism that concentrated and revolutionized the self-same workers. That is, Marx’s vision of social transformation was explicitly and necessarily an urban and industrial phenomenon.

A further unexpected description that repeats across the Manifesto is the bourgeois class’s revolutionary history in Marx’s and Engels’s views (the revolutionary rise of middle-class mercantilism). Rather than being a universally detestable or somehow subhuman group, the Manifesto instead presents the bourgeoisie (wealthy middle class) as having “played a most revolutionary part” and argues that “the bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations” (Marx & Engels, Communist 76). Even while calling for a further revolution to overturn the bourgeoisie by the proletarians, they still argue “feudal society fought its death battle with the then revolutionary bourgeoisie” (Marx & Engels, “Proletarians” 37). In this sense, Marx and Engels see the wealthy, commercial middle class as having revolutionized society.

Hence, in their perspective, both the French Revolution and the American Revolution were bourgeois revolutions or revolutions of the middle class against those who would retain rule by an aristocratic bloodline. An alternative phrasing would be that the Aristocracy and Feudalism (hereditary kingship) were displaced by Liberalism (the bourgeois revolutions), which has remained the dominant political system ever since. The point for philosophy, however, is
Marx’s understanding of this historical process as the result of dialectical conflict between material and economic forces. It does not require a metaphysical approach to history with an eschatology, although some argue that the deterministic elements of Marx’s argument are simply a new eschatology. For example, if in our reading there is an inevitable conflict between workers and owners (and that conflict is a result of owners having toppled the previous hereditary rulers of their supremacy), that conflict would seem to bend in only one direction over time: the toppling of rulers by the ruled.

**Historical Materialism**

Several terms are used to describe Marx’s and Engels’s ideas, and they do not always define these terms while using them. Others exist only as themes in the *Communist Manifesto* and do not emerge as part of a Marxist lexicon or jargon until later as Marx’s ideas developed more fully.

“Historical materialism” is sometimes called “dialectical materialism,” although Marx never used the term. It is important to keep in mind that historical materialism is a method more than a particular answer or outcome. It does not tell the future and was always caught in a “mutually defining tension” between competing forces. This is to say, material (and not social) conditions drive historical change. The concept is often disconcerting since people do not fondly think of themselves as a product of material and economic forces. We prefer to regard ourselves as a unique and singular person capable of self-direction and autonomous choice. Nevertheless, we take this concept of being materially determined for granted in the social sciences and frequently look to the material conditions that sit beneath various social problems or structures. For examples, what is Criminology if we do not think of people as a collection of relationships among various social forces? Can we consider large social groups as a collection of individuals, or must we always see them as a general trend with predictable actions based on collective responses to material circumstances?

The root concept is that we do not, in the social sciences, tend to adopt the psychological view of people as exercising personal choice, and we also limit the Enlightenment vision (such as we find in the founding documents of the USA) of humans acting as rational creatures capable of self-directing choice. We instead look to “people” as an accumulation of the conflicts between different forces, the most important of which surround economic activity. Hence, a sociologist or criminologist might look to unemployment or poverty in relation to problems such as addiction or criminal behavior.

This may seem intuitively peculiar since Marx was a traditional humanist in the Classical tradition, working in several languages, actively translating Ancient Greek, and turning his attention to literature and art at every available opportunity. Yet, this is not as contradictory as it may at first seem. Based on relations among forces, when we talk about “Historical Materialism,” we
consider History or change as the product of conflicts among various forces. In order, they would be:

- Economic organization
- Material conditions
- Existing social structures

For instance, what happens when a form of economic organization (such as payment per item produced in a cottage industry) comes into conflict with a new technology, such as the modern factory? What happens in such a conflict when material conditions, such as transportation (trains, walking, or carriages), do not allow for the easy return home from work or commuting from the cottage where one’s family lives? Put another way, if people principally lived in rural settings and had an established way of life based on farming and cottage industries such as textiles, what happens when textile factories open in urban centers and drive down the per item cost of production? To view this change in terms of personal choice, the exercise of reason is fallacious—people do not have an option to rationally choose whether or not to continue in a cottage industry. I cannot “choose” to run a local Blockbuster VHS video rental store for the simple material reason that the technology is defunct. Economic necessity impels change.

This is precisely the situation Marx and Engels first considered through historical materials. Think of the creation of textile factories that made it impossible for the traditional cottage industries to sell knitting, weaving, or sewing as they had for hundreds of years. What did those workers do? If they chose not to accept migration to city centers and wage labor in textile factories, they would starve and other workers would simply take their place. Furthermore, how did this new condition (urbanization and wage labor) conflict with the existing social structures, such as monogamous relationships in the religiously sanctioned institution of marriage, but with the wife in the city working for wages and the husband still on the farm? This dialectical series of conflicts replaces providence and eschatology for Marxist history, but it is not humanist, it is materialist.

The Social Formation

The fully formulated concept of the Social Formation (Base and Superstructure) followed after the *Communist Manifesto*, but it is largely implicit in the materials we are reading. The classical understanding is that the full Social Formation (the totality of a given society, whether it is a nation, a city, or a town) is formed from two conflicted components: the Base (Infrastructure) and the Superstructure. The overall mode of production (the social formation) is determined by the dialectical tension between the Base and the legal/political Superstructure that it gives rise to. They are also known as the “material productive
forces” and the “social relations of production.” Marx first developed the concept explicitly in response to Alexis de Tocqueville. The Base refers to the organization of social life in relation to labor, such as how the working day is divided, how a division of labor is established, what material conditions prevail, property relations or forms of ownership, and so forth. The Superstructure, in contrast, includes the larger forms of social organization such as the political system, the judicial system, culture, religion, the state itself, and other social institutions.

Orthodox Marxism saw Base as determining Superstructure. This deterministic relationship underpins several elements of Leninist and Maoist forms of Marxism (to be discussed more next week), but the Western forms of Marxism seen in the Frankfurt School, the Birmingham School, Antonio Gramsci, and other Humanist forms of Marxism have consistently identified a mutual influence among the two. Godelier argued against the French Marxists that Base and Superstructure are “reciprocally-causal” and Friedman brought this to England in 1974, though Raymond Williams (Birmingham School) had already argued the same notion from reading Marx’s manuscripts the year before (Williams 31–49).

We do not need to follow this argument in detail. The crux for us is that there is a living dispute in Marxist philosophy over whether the dialectical unfolding of history through conflicts among material forces will “determine” or “contextualize” the people living through it.

Dialectics

Marx refers to dialectical conflicts and dialectical history, but the common term Dialectical Materialism is not in any of Marx’s works. The use of Dialectical Materialism is best known through Lenin’s use of term to emphasize material life over social consciousness, but for Marx the dialectical method was more simply an acknowledgement of conflict, such as in a dialogue. The standard articulation of Marx’s dialectics is

thesis + antithesis = synthesis

Simply put, the given state of affairs (thesis) comes into conflict with a new idea, new situation, or new technology that is not easily adapted to the established norm (this is the antithesis). Through this conflict, a new synthesis emerges. A simple and contemporary example of such a conflict might be the availability of music through internet access – this new technology conflicts with the existing record store and album format of the music industry. A painful struggle is now underway as the thesis + antithesis conflict until a new synthesis is formed. A genuinely Marxist understanding of this conflict, however, would note that distribution and sales outlets are not the sole “thesis” involved – the
very concept of an “album” or the collecting together of different songs into one cohesive (and saleable) whole is also implicated. The artistic concept of what constitutes an “album” is just as much at stake as are systems of distribution and sale, and hence cultural and artistic norms follow economic forces.

A more traditional example of the dialectical process would be to consider how laws or social institutions (such as those surrounding marriage) change based on altered conditions. As mobility and relocation for employment have become more common in tandem with the increasing prevalence of dual income families, the legal regulations of marriage are adapting, such as “no-fault” divorces in some American states or Canada as a whole (this is, of course, an extreme simplification of the complex social conflicts at play). In an aristocratic Social Formation based on the inheritance of property and with social hierarchies based on birthright, matters of paternity and marriage are crucial—in a bourgeois or liberal Social Formation, they are less important. The more mobility we need as workers, the more our culturally inherited sense of “family values” must adapt to our new conditions, and hence culture follows economics.

The Ruling Hobbits

Many Marxist critics have had sharp words for fantasy fiction in general and Tolkien in particular. The quasi-Medievalisms of fantasy seem to nostalgically call for a reactionary (regressive) turn back to long past modes of social organization, undoing the progress from an aristocracy to a bourgeois democracy. Now that we have a better sense of Marx's critique and philosophy of history, it is possible to look back across what we have read with questions about social class, hierarchy, economic modes of organization, and the social world of Middle-earth. As an example, Katherine Hume has given a pointed critique of Tolkien in her discussion of fantasy as a genre. For Hume, to discuss fantasy as a genre is to take up the matter of realism and the fantastic, as would be expected from her title *Fantasy and Mimesis*. She draws on Erich Auerbach’s work while, perhaps surprisingly, asking “Does escapist, fantasy refresh readers and send them back to their real world renewed? Or does it make their real world less tolerable? Or does it undercut the readers’ abilities to act – as Marxists feel?” (Hume 12). Her response presents fantasy as non-mimetic (not realistic or engaged with realism) by nature, yet she sees it as still capable of commenting on the world and, contrary to the Marxist reading, able to act upon it. That is, for Hume, fantasy is not necessarily regressive, and it can foster positive social growth. Her worry, however, is about the social impact of literature, and less on its internal legendarium, aesthetic value, or entertainment. In other words, she asks does a given book compel readers to change their world for the better, or does it offer consolations for the difficulties of the world that comfort the reader into acceptance and inaction? In her interpretation, Tolkien does not.
With regard to social class and class conflict as the engine driving history, Hume describes Tolkien’s just king Aragorn scathingly:

Few readers of Tolkien would accept his aristocratic values…. Aragorn is best because he is descended from a long line of kings and elves; those of lesser descent have fewer noble qualities, and there is no place in the power structure for a bright and ambitious nobody. Yet… Tolkien addicts would still accept a one-way ticket to Middle Earth [sic]” (Hume 194–195).

These are blunt critiques… It is unlikely we would today accept that a person is the best in our society and hence entitled to power because of their parents, yet this is exactly what Tolkien argues for Aragorn. This is, for Hume, an essentially reactionary worldview espoused by the books. So, when *The Lord of the Rings* gives us comfort for our struggles, the novels do so by diminishing our ability to struggle for a better world as well, a world without aristocratic inherited birthrights. For Hume, this “addiction” follows because

Tolkien offers readers experience in the feeling of devoting one’s life to an unambiguously good cause, and the readers most gripped by this experience almost resemble early Christians in their craving for a beautiful ordering of experience, even if it is non-rational. Read in this passionate way, such heroic literature ceases to be casual escapism, and becomes something more deeply subversive. (Hume 194–195).

From this point, she goes on to compare such devotion to depravity. Hume’s views, at least in this, accord with the arguments of Marxist critics such as Rosemary Jackson, Fredric Jameson, and Darko Suvin, even if they are distressing to many Tolkien readers. However, they are also in the tradition of the novelist and critic Michael Moorcock’s “Epic Pooh.” In his polemical essay, Moorcock sees *The Lord of the Rings* as “a pernicious confirmation of the values of a morally bankrupt middle-class” (Moorcock 127). Moorcock, of course, had a far more subversive and working-class background. The novelist and scholar China Miéville addresses the indignation that such assessments of Tolkien may provoke by deflating a bit of its rhetorical flourish in his Introduction to Moorcock’s *Wizardry and Wild Romance: A Study of Epic Fantasy*, even while maintaining the same position: “No matter how heartfelt your objections to *The Lord of the Rings* might be, the mere fact of stating them enters you into a kind of performative mode, and you’re a tired, too-old *enfant terrible* cranking out the iconoclasm as a party turn” (“Introduction” 13). In other words, there has been a lot of critique of Tolkien in this vein, and much of it is quite true—we would not accept these cultural logics in our modern world. Yet, they still appeal to us.

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What do we as readers make of this? Frodo and Bilbo’s upper-class status in the Shire seems clear. There are hobbit families with property and wealth, and there are hobbit families that labor. Their positions are hereditary, and we can judge a hobbit’s merits based on paternity. Some own property and land while others engage in tenancy farming. The social model is close enough to the Medieval world, but it is deeply entrenched in class. Hume, again, gives the most direct rebuke to Tolkien by saying *The Lord of the Rings*

reflects a child’s understanding of the world: food is delivered, put into the pantry, and eaten, but not paid for. The labor going into its production and the problems of isolated agricultural communities are ignored. The wealthy families have money but no source for it in tenant peasantry or stock-exchange investments. Another artistic flaw is the ineffectuality of the evil; the quasi-industrial damage done to the Shire is quickly rectified; the fellowship of the ring is too little damaged – Gandalf is even brought back to life. Heroism that exacts no price loses its meaning…. [W]e are forced to concentrate on his exaltation of heroic action. He offers us a paradox as answer to the question of the value of the individual: the individual’s private and personal life is insignificant, but he can achieve significance through commitment and dedication to a cause. (Hume 47)

Kindred challenges could easily be raised for C.S. Lewis’s works and the other Inklings as well as their normative influence across the genre running through the growth in heroic fantasy from 1977 onward to today. Would we accept these values if they applied to working-class families in New Jersey who follow a new leader simply because he comes from a wealthy family in Manhattan, or would we critique the supposed “natural” system of domination?

Questions for Self-Review

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for responding to a classmate’s comment. This week, you will have two classmates initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sentences from Tolkien and a few sentences from Marx.

1. Does Tolkien’s Middle-earth embody a Social Formation we would find unacceptable today? If so, what is the nature of its deep appeal (and is this appeal akin to the ring’s seduction of its owners)?
2. Does Tolkien’s history unfold dialectically?
3. Is the inevitable fading of elves and wizards from the world, leaving it for man, akin to the dialectical progress Marx envisions?

4. Everyone in this part of *The Two Towers* seems to need a master. Gollum serves Frodo, and Aragorn rules. How might Marx interpret this?

**Works Cited & Supplemental Readings**


Week 11: Materialism & Political Economy

Objectives

1. Distinguish between determinism in providence versus determinism in materialism.
2. Recognize the consciousness as distinct from choice.
3. Describe how the material world shapes consciousness.
4. Identify choices in The Two Towers that are influenced by outside forces but appear to be made by characters.

Reading Assignment


Tolkien, J.R.R. The Two Towers. Del Rey, 2017. (Book IV, chapters 5–10)

Commentary

To recall our discussions last week, we began to consider Marx’s notion of historical materialism and the conflict-based “dialectical” understanding of historical process. We also began to consider the problems that arise from the “subject” or self-conscious individual within these historical processes. The latter issue will occupy our attention this week while we rethink the Communist Manifesto in the light of later works Marx had not published in his lifetime that deal with subjectivity. For Tolkien, we may also ask how novels written at the height of the modernist literary movement, a movement characterized by its “inward turn” to reveal states of consciousness for characters through a widespread “stream of consciousness” literary technique could be so devoid of thoughts. We rarely have access to the interiority of Tolkien’s characters. They do things and occasionally have feelings, but interior monologues of thought are almost nonexistent in a way that seems quite unique to Tolkien in comparison to many other fantasy writers.

Determinism & Subjectivity

As a quick reminder of our previous topics, you might rethink the popular
political comment in today’s environment, “It’s the economy, stupid.” The difficulty is that populists or television pundits making this comment most likely do not consider its deterministic or “Vulgar Marxist” connotations (that is, Economic Determinism). If the economy determines political opinions, even in a liberal democracy, then the rational and self-reflexive choices made by individuals cannot be reliably ascribed to the exercise of reason: they are deterministic components of the material conditions. The long philosophical traditions of the Enlightenment emphasizes rational humans capable of exercising reason in order to make self-determining choices. From René Descartes to Immanuel Kant, this is the norm. Marx and Engels began to challenge this vision by focusing on the importance of material conditions and conflict (the dialectic between “thesis” and “antithesis”) in driving forward social change. Hence, by claiming “It’s the economy, stupid!” our ostensibly rationalist and bourgeois pundits are in fact espousing a fundamentally anti-Enlightenment opinion. Obviously, we cannot hold television personalities or entertainers to the same standard we hold the authors in this course, but the problem may help us to keep our philosophical discussions here distinct from the more prevalent information we receive through popular entertainment.

Less extreme opinions that echo the dialectical approach espoused by Engels and Marx abound. For instance, “soft” determinism is present whenever a politician, social worker, or activist suggests that by fixing or changing the economic woes of a society, we will reduce crime and imprisonment rates, voting trends, or general cultural happiness. This “soft” determinism allows for an uncertain process to exist between self-determining individuals in contrast to the collective behavior of humans in social groups or social systems as a whole. However, that’s not the whole story...

Do we really want to think of “consciousness arising from material conditions”? Do we have agency, or are we passive objects drawn coercively through a circumstance we only understand through the ideology in which we live? We rarely believe that we are simply a product of our conditions, but in extremis (extreme conditions) we do not particularly challenge the idea. Marx’s simple formulation in the *Communist Manifesto* is a question:

> Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man’s ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life? (Marx & Engels, *Communist Manifesto* 90)

A more specific phrasing might be that the “conditions of material existence” (the “Base”) condition people’s social consciousness. We would surely think differently if a radical change were to occur in our material conditions, such as moving from an able body to a disabled body, or from a position of affluence to
a position of poverty. We might, for instance, ask to what degree our consciousness would change if we moved from one social class to another, one nation to another, or as many students in this course have experienced, from one language to another? While we still cling tenaciously to our sense of being rational creatures capable of exercising reason in the process of making self-determining choices, we are at the same time shaped by these various conditions in which we find ourselves. Do we marry and fall in love in order to satisfy existing material, social conflicts? Do we move to new locations or nations based on economic necessity or pressure?

More specifically, are these influences deterministic? This entails asking if these influences are something that cannot be socially resisted, such as workers moving to urban centers for factory work during the Industrial Revolution – it is deterministic because any worker who did not move would be replaced by one who would, and hence the social transformation is deterministic even while individual choice remains possible through meaningless to history. Alternatively, we might ask if these processes are of a type in which we exercise rational choice even while that choice is unfairly negotiated (in Antonio Gramsci’s terminology). We choose but never freely.

Hegelian Dialectics posit an Enlightenment move from “fragments to reality” (in Hegel’s sense) via the dialectical interactions of irrational to rational forces. For Hegel, this is humanity’s movement from the irrational to the rational through experience (experience drives us from irrationality to reason). This same teleology is the Marxist vision of History in which the move from the rule of Kings to the rule of an Aristocracy to the rise of the wealthy middle-class bourgeoisie is then followed by a new social system oriented toward the best interests of the working population.

As Marx writes in the *Communist Manifesto*, when he directly addresses the bourgeoisie:

> Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property, just as your jurisprudence is but the will of your class made into a law for all, a will, whose essential character and direction are determined by the economical conditions of existence of your class.

> The selfish misconception that induces you to transform into eternal laws of nature and of reason, the social forms springing from your present mode of production and form of property – historical relations that rise and disappear in the progress of production – this misconception you share with every ruling class that has preceded you. (Marx & Engels, *Communist Manifesto*)

An unstated component of Marx’s indictment of the bourgeois (capitalist wealthy middle class) in this passage is the relationship between self-identity or
the concept of an Enlightened and rational subject and the “ideas” that are “but the outgrowth of... bourgeois production and bourgeois property” (88). Insofar as Marx sees jurisprudence (the law courts) as “determined by the economical conditions,” we might ask if the rational and self-determining subject of those laws (the reason we have mens rea in our legal system, meaning guilt by intention rather than the act alone) also “spring[s] from [the] present mode of production and form of property” (88). At the same time, however, Marx keeps what he calls the “selfish misconception” of the wealthy from the seemingly positive and desirable “eternal laws of nature and of reason” (88).

**György Lukács & Subjectivity**

Lukács (1885–1971) was a Hungarian philosopher, professor, and politician who led the Westernization of Marxism and departed from Soviet orthodoxy. He was equally active in the arts and wrote extensively on literary subjects as well as critical theory. His ties to and condemnation of Stalinism are much debated, though his notion of the “subject” (the active individual capable of self-determining choice) is at the heart of much of the dispute between the loosely defined Western versus Soviet or Maoist versions of Marxism. In brief, the concept of a rational “subject” or self who makes choices and takes action in the world is, for Lukács, a misnomer – the social context is, for Lukács, the basis for subjectivity, and not the reverse (individuals being the basis for social organization). This is a simplification, but it gives an entrance to the dispute and the actions people have taken based on this matter. For instance, if subjectivity is determined by social existence, then changes to the material social world will change subjectivity. Hence, rather than convincing rational subjects that they should change how they live, by changing how they live, one would effectively convince them. Late in life, Lukács repudiated this view, but it is an effective summation of several elements of Stalin’s and Mao’s different revisions to Marx.

In his *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács returns to the problem of class consciousness and dialectical materialism, and in particular to a highly charged and specific discussion of consciousness by Marx. Marx writes in his “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx, “Preface” 42). The complete passage from Marx, on which Lukács focuses, reads as follows in context:

> The general conclusion at which I arrived and which, once reached, became the guiding principle of my studies can be summarised as follows.

> In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage
in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Marx, “Preface” 41–42)

There are several key terms in this passage that should be familiar from the previous week’s readings in *The Communist Manifesto*. For instance, the “stages” of development reflect Marx’s sense of how economic life transforms society, such as the movement from an aristocratic form of economic and social organization to a capitalist form based on the bourgeoisie. The relations among people change based on these different social forms of organization, such as diminishing aristocratic privilege and status based on family and birth rather than economic success or innovation. Likewise, “superstructure” refers to the social and cultural forms of organization, such as social institutions (the law, courts, judiciary, educational institutions, and so forth). A simplified restatement of Marx’s ideas might then be “in social circumstances, people enter relationships that are independent of their individual will, and these relationships form the superstructure of society – as a consequence, individual will or consciousness does not create social life, but rather social life creates the context and boundaries within which that individual consciousness can exist.”

**Understanding *The Communist Manifesto* Through Close Reading**

With these concepts now in place, or at least the basis for the disputes established, try returning to *The Communist Manifesto* for more attentive readings. The section “Proletarians and Communists” (15–24) from last week may be particularly productive for this line of analysis. For instance, how do you now read the passage that opened this week’s section of the Study Guide?

Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property..., a will, whose essential character and direction are determined by the economical conditions of existence of your class.

The selfish misconception that induces you to transform into eternal laws of nature and of reason, the social forms springing from your present mode of production and form of property – historical relations that rise and disappear in the progress of
production – this misconception you share with every ruling class that has preceded you. (Marx & Engels, Communist 88)

How you read this passage will likely shape how you understand the more complex works Marx developed later in his life. Is this an indictment against those whose economic interests make them blind to the rights and dignity of others, dignity based on the capacity for reason and self-determining choice? Or, is this a rejection of any notion of subjectivity or selfhood apart from an uncontrolled and uncontrollable reflection of material conditions? More simply, is Marxism humanist or determinist? Does it reject the rule of kings, aristocrats, and capitalists in order to liberate self-conscious people, or is it an analysis of an inevitable process for which self-consciousness and choice are irrelevant?

The answer is likely both, since many people will happily say “It’s the economy, stupid” (meaning people vote [make self-determining choices] based on the economic situation of the nation) while at the same time believing in voting as a meaningful process. The conflict is between (1) economic determinism and (2) the Enlightenment concept of self-determining choice through the exercise of reason. Alas, in everyday life, we float freely between both ideas without carefully recognizing that they are mutually exclusive and disprove each other.

Alternatively, you might ask what are the virtues of Marxism if you approach it through a Humanist perspective, and also what are its limitations? Likewise, if you approach Marxism through an anti-humanist viewpoint, what are its productive uses and limitations?

**Consciousness: Determined & Contextualized**

As we consider Marx’s concept of consciousness determined by social existence, we might do well to contrast this against Gollum’s and Sméagol’s consciousness as determined by the Ring. Do we hold Gollum responsible for his decisions? Should we hold Frodo responsible for his final decision at the end of the novels while standing over the fires of the Crack of Doom? Does this relate to whether we should hold ourselves responsible for decisions that are deeply determined or contextualized by our social existence (meaning our economic circumstances and the structure of our material world)?

Raymond Williams, as we saw in Week 9, argued that a better translation of Marx’s wording in the “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* is that “contextualizes” is more accurate than “determines” (Williams. This is not actually true. “Determines” is the right word, and Williams surely knew this. His argument, then, is more by way of a revision or correction that he, Williams, wished to make. Would we alter our views if we instead argued that our consciousness is “contextualized” by our conditions or even “unfairly negotiated” based on our conditions? The latter phrasing comes from the
Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and his argument that workers make decisions that are unfairly negotiated with those who hold power and the beliefs with which they were raised (recall in Week 9 how we saw Fredric Jameson arguing that Tolkien’s and fantasy fiction’s magic set up a contrast between “good and evil” in which “good” supports the existing social world and “evil” seeks to change it). Do we hold people uniquely responsible for making decisions based on ethical and moral beliefs with which they are raised and that their society regards as normal? Is King Théoden to be held responsible while under Gríma Wormtongue’s sway? How we think of ethics, or if we think of ethics at all, relates closely to how we answer these questions about subjectivity.

As a larger problem, we might also consider the contrast between the narrative mode of the novel and the films. Where the novel offers us a parallel series of plots (which is now almost ubiquitous in the fantasy genre), the films give us a chronological narrative. Does this alter our understanding of the book and our approach to the films? If it shapes our structural understanding of either, does this mean we have a free hand for our interpretation, or has it been “contextualized” or even “determined” by its format? Comparing your experience of the film and the novel may be useful for this, in particular by asking how you as an individual exercised choice in your understanding of the work and how the different format shaped it?

Questions for Self-Review

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for responding to a classmate’s comment. This week, you will have two classmates initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sentences from Tolkien and a few sentences from Marx.

1. Is Marx’s determinism eschatological?
2. How do Marx’s ideas of “consciousness” relate to our earlier discussions of free will?
3. If we accept Marx’s arguments about consciousness, is it possible to still discuss ethics and ethical choices?
4. How might you compare the problem of evil in Providence with Marx’s dialectical history and social existence determining consciousness?

Works Cited & Supplemental Readings


Week 12: Existentialism & the Madman

Objectives

1. Distinguish Nietzsche’s concern with “truth” from the theological and anti-theological elements of “The Madman.”
2. Recognize choice and the self as distinct from the choices being made.
3. Describe choices made in The Return of the King.
4. Identify Faramir’s choices in The Return of the King as distinct from what is true or believed to be true.

Reading Assignment


Tolkien, J.R.R. The Return of the King. Del Rey, 2017. (Book V, chapters 1–5)

Commentary

This week we begin The Return of the King and start to ask how philosophy changes after our contrast between theology and materialism. If we notice a similarity between theology and materialism in their juxtaposition, such as eschatological paradigms, the idea of providence, and a direction to history that is teleological, this seems natural. After all, how could we expect a new philosophy that did not answer the same questions as the old philosophy? Nietzsche will challenge us to set aside those questions and to ask new ones. His philosophical work is often described as more literary, drifting as it does into poetry, narrative, aphorisms, and word play rather than the familiar pathways of logic and argument. Nietzsche will sometimes set intuition ahead of reason and impulse ahead of rationality. However, a purpose for this different method of doing philosophy comes from Nietzsche’s focus on what he called “errors,” such as paying more attention to the idea of “truth” than to our choices.
The Madman

The first thing for us to notice about Nietzsche’s “The Madman” is that he is mad. This may seem obvious, but while the phrase “God is dead” is often repeated or parodied, when taken in its context, we are led to far more difficult questions. Nietzsche does not broach the phrase “God is dead” lightly and puts the words in the mouth of a madman. It is also the second time Nietzsche uses the phrase in the book from which we take this excerpt. This thought experiment comes to us from *The Gay Science* (our edition draws on the public domain first English edition, *The Joyful Wisdom*), which takes its title from the idea of a poetic renewal in southern France (Provence) following the decline of the troubadour tradition. The lone voice of the troubadour or poet is a repeated philosophical trope here with an emphasis on rigorous thought leading to joy rather than sorrow.

The first thing we may notice in this short piece is that Nietzsche does not actually advance any argument here against theology or the existence of the divine. It is right to assume that he is not defending them, but this particular scene does not actually argue for the death of God. Instead, we see Nietzsche contemplating what such an assertion would mean (not its truth or falsity). This may seem a subtle distinction, but it tells us much about how to approach his work. The madman, for instance, does not find “joy” in this assertion, and we are left with the closing question “What are these churches now?” (Nietzsche 47). Rather than questioning religious faith, the problem is what the giant edifice of faith would be (its churches, buildings, infrastructure, etc.). Since Nietzsche’s concern in the book is philosophy, we can see this as a form of allegory: if philosophy decouples itself from theology, what then is philosophy? If philosophy chooses to simply not ask questions about the divine or the metaphysical anymore, what then does philosophy do? Even more problematically, since the madman does not seem to be a person we should emulate, nor are those who mock him, how might this problem guide us to joy?

The typical approach to Nietzsche’s madman thus takes two directions. There is the less rigorous and likely more familiar acceptance or rejection of the death of God. This can range from the arguments of atheists and theists alike, such as the graffiti scrawl “God is dead! – Nietzsche” that we may compare to the “new atheism” movement of Christopher Hitchens’s *God is Not Great* (2007) and Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* (2006). The rebuttal to this is again the graffiti scrawl that crosses our the Nietzschean epigram to replace it with “Nietzsche is dead! – God,” and some have called this response to the new atheism movement the “new apologetics” (or perhaps more accurately, a new “new apologetics” following on the first new apologetics at the beginning of the twentieth century). For our purposes, we will take a second and more rigorous approach: the assertions that both are errors created by demanding an absolute
truth, and as such, both draw on philosophical systems oriented to the absolute and the divine. Nietzsche’s question is more difficult. What is philosophy if it is no longer concerned with truth?

Truth

Nietzsche’s quarrel with truth as a concept is long. This does not mean he was not committed to rigorous intellectual interrogation of concepts and ideas, but rather that he sought to distinguish between what one may know or not know from what one chooses to do or to believe. The argument about God would be, for Nietzsche, an instance of seeking “truth” but doing so in error. The question for Nietzsche is not whether or not to believe (William James may provoke our thoughts about just a willful choice) but rather recognizing that this is a choice and not a philosophical truth. If philosophy is concerned with what may be known, then the existence of the divine (apart from the hubris of arguing a human may know the divine) is not a matter of truth. It is unknowable in either direction. So, to present it as an assertion of truth is to make an error. People believe or do not believe, but that is a question of belief and not a question of truth. For Nietzsche, claiming that one believes or does not believe because that belief is “true” is mentally lazy – it is a way of avoiding responsibility for what one has chosen to believe. A better and more joyful proposition would be to claim responsibility oneself for one’s beliefs.

This is the crux of a line of thought we will see in Existentialism: responsibility. One of Nietzsche’s aims was to disengage such decisions from the illusion of “truth”:

When the madman claims that this tremendous event is still on its way, etc, he is claiming that even the atheists do not appreciate the meaning of “the death of God.” For God here is not merely the metaphysical underpinning of the Christian cosmology. He is the very notion of a basis, an external authority, on which opinions are founded – the very notion of a horizon against which everything can be seen and judged. (Gemes 50)

Gemes’s argument here is far-reaching. Like Nietzsche, he does not take a position on the theological or anti-theological assertion of truth but instead questions the notion of truth itself. For Gemes, this comes by recognizing how both the theistic and atheistic claims are rooted in an assertion of “truth” rather than a personal decision, hence making the act of choosing inferior to the fact of “truth” – in effect, I am not responsible for my choices, truth is:

According to Nietzsche, a primary function of the invocation of God is the provision of a means of escaping responsibility. For
the Christian the world, including himself, is a product of the will of God. Truth, reality, is founded in God for the world is God’s word. Typically atheists, having rejected God as the basis of all values and belief, supply a new basis. (Gemes 50)

Gemes goes on the look at those various bases as forms of “truth,” ranging from utilitarianism’s “greatest good” to positivism’s empirical observation. All of these, Gemes argues in his approach to Nietzsche, weaken the self by subjugating it to a concept of “truth” (real or not). And this kind of dismissal of one’s self cannot lead to the “joy” that is Nietzsche’s goal:

In each case what is being denied is the effect of the individual will. In effect the interlocutor is saying, I do not believe this because I choose to, because this kind of belief suits …, I believe this because that is how things are and hence I cannot choose otherwise and neither can you. (Gemes 50)

The possibility for joy then comes from placing that individual at the center of this process again. Joy comes from deciding “I choose this or that” without hiding behind the “error” of truth and by taking responsibility for this choice. Nietzsche’s argument, then, is not that truth does or does not exist, but rather that he does not have anything to say about truth. Instead, he has things to say about the self and its choices. What if philosophy’s role is to help us consider ways of living and choosing rather than ways of moving ever-closer to truth? How do we live more authentically rather than more truly?

**Faramir’s Dilemma**

We may consider a different madman to explore Nietzsche’s movement beyond truth. Where Blount encourages us to see the making of meaning and purpose through hobbits, we might also look to Faramir’s decision to honor the commands of his madman father, Denethor. Faramir is (insanely) commanded to defend Osgiliath against Sauron’s orcs, which is not possible. We as readers see this as a question of truth in the narrative: who is the true King and what is the truth of the threat to Minas Tirith? Denethor has looked into the palantir and despaired of any possible victory, but we as readers see this as untrue. Likewise, Denethor will not accept Aragorn as the true King, which we also see as untrue. Faramir’s question is different, though. His is not a question of what is true but what he must do. Must he disobey his father, or must he risk his life? Where Denethor is led to despair by grasping after truth (which is possible and what is not), but Faramir has hope based on deciding what he must do. Their outcomes may tell us much about the possibility for joy in an existential worldview. After all, we do not decide what world we inhabit nor what challenges we will face,
and as Tolkien is so often quoted as saying, “All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 56).

**Questions for Self-Review**

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for responding to a classmate’s comment. This week, you will have two classmates initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sentences from Tolkien and a few sentences from Westphal.

1. Why is Nietzsche’s phrase “God is dead” spoken by a madman?
2. What is the importance of truth in Nietzsche’s philosophy?
3. What is an example of an “error” in Nietzsche’s approach to philosophy?
4. How do choice and truth relate to each other in *The Return of the King*?
5. Can we reconcile Tolkien and Nietzsche on some topics?

**Works Cited & Supplemental Readings**


Week 13: Existentialism & the Gift of Death

Objectives

1. Distinguish between existentialism and providence as concepts.
2. Relate Nietzsche’s sense of “Truth” to existential “essence.”
3. Describe mortality and immortality in relation to “meaning” in *The Return of the King*.
4. Identify both purpose and meaning in *The Return of the King* and describe if they are found or made.

Reading Assignment


Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King*. Del Rey, 2017. (Book V, chapters 5–10)

Commentary

The questions behind much of philosophy, such as “What is death?” and “What is the meaning of life?” give us a focus for this week’s readings. This means we will confront mortality and meaning together, but we should also ask ourselves if these ideas must always be conjoined. For example, does mortality drive the search for meaning? Without mortality, would we feel as strong a drive for purpose and meaning? And if we focus on the end of life, what about its beginning, and what comes before? Does the purpose of life precede our life, or does it proceed from living? Specifically, we will use Jean-Paul Sartre’s approach to existentialism to question Tolkien’s immortal elves and mortal humans. We are also straining at the edges of philosophy and art. Just as Nietzsche set aside many of the central arguments of philosophy and engaged in a style of writing sometimes closer to literature than philosophy, Sartre likewise moved freely between his literary and philosophical writings.
Existentialism & Humanism

Existentialism is usually understood in a line of growth from the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard to Nietzsche, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus. Sartre formalized the use of the term “existentialism” as a school of thought, although he drew on a number of other philosophers in doing so, such as Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological work. The French philosophers who were directly connected to Sartre (de Beauvoir was his partner, and both Merleau-Ponty and Camus were his friends, while most of them had been students together) also moved freely across philosophy and literature. Camus and Sartre both were awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, and all of them apart from Merleau-Ponty wrote literary works as extensively as they did philosophy. In this sense, existentialism is as deeply entangled with ways of living, ways of being in a community, and ways of being a creative artist as it is a political and phenomenological philosophy.

Sartre’s “Existentialism is a Humanism” is one of his earliest existentialist works and the first in which he accepted the term “existentialism” for his work. While he later altered his views in this piece, both refining and changing several ideas, it remains a definitional work of existential philosophy. One of the opening gestures is to echo Kierkegaard’s approach to Christian faith: absurdity. Where Kierkegaard had, as a Christian, felt that theological truths exceed rationality, and hence theological truths cannot be known through reason alone, Sartre extended the concept after Nietzsche without its connection to theology or faith. For this reason, the opening five paragraphs of “Existentialism is a Humanism” are more important than their brevity may suggest – they clarify how Sartre’s argument relates to other major schools of philosophy around him in that moment. The lecture on which the essay (and later book) is based was given in 1946, shortly after the end of World War II, and he published the major book on which the lecture is based, Being and Nothingness, in 1943 while France was occupied by Nazi Germany – the importance of communist groups to the underground resistance, and the perceived collaboration of the Catholic Church shaped the historical moment in which Sartre’s works emerged. All of the ideas from the lecture with which we engaged are explored in much greater detail in Being and Nothingness. Notably, Sartre sets existentialism in contrast with both Marxist materialism and Christian providence by saying his paradigm rejects the determinism of both. Also, much like we have seen with Nietzsche and our explorations of ethics, Sartre privileges choice as a central expression of being. If existentialism offers a humanism, it is a sense of humanity rooted in the act of choosing.

This leads Sartre to his first articulation of the dictum “existence precedes essence” (“Existentialism”), which he developed in more detail in subsequent works. This is to say, we exist before we have purpose and meaning. His example to explain this is the paperknife, for which the purpose of cutting open
paper (ie: envelopes or a French-bound book) \textit{precedes} its production, so it is the opposite of a human experience. In other words, a person had a need for something with which to open paper before the knife specifically designed for this purpose was made, and hence the idea of a paperknife came before the actual modern product. The paperknife’s essence precedes its existence. We craft tools to suit a need, so the purpose precedes the tool’s existence – this is unlike humans. For context, “French binding” means that the folds of paper are in the external (not bound) portion of a book, and so to read a book, one would need to cut open this folded edge, just like cutting open an envelope today. It is in a sense like a magazine stapled on the wrong side, so that you would need to cut open each page. This is why with some older books, researchers can know what parts of a book its owner (ie: a specific author or philosopher like Tolkien or Sartre) had \textit{not} read… Today, the aesthetic value of these cut pages in older books now lead us an artificially produced “rough” edge – this is meant to be a “luxury binding” for aesthetic appeal. Consider any books you have seen in bookshops that have a smooth edge (like your paperback copies of \textit{The Lord of the Rings}) in contrast to those with a rough or “ripped” edge – this is a nostalgic aesthetic for those who are used to having French bindings cut open. It also means that for Sartre, the paperknife is a ubiquitous object for reading and academic life.

For the paperknife to have been designed for the purpose of cutting open books and letters, this means that its purpose or \textit{meaning} for existence (its “essence”) preceded its \textit{actual} existence. It was made to fulfil a purpose. We may think the same way about our lives, and in the theological discussions that preceded Spring Break in this course, we do indeed see the purpose of life as living a moral and ethical existence, minimizing harm, maximizing good, and so forth. These values tend to be based on a religious belief in the divine or in providence (God’s plan) as an essence or purpose for us that precedes our own existence. That is, we use these approaches with the same sense as if we were a paperknife: “essence” (or purpose) precedes “existence.” Sartre’s existentialism reverses this as a fundamental belief. For Sartre, if there is no recourse to an omnipotent deity to provide the “essence” or purpose of life, then “there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man” (“Existentialism”). We, as humans, exist before we have a purpose. Purpose, therefore, follows after existence. More radically, purpose is something \textit{made} not given, and it is made by the individual’s choices and actions.

Also at the center of existentialism is the relationship between subject and object or Self and Other. Where Sartre contends that existentialism “\textit{does} not make man into an object” (“Existentialism”), his point is the existential focus is on the acting subject. In a grammatical sense, the subject in a sentence \textit{does} the verb to an object, such as “I hit the tree.” The subject “I” hits the object “tree.” Rather than seeing human beings as determined by the world,
existentialism posits the human as an acting subject. This is why Sartre’s immediate contrast is to materialism – his aim is to reject materialist determinism even while retaining its revolutionary aim to transform the world. For the same reason, he refutes any concept of Providence or predestination. Notice as well the extent of Sartre’s reliance here on literary examples. To extend these claims, he turns to novels like George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* rather than to news reports of real people in contemporary situations. We may, in this use of examples, also recognize how deeply rooted existentialism is in creative activity and artistic creation.

**Absurdism & Mortality**

Sartre’s friend Albert Camus described his own understanding of existentialism as “absurdist.” This is an extension of the non-rational approach to theology described above from Kierkegaard. Camus’s argument extends beyond the idea that theological truths cannot be approached through reason alone. For Camus, the “essence” or purpose that proceeds after existence must confront the reality of mortality. If all meaning is made by the individual’s choices, then that “essence” ends when the individual perishes. However, rather than seeing this as an extreme nihilist might (that all existence is without purpose, that all “essence” or meaning to life is false, and that all ethics are arbitrary), Camus’s sense of the absurd seeks a positive end. By confronting the absurdity of existence, the individual can, by continuously choosing to live, thereby produce a joyous “essence” or meaning to life. That is, the meaning of life would be to live despite the absurdity of it. In a simplistic sense, this might mean being happy without being hopeful. In another sense, it means that life today may be filled with happiness and purpose whether there is more life tomorrow or not.

For our reading of Bill Davis’s chapter on Tolkien’s immortal elves and mortal men, this means that humans in their finitude find freedom only when they accept their limitedness and mortality while dedicating themselves to their “essence” or meaning. Elves, who are not mortal in Tolkien’s books, face a more difficult challenge than accepting death…

“within the circles of the world”

Davis points to the immortality of the Elves in contrast to the mortality of the Hobbits and humans by saying “their souls remain ‘within the circles of the world’” (Davis 124). However, this phrase is not given a clear citation to Tolkien, and a careful reader will notice that it recurs. The first instance is dark but connects closely to the concerns of existentialism that we have outlined and to the central love story of the novels, the relationship between Aragorn and Arwen:
“I speak no comfort to you, for there is no comfort for such pain within the circles of the world. The uttermost choice is before you: to repent and go to the Havens and bear away into the West the memory of our days together that shall there be evergreen but never more than memory or else to abide the Doom of Men.” (Tolkien, *Return* 245).

This is the choice for Arwen. She may have elven immortality by leaving Aragorn, but then she would then not have the experience of life and love itself. Alternatively, she can live and experience love with the price of mortality. By contrast, the phrase recurs in the Appendix to *The Return of the King*. Here we learn of the Númenoreans that Aragorn while dying says to Arwen “In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!” (Tolkien, *Return* 378). In context, this means that a dying human may have sorrow at death but not despair, for there is another life beyond the world itself. This view fits very readily into Tolkien’s Catholicism. The fascination for us may lie in the repetition of “circles of the world” meaning material existence and “memory.” The elves in their material immortality have memory but little access to an existential sense of purpose or “essence,” while the humans in their mortal condition gain both a meaning for life and something uncertain “beyond them” that is “more than memory.”

While Tolkien almost certainly understood this “beyond” in religious terms as heaven, to which humans may attain after death, Davis presents this as an existential difference between elves and humans. Human may fulfill their nature precisely because they are mortal, which is a way of being true to the “essence” they have created for themselves or a way of being “authentic” in Sartre’s sense. As Davis points out, the most problematic contrast is the Ring Wraithes, who are continuing to exist but do so in contradiction of their essence. They are immortal only by unnaturally contradicting their nature or essence. Elves, in contrast, have no such possibility since their essence precedes their existence. They do not change, and their growth as individuals appears to be fixed at a static point.

Sartre and Camus also emphasize the issue of choice and freedom, as does Davis, in particular as he discusses Aragorn and Arwen:

> Arwen does not choose death for its own sake. She chooses life with Aragorn for its own sake and accepts eventual death as a price she is willing to pay to get it. (Davis 135)

Our challenge as readers is to decide how we resolve this puzzle. Aragorn believes in a life beyond the “circles of the world,” and we may through Tolkien’s Catholicism simply call this “Heaven.” However, as we realized earlier in Week
Tolkien was perfectly aware from his scholarly work on the English language that the word “Heaven” is itself from the pagan Old English traditions, so our terminology becomes challenging. What exactly he means for Aragorn and Arwen moving beyond the “circles of the world” is still very much open to interpretation. Must we value Arwen’s choice to be mortal only based on Aragorn’s dying expression of belief in another form of immortality beyond the world? Do we instead read with Davis through Sartre that Arwen fulfills her “essence” or meaning in life by choosing her most authentic existence, regardless of what she believes about death? Is mortality a necessary condition for meaning, purpose, or “essence”?

Questions for Self-Review

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for responding to a classmate’s comment. This week, you will also have two classmates initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sentences from Tolkien and a few sentences from Sartre and Davis.

1. What does Sartre mean by “essence” when he says “Existence precedes essence”?
2. In Week 12, Gemes situated Nietzsche’s “Joyful Wisdom” as the individual’s act of choosing. How does this relate to Sartre on existentialism?
3. Can literary and philosophical truths or meanings co-exist together?
4. Why is death a “gift” for humans in Tolkien’s books?
5. Is it possible for Davis to reconcile human choices of authentic existence with Tolkien’s theology?

Works Cited & Supplemental Readings

[http://tinyurl.com/yxeq17cp](http://tinyurl.com/yxeq17cp)

[https://tinyurl.com/y8tahcky](https://tinyurl.com/y8tahcky)

[http://tinyurl.com/yy2ojjoo](http://tinyurl.com/yy2ojjoo)


Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King*. Del Rey, 2017. (Book V, chapters 5–10)
Week 14: Ecology & the Green Knight

Objectives

1. Distinguish between subjects and objects.
2. Recognize “green time” in Tolkien.
3. Describe “symmetrical discourse” in Actor-network Theory.
4. Identify relations among the human and non-human.

Reading Assignment


Tolkien, J.R.R. The Return of the King. Del Rey, 2017. (Book VI, chapters 1–4)

Commentary

As we near the end of our quest, we begin to ask some challenging questions, “here at the end of all things” (Tolkien, Return 241) about Tolkien and about our contemporary world. Andrew Light returns us to the beginning with questions about “green time” and deep ecology through Treebeard and the ents but, even more importantly, Tom Bombadil. We will extend this by introducing the concepts of Actor-network Theory (ANT) from Sociology, which gives us a new way of discussing (or translating) the interactions of the human and non-human. Our title draws from Tolkien’s extensive work on the Middle English romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a poem that has garnered increasing attention in ecopoetics.

Green Time

Andrew Light opens his chapter “Tolkien’s Green Time” by dodging the question of why he is bringing philosophical concepts to popular culture by suggesting this seems somehow surprising. In his phrasing, “I’m somewhat embarrassed because she’s a serious art historian and I worry that she’ll mistakenly think I’m dabbling in cultural studies” (Light 150). By this point in our
readings, hopefully the question of whether or not popular culture and cultural studies can yield complex philosophical questions has been dispelled, although he is rather more specific in his dodge. Light specifies “cultural studies,” and in this he is actually quite serious, just not for the reason we might assume. Rather that implying that reading popular culture is somehow “low brow” for an academic, he is instead insisting that his approach to ecological issues and philosophy is distinct from what cultural studies does: analyzing cultural products within the context of their production and consumption. We must wait until the next page before he makes this clear. When he asks himself “Couldn’t this be used as a launching pad for a discussion of sustainable development or globalization today” (151), the point is that while this is certainly possible, this would be the domain of cultural studies, and his interests are less in how we consume this set of texts today as a society (or as one society that consumes them today). Instead, his focus is on “the representation of a kind of geologic or naturally scaled time in The Lord of the Rings” (151). By this, he means “a sense of the past through which ‘nature’ sets the context for events in the present” (152). He calls this “green time” in Tolkien, or a sense of time that is apprehensible to not only anthropomorphized creatures like ents but also to immortals bound up with the natural world like Tom Bombadil, or even to the world itself in the form of trees or mountains. It is this last comparison that will, below, lead us into a brief outline of Actor-network Theory.

The anthropomorphizing of trees into ents tempts us as readers toward an allegorical reading, and Light moves away from this very quickly. Where he considers the ents, it is in exactly the same frame of mind as his rejection of “cultural studies” as his aim or of using the text as a way to discuss “sustainable development or globalization today” (150, 151). These may be fine things to do, but his purpose is in lending a voice to the non-human, and hence rather than casting the ents as an allegory for our environmental degradations today, he instead offers a different position:

But what he [Treebeard] and the other ents do is not simply take care of the forest as much as they serve as a narrative device that allows the forest to speak for itself…. In this sense no one stands for anything in Middle-earth, but the place itself is fully animated so that it stands for itself, and even speaks for itself at times. (154).

This speaking for itself is the crucial issue for Light. This issue of a forest or complex and non-human system speaking for itself is at the heart of his contention. For Light, “no doubt if a forest or ecosystem could talk we wouldn’t understand it” (160) because we share no common perspective with it. It lives in a very, very long “green time” that is outside of our mental apparatus. This means that when we anthropomorphize non-human life or systems into a
human-like character, we (or the author) must either erase these enormous forms of difference or represent them in a way that makes the profound feeling of difference felt by the readers. Light suggests that Tolkien does the latter through the sense of an alien “green time” in *The Lord of the Rings*.

**Actor-network Theory**

Actor-network Theory (ANT) is a useful way of understanding what drives Light’s argument. ANT itself grew out of sociological studies of science and the history of science (STS or Science and Technology Studies). As a theory of translation between the human and the non-human, ANT is typically understood through a set of studies that may be best summarized through Michel Callon’s article “Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay” in the breakthrough book edited by John Law, *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge*. This is a simplified history, but it makes the point. Callon’s analysis was of the relationships among fishermen, scallops (clams), and the French government. While we would typically look at the fisherman and the government as expressing human agency and decision-making, and from this grant these groups a sense of human subjectivity, this issue in discourse (how we talk about things) overlooks the obvious importance of the activities of the scallops. That large groups of organized human labor (fishermen) and even government agencies would change their behaviors based on the decisions made by scallops seems shocking, yet our language itself resists thinking of clams as making decisions that shape human life. This is a failure of language rather than a failure in reality...

Because of this, Callon and others developed a theory of actors and actants in a network. Their work aimed to “translate” between the human and the non-human, or in more practical terms, to establish a generalized symmetry in discourse such that the human and non-human could be discussed using equal language that would avoid closing off our assumptions presumptively or inaccurately. At the heart of ANT is this sense that “real” material relationships among things – such as between clams, fishermen, and governments – are also composed of “real” discourse or semiotic relationships. The concept of “generalized symmetry” means that we, who are doing a scholarly study, had best avoid elevating or degrading different actors in a network using biased language, such as that which confers intentionality on humans and the absence of agency on the non-human (or even the non-living).

In part, this semiotic (language) shift is a way of addressing a long-recognized problem in Enlightenment philosophy. Again, in a simplified form, the Enlightenment regarded humans as rational creatures who, by exercising reason, are able to make self-determining choices. This is only one way of understanding humanity, but it has a deep influence and can accurately be seen as
underpinning modern democracy and several systems of law in the world today. For humans, instinctual reactions are not choices, per se, and likewise decisions make while in a state of mental derangement are not rational, and hence we do not hold the rational and reasoning person responsible for these (or at least not to the same degree). This paradigm likewise alienates humanity from nature by privileging rationality and reason as the central elements of humanity: humans are understood as subjects making decisions about what to do to the world, and the world is understood as an object about which decisions are made that it can never understand. This is in the grammatical sense of the subject and object discussed in the previous week. “I hit the tree” has the subject “I” doing the verb “hitting” to the object “tree.” The natural temptation is then to divide humans from the world. Enlightenment philosophy has tended to alienate humans as subjects from the world as object, even though we are obvious a part of that object. ANT seeks to correct this by a semiotic change in how we discuss such problems – no relationship among actors or actants (not subjects and objects) can be discussed without symmetrical discourse. “Symmetrical” means that our language should not grant no bar agency from any actor in a network, nor should our language impose divisions between these actors. This allows us an enriched way of understanding the complex network of relationships among things as different as humans, governments, clams, and ecosystems without pre-determining our results based on the language of our analysis.

Another standard example that adds to Callon’s scallops moves from the non-human living world to the products of the living world as well as non-organic (or at least non-living) products. We might, for example, consider how networks among humans compare silk with nylon, the former having a deep attachment to the labor of silk worms and the latter being non-living. While we might compare human social hierarchies (silk is “upper class” while nylon is “working class,” in a simplified sense), we would in an ANT perspective also consider the silk itself or the nylon as part of the network of actors, as well as humans and silk worms. The same kind of argument is extended to lead or PVC plastics in plumbing (Mulder & Knot 265–286). By refusing to give human actors a special or exalted position in our discourse/language, we may open ourselves to a more nuanced understanding of the relationships involved as well as how we understand concepts such as agency, free will, and subjectivity.

Questions for Self-Review

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for responding to a classmate’s comment. This week, you will also have two classmates initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sentences from Tolkien and a few sentences from Light.
1. What does Light mean by the term “green time”?
2. What does the term “generalized symmetry” or “symmetrical discourse” mean in Actor-network Theory?
3. How are the ents or Tom Bombadil important to “green time”?
4. What is the difference between the ents as an allegory for the natural world versus the ents as speaking for the natural world?
5. Is Tolkien’s sense of the ecological world of special relevance today? If so, how, and if not, why?

Works Cited & Supplemental Readings


Week 15: Ecology & the Non-human

Objectives

1. Distinguish between the “non-human” and “Nature” as concepts.
2. Recognize the “land ethic” in The Lord of the Rings.
3. Describe the “land ethic” as an ethical approach to the non-human.

Reading Assignment


Tolkien, J.R.R. The Return of the King. Del Rey, 2017. (Book VI, chapters 5–9)

Commentary

This week we complete The Return of the King and begin to ask the same questions that opened the course but with regard to different subjects. The previous week introduced us to “green time” and “Actor-network Theory” (ANT) as ways of discussing human contemplation of and interactions with the non-human world. Niiler’s approach to “green reading” extends these ideas to the relationship between the human and the non-human. Where ANT made us think about how our language shapes our understanding of the relations among the human and the non-human, Niiler begins to ask how the category of ethics relates to these interactions. If we accept a network of relations among actors or actants, and we seek “symmetrical discourse” that does not artificially divide humans from Nature, what does this mean for ethics? How do our categories of deontological, utilitarian, and virtue ethics relate to ecology?

The Land Ethic

Niiler’s argument about the “land ethic” derives from the conservationist and travel writer Aldo Leopold (1887–1948). His ideas may strike you as anticipating some of the concepts in Actor-network Theory (ANT) and later ecological movements we recognize today. By asking difficult questions, such as “thinking
like a mountain,” by which he meant including the non-human in questions of our relationship with land. The ideas also reflect a growing awareness of Indigenous stewardship of ecosystems and the widening recognition of indigeneity as rootedness in place.

Glen Sean Coulthard has integrated the concept of locality and of indigeneity as “rootedness in place” with decolonization paradigms in Red Skin White Masks (2014), which draws its title from Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks (1968) and uses Fanon’s Sartre-influenced Marxist methodology. This means Coulthard’s critical frame relies on articulating the decolonization project much like during the rapid decolonization of Africa at the mid-century. From Fanon, Coulthard specifically draws on chapters 26–32 of Marx’s Capital on primitive accumulation. However, Coulthard refocuses the argument to deal with indigeneity specifically as a relationship with or an ontology (a way of being) built out from land. While Fanon’s focus is on negotiating race through discourses of class (recall our discussions of a Marx in Week 10), Coulthard extends the project to accommodate forms of subjectivity that are predicated on grounded concepts of indigeneity as belonging or rootedness in place. He also presents this rootedness in place as anti-capitalist and disruptive to the nation-state.

For indigeneity, Coulthard contends, via Vine Deloria Jr., that “one of the most significant differences that exist between Indigenous and Western metaphysics revolves around the central importance of land to Indigenous modes of being, thought, and ethics” (Coulthard 60). Because of this, Indigenous populations, culture, literature, and resulting critical paradigms will privilege place, locality, and embeddedness in place as an ontological framework. In contrast, the West differs insofar as colonial narratives “derive meaning from the world in historical/developmental terms, thereby placing time as the narrative of central importance” (60). Therefore, “place is a way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world with others” (61). This contrast between time and place is central. Hence, Indigenous forms of knowledge and ontology are always relational. As with Margaret Noodin’s Anishinaabe work, Coulthard articulates this relational focus on place as also embedded in language. In Coulthard’s work, this language is Dogrib (Thčhọ, meaning “Dog Flank People”), and we may recall the importance of symmetrical discourse in our readings about ANT last week.

Leopold’s work was rooted in the American Dream of a Manifest Destiny, by which the expansion of the nation across the continent and the colonization of land was a deeply rooted part of the national identity. Instead, Leopold sought to rethink land as a part of relationship between the occupants (humans), the communities, and the nation as a whole.

The challenge to Leopold’s view, which expands it in ways sympathetic to Coulthard’s sense of Indigenous identity, comes when Niiler compares him to Murray Bookchin (278). Niiler begins with the rhetorical question “Is nature,
in fact, all that is non-human?” and reasons the consequence of an affirmation as “the human race has a biblical ‘dominance’ over nature” (278). However, Niiler quickly shifts this answer by adding the question “if nature is broadened or extended to include human beings, what then?” (278). This, he argues, becomes a matter of ethics.

The Ethics of Human & Non-human Relations in Nature

If we give more detail to Niiler’s argument by our discussion of ANT the previous week, we are left with the alienation of humans from nature by an error in our language. We set humans as “subjects” doing things (verbs) to nature as an “object” (in the grammatical sense of these terms). This Enlightenment habit of mind alienated humans from nature. However, as Niiler points out, we are in fact part of the natural world, and our sense of being conscious subjects making rational decisions exercising reason in order to act upon the world is itself troubled: we are often irrational and unreasonable, and many parts of the living world also exercise choice, although the non-living world is also (for ANT) an actor in this network of relationships.

If a symmetrical description of our relationships in this network can be offered, then what are the ethical dimensions of these relationships? In our opening example of the Ring of Gyges, we never asked about the ethics of the ring itself, although we may feel more tempted to consider Tolkien’s Ring as an active agent with unethical intentions. The ethical questions in Plato relate to the humans involved, and the non-human or even magical world of the ring have no involvement in ethics. In a grand sweep, we can use the thought experiment of ethics if one were to be the last human in the world. Lying, for example, may be unethical in our social world, but if all other people were gone, would lying remain unethical? What about theft or violence in a world without humans? As Niiler points out, either the natural world and ecology with which we interact (and of which we are a part) has an expectation of ethical interactions from us, or it does not. As with our other questions of ethics, the convenience or ease of an ethical choice is not a factor in considering what is or is not ethical. We may be tempted to consider this as the domain of virtue ethics, that such decisions reflect us as subjects and our innermost being, but Niiler offers the concept of “land-autonomy” as a lever out of this conundrum.

Niiler offers land-autonomy as the view that humans and the natural world should be separate, with nature “left to care for itself, and that, in fact, any and all form of human (or hobbit) agency constitutes an unwanted, unwarranted intrusion” (280). His argument is that where this is a starting point in human/non-human relations in The Lord of the Rings, the books grow towards a “land ethic” akin to Leopold’s views: “the Ents re-create – recover – a fresh possibility of better future stewardship of nature” (280). For Niiler, then, “it is possible to trace in The Lord of the Rings the growth of a land ethic – a
move from land-appropriation to land-husbandry” (281), and even more forcefully that the human world cannot succeed without an ethical relationship among the human and non-human worlds since “the Shire’s democracy crumbles without the existence of free land” (281). Marx may lead us to question the democracy of the Shire, but the pressure toward a symmetrical and ethical relationship has much merit in Tolkien’s and our worlds. This reminds us of the struggles around the Shire that close The Return of the King just as much as it makes us recall Tom Bombadil from The Fellowship of the Ring at the start of the books. Both the recovery of the Shire and Tom Bombadil’s early model of ethical relations with the world remind us that “he [Tom] is, in part, an indictment of a materialistic culture that has forgotten its ethical obligation toward land” (283). As his talk shifts from nature to culture and the language of “kingdoms” and “victory,” he charts a failure to find ethical balance among the actors in the network of the natural world.

Our challenge as readers is to marshal our ethical discussions from earlier in the course to address this problem of ecology and the human, non-human, and also non-living world. Do we bear ethical responsibility to other non-human things, and do these ethical obligations (if we agree to them) extend from living things to non-living things? Is consciousness the only arbiter of our ethical obligations, such that we may have a duty of care to gorillas or ravens but not to trees or forests? If we do have an ethical relationship with living things, must this also extend to the non-living world? Is our sense of our ethical responsibilities based on a concept of virtue ethics, which means it only has to do with ourselves and our own personal betterment, or does ethics reflect doing things that are intrinsically good or that bring happiness to the greatest numbers? If we accept a deontological ethics and see right action as itself ethical by definition, then the distinction between the human and non-human would seem unimportant since it is the action itself we must consider. If instead we accept a utilitarian ethics, then how do we balance the greatest happiness for humans against the happiness (or harm) brought to other living things, some of which show the capacity for forms of consciousness, and many of which show a very real capacity to suffer and experience pain? More difficult still, how do we extend these thoughts to a full ecological system that is complex and difficult for us to conceptualize as a totality, just as it is difficult for us to conceptualize a society or culture as composed of individuals?

In Tolkien, much attention is given to the Shire as a part of the natural world that seek harmony or that balances a way of life between tradition and increasing industrialization. Much has been made by scholars of the “return to the shires” movement after World War II in Britain, by which they mean a literary and cultural shift to value traditional rural life that was being lost due to modernization. This can be a consequence of nostalgia and can even be politically reactionary (seeking a return to a less democratic and less free world, more aristocratic in its social structure), but it can also be regarded as a longing for
nature. However, our attention must include not only the good world of the Shire but also the fallen world of Mount Doom and the non-human species such as Orcs or the peculiar force in the Ring. If we regard the climax of *The Return of the King* as a conflict between Frodo and Gollum, we lose the importance of the Ring’s influence over both of them. Likewise, we lose the internal conflict between Gollum and Smeagol. But what of the Ring as an actant in this network of relations? Has it not precipitated the entirety of four novels around itself? If we do not consider it a protagonist, what have we lost? And must Mount Doom itself remain an object alone, even though its fire destroys the Ring? If our language and form of discourse cast the mountain as only an object without any active agency, how do we understand it as the grammatical subject that destroys the Ring?

**Questions for Self-Review**

Please respond to any of these questions on the discussion board in WebCampus. Remember, you have 1 point for your own comment and 1 point for responding to a classmate’s comment. This week, you will have two classmates initiating discussion by posting a “Critical Summary” that excerpts a few sentences from Tolkien and a few sentences from Niiler.

1. How are the human and the non-human a subset of “nature”?
2. Do virtue ethics include one’s actions to the non-human?
3. In a utilitarian paradigm, how could one weight the balance between human and non-human happiness and suffering?
4. Do deontological ethics include actions (or inactions) toward the non-human?
5. What does it mean to be ontologically rooted in place rather than time?

**Works Cited & Supplemental Readings**


https://tinyurl.com/y6bgcr54

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King*. Del Rey, 2017. (Book VI, chapters 5–9)
Week 16: Review

Objectives

1. Recognize intentional and incidental learning through the course, class discussions, and personal readings.
2. Identify instances of ethics, social hierarchy, purpose, and ecology from The Lord of the Rings.
3. Identify instances of ethics, social hierarchy, purpose, and ecology in your own life.
4. Discuss how ethics, social organization, and ecology contribute (or fail to contribute) to a meaningful sense of purpose in life.

Reading Assignment

There are no assigned readings this week.

Commentary

This week is dedicated to review and catching up any missed readings. We have only Monday before the reading days dedicated to missed classes and your own review followed by the beginning of the examination period.

“Here at the end of all things”

Like so many of Tolkien’s key phrases, “Here at the end of all things, Sam” repeats in The Return of the King (241, 244). We have it the first time as “I am glad you are with me here. Here at the end of all things, Sam” (241) and again slightly modified as “I am glad that you are here with me,’ said Frodo. ‘Here at the end of all things, Sam” (244). Both Thomas Kullmann (47) and Devin Brown (171) notice this repetition, and Kullmann links it to larger intertextual structures across the books that occur through precisely these kinds of repetitions. Recall our discussion of this as the beginning as well. Our work in the course has focused on close readings, being attentive to how our attention is guided to informational and inferential approaches to the text, ethics, theology, our sense of purpose in life, and finally how we fit within our world. Now that we are all here at the end of all things, or at least at the end of all things in this course, we have a chance to reflect on our experiences and our fellowship, as Sam and Frodo do across this scene in the book.
For your own experiences, there are intentional learning outcomes in any course of studies, as well as incidental learning outcomes. The intentional components are listed as objectives in each week of the Study Guide. You may wish to review these as preparation for the final examination. However, just as I have other unstated learning objectives for you, ones that are often easier to approach through a side-door or while you are not consciously thinking of them as a goal, you also surely have unexpected or unintended learning as well. Some of this may come from readings outside of those assigned (such as secondary works from the Annotated Bibliography assignment), but they may also be from ancillary components of our readings. Please take time in the Discussion Board (ungraded this week) to share what you have learned or to pose questions to your classmates.

**Viva Voce Final Examination**

The final examination for this course will be conducted as a “viva voce” (interview) online through Skype, telephone, Blackboard Collaborate (the video conferencing system built into WebCampus), or other audio or video communications. Students must have access to either a telephone or computer system that supports audio/video conferencing or such technology. Three questions will comprise the examination:

1. an oral defense of your final essay based on a challenge or query given by the instructor,
2. discussing your final essay’s topic or approach in relation to a different text or paradigm provided during the exam by the instructor, and
3. a comparison of two course readings suggested by the instructor.

Evaluation of your performance in the examination is based on three criteria ranked in order of importance:

1. demonstrated completion of the course of studies,
2. demonstrated understanding of the critical concepts of the course, and
3. the capacity for creative or innovative thought

More succinctly, the exam will test if students completed the course and achieved a reasonable level of comprehension of the materials. If you find that you are unable to answer a particular question, you will be offered alternatives until you are able to demonstrate what things you have learned, although there may be deductions for each question left unanswered. This means that the *viva voce* examinations are both rigorous and generous. They are rigorous because they show very quickly what work has been done and what work has not, but
they are generous because you are always able to demonstrate what you have learned and ensure that your learning does contribute to your final grade.

Questions for Self-Review

You may ask any questions in the Discussion Board, both for the instructor or for classmates. Please use the venue as a place to reflect on your learning across the semester or to pose questions about the examination and future studies. You may wish to use the “Objectives” above as a guide for your self-review.

Works Cited & Supplemental Readings


