

Notes on a Philosophical Anthropology of Middle-earth

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I

This paper is in two parts, a major followed by a minor. The first presents and discusses a positive contribution Tolkien's fiction can make to our understanding of human nature. The second addresses a criticism of Tolkien's fiction for what it implies about human nature.

First, however, a note on philosophical anthropology. I mean it in the generally accepted sense of an attempt to understand human nature, taking some of its data from empirical anthropology but unlike the latter, overtly philosophically-oriented. Obviously any such attempt is predicated on a defensible concept of human nature as such. I won't take up my limited time here doing so except to quote the opinion, towards the end of his life, of Paul Feyerabend, the renowned epistemological anarchist and defender of pluralism: 'I have come to the conclusion that every culture is potentially all cultures and that special cultural features are changeable manifestations of a single human nature.' [1]

I would add that this needn't (and shouldn't) be thought to endorse an idea of human nature as an eternal or unchanging essence; only that it is sufficiently stable and coherent to suffice for all our purposes. And although it is notoriously difficult to specify the exact limits of human nature, it doesn't follow that there are none. Indeed, the idea that there are none, that human nature is infinitely plastic and that for us, limits are optional, strikes me as a wholly implausible and even damaging notion, as well as insufferably conceited.

One of the many striking aspects of J.R.R. Tolkien's fictional world of Middle-earth (*Arda*) is the variety of 'races', that is, species of sentient or, if you prefer, rational beings, that it contains: Elves, Dwarves, 'Men', i.e. humans (including the relatively distinct *Drúadain*), Hobbits, Ents, Orcs, Trolls, and *Maiar* (Sauron, the Wizards [*Istari*], probably the Balrog of Moria and possibly Tom Bombadil).

These can all be considered in two perspectives. One allows each kind of being its full stretch of distinctiveness: the unique ethos, particular qualities and enduring characteristics which it brings to the story. The second is to consider them as different aspects of human nature. I believe both approaches are valid as long as we resist the temptation to reduce the former to the latter. That would result in a kind of allegorisation of the story itself, to see what we can learn about human nature, or about Tolkien's idea of human nature, say, which was something he strongly disliked. [2] And rightly so, for it would betray the story and its rich possibilities of applicability into the hands of its instrumentalist enemies. For that matter, all my own work on Tolkien is predicated on the validity of applicability which, to quote Tolkien, 'resides in the freedom of the reader.' [3] Consequently you won't find anything much 'sources' or 'influences' there, but you will find an adamant if largely implicit defence of the freedom of the reader.

So it is safer, as it were, just to see each 'race' as autonomous. But I want to take the road less travelled – the human nature perspective – and travel it responsibly. There is warrant in Tolkien's letters for doing so. He writes that 'if I were pressed to rationalize, I should say that they [the Elves] represent really Men [i.e. humans] with greatly enhanced aesthetic and creative faculties, greater beauty and longer life, and nobility...' [4] And

elsewhere: ‘Elves are certain aspects of Men and their talents and desires, incarnated in my little world.’ [5]

He also writes that ‘The Hobbits are, of course, really meant to be a branch of the specifically *human* race...’ and again, that they are ‘a diminutive branch of the human race.’ [6] It doesn’t seem too much of a stretch, then, to argue that if hobbits are a kind of human, they share human nature.

I don’t propose to try to discuss all the Ardan ‘races’. Rather I want to concentrate on three, or a certain aspect of three: the Elves, Sauron the Maia, and hobbits. The reason is that I discern a pattern connecting all three which offers a valuable philosophical insight – metaphysical, moral, and even prescriptive – into human nature.

The Elves

Tolkien’s Elves are unique in fictional literature. My account of them is partial, being structured by my topic, but any account must begin by taking seriously how seriously Tolkien wanted us to take them: neither Shakespeare’s nor the Victorians’ ‘silly or pretty’ creatures but ‘a race high and beautiful, the older Children of the world... the People of the Great Journey, the People of the Stars. They were tall, fair of skin and grey-eyed, though their locks were dark...and their voices had more melodies than any mortal voice that is now heard...’ (7)

The most important aspect of the Elves that concerns us here is also the most obvious. The Elves are exemplars of *Faërie*, Tolkien’s term for enchantment as a place, which is both an ‘inner’ state and simultaneously an ‘outer’ realm where everyone and everything that is enchanted ‘[has] their being’. *Faërie* is thus upstream, so to speak, of the hallowed distinction, first proposed by Parmenides and (extremely influentially) Plato, then sharpened and reapplied by Descartes, between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’. It is firmly both.

Central to this understanding is the contrast between enchantment and magic. The former is sheer existential wonder, and insofar as there is a desire validly associated with it, it is the artist’s desire to achieve ‘the realisation...of imagined wonder.’ [8] Magic, in contrast, ‘produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World...it is not an art but a technique; its desire is power in this world, domination of things and wills.’ [9] And in another letter, Tolkien remarks that ‘the Elves are there (in my tales) to demonstrate the difference between the two’, that is, between magic and enchantment. [10]

At this point we may be led astray by our long intellectual training, originally Platonic but latterly modern, to distinguish sharply between spiritual – more recently, psychological and/or cultural – and material, understood as scientifically naturalised substances or processes. That would predispose us to see enchantment (and perhaps magic too) as an instance of the former. But Tolkien insisted that the Elves are not *supernatural*: ‘they are natural, far more natural than [humans].’ [11] To put it another way, their spirituality is immanent in the world, not transcendent, and therefore not in any way opposed to it.

That point enables us to appreciate the elective affinity of the Elves and the living more-than-human natural world. Tolkien describes their ‘oldest motive’ as ‘the adornment of [the] earth, and the healing of its hurts.’ [12] Lothlórien, ‘the heart of Elvendom on earth’, is a forest. [13] And the Elves are often described as immortal, which has some justification, for they live many, many times longer than humans. But it is not strictly true, for their lives, even if they are not slain, do not last forever but are ‘strictly co-extensive with the life of Arda [the Earth]’, so when they finally die they do not, like humans, pass ‘beyond the circles of the world’. Thus it was really a kind of longevity, which Tolkien contrasted with ‘true “immortality”’. [14] (I shall return to this point.)

Sauron

Now the obvious corresponding foil in Tolkien's fictional world for Elvish enchantment is the magic of Sauron, the greatest and most powerful magician and (by the same token) technologist in Middle-earth; Tolkien describes him as 'the Lord of magic and machines' [15] This contrast is made concrete in the Three Rings of the Elves and the One Ring of Sauron; and with good reason, we think of them in very different terms: the Three all about healing, protecting, nurturing, and the One all about power and ruthless domination. But it is impossible to ignore the fact that although Celebrimbor made the Three without Sauron's direct involvement, he did so only after their collaboration. And of course, when the One was destroyed the Three also perforce passed away; so there must be some internal connection. Relatedly, even though their purposes and means do indeed differ, the One and the Three share an essential characteristic: they extend longevity.

How the One Ring does so is, of course, through bringing about what Tolkien calls 'endless serial living' or 'limitless serial longevity', figured in the Ringwraiths but also Gollum, for whom death is not transcended or vanquished but merely endlessly deferred, until life becomes a terrible weariness and death is craved as much as it is feared. [16] Tolkien warned of 'the hideous peril' of confusing true immortality, which only exists on the other side of death, if anywhere, with this necrotic simulacrum. [17] Far from heeding the warning, some humans – transhumanists, to be precise – are in eager pursuit of just such an outcome. [18]

All this is well-known. What is less often appreciated is that Tolkien was also critical of Elvish so-called immortality as a model, even of admiration, for humans. Here I am indebted to a discussion by Franco Manni. The Elvish temptation – and by implication, one for humans also to try to avoid – is, as he says, not to have more time, but to stop it. [19] And there is, as befits any great Rings, even the Three, a power involved: that of stopping change, including ageing, 'to keep things always fresh and fair'. [20] But with the end of the acme of Ring-power, the One, Tolkien says, 'their little efforts at preserving the past fell to bits', as they were bound to eventually. [21]

In short, neither the longevity of the One Ring (dramatically) nor that of the Three (more subtly) are appropriate, let alone desirable, human ideals. Nor, therefore, are they completely opposed. Instead, the more radical contrast is between longevity *tout court*, whether Sauronic or Elvish, and true immortality. The latter alone is appropriate and desirable for humans, even though it is attended by an obvious and potentially appalling paradox: as Manni says, it 'coincides with death'. [22] Mortality, for us, is arguably not only a precondition for passing beyond 'the circles of the world'; rather they are one and the same.

The Hobbits

I can go no further in that direction. But what of the hobbits? Despite the incongruity of their humble, even comical status with these grand questions of life and death, their pivotal place in Tolkien's story suggests a possibly potent significance nonetheless. Here I am again indebted: this time to Jan Zwicky's book *Lyric Philosophy*, in which (compressing unforgivably) she suggests that humans partake equally of the lyric, which is practically cognate with enchantment, *and* the technological: the mode of appropriation, manipulation, and exploitation. (As I have noted, that excludes enchantment but not magic.)

Tolkien's severe anti-modernism led him to give that mode almost entirely to Mordor, the sole modern state in Middle-earth, and pathologically so. Zwicky recognises its human potential for both good and evil. However, her deeper point is that we cannot live permanently or completely in either lyric mode – *Faërie* – or in instrumental mode. Not, that

is, while being or becoming fully human. (I suppose it's possible that we may become either less or more than human.)

The state and realm where we humans *can* live, and should aspire to live, is a third mode she calls 'the domestic'. 'The domestic accepts the essential tension between lyric desire and the capacity for technology. In this acceptance, it mediates.' [23] Furthermore, 'Domesticity lives without absolutes – including absolute clarity.' [24] The domestic, then, accepts imperfection, and in so doing, opens the door, at least, to finding in imperfection a flawed but vibrant kind of paradoxical perfection, perhaps the only possible one for us, a kind memorably encapsulated by Leonard Cohen: 'Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in'. [25]

It should be clear where I am going with this, because what are the hobbits if not domestic? [26] Family (and therefore genealogy) is tremendously important, as are food and comfort; practical crafts take precedence over art; nature is respected, and used at need but not exploited; the dominant life-philosophy is true conservatism: not reactionary but cautious, even suspicious, of change – certainly that hallmark of modernity, change for its own sake – and accepting of the reality of limits. The soul or spirit is firmly embodied. And pointedly as well as poignantly, Tolkien's tale ends with Sam, the books' most 'representative hobbit' as Tolkien described him [27], not passing over the Sea to Elvenhome but returning to his home, wife, child, fire and evening meal in Middle-earth.

There is our human model. But it's not how hobbits are human that matters so much as how humans are potentially hobbitic, and in a way, moreover, that could have very positive consequences. In a world ravaged by ecological, political, social and cultural madness, and by a dire lack of individual and collective self-restraint, I do not think I need to spell out why. And at their heart is an acceptance of the ultimate imperfection and limit – death – along with the possibility of true immortality. For that, however – certainly for 'non-believers', and perhaps even for 'true believers' – we have only, in Tolkien's resonant phrase, 'Hope without guarantees'. [28] And that imperfection too must be accepted.

II

In this short remaining section, I want to consider the occasional recent charge that Tolkien's fiction is infected by racism – something which might indeed, if true, undermine its potential contribution to a human philosophical anthropology. The best candidate for an intractable problem regarding such racism is, of course, the Orcs. With all the other races in Middle-earth, individual difference finally trumps group characteristics. Even when the latter are in play, how they are manifested varies widely between individuals. But Orcs, as such, are apparently irredeemable.

But are they? In *The Lord of the Rings* they unavoidably become more individual, arguing with each other, expressing fear and revulsion of the Nazgûl, and engaging in blokey camaraderie ('the lads'). And that variability surely makes Orcs less generically evil and more variable, just like the other races.

They are not even uniformly black-skinned. Some were – the Uruks of Mordor – but Tolkien describes Orcs generally as 'sallow-skinned' [29], which *Chambers Dictionary* defines as 'of a pale-yellowish colour'. We might also recall Tolkien's deliberate and principled rejection of simple-minded allegory, whereby the Orcs 'are', or even are 'like', blacks.

Yet at the same time, it is impossible not to be struck by Gandalf the (truly) White, the dazzling white light of the Galadriel's phial, the White Lady of Rohan and so on, as against the Black Land, the Black Speech, the Black Riders and so on. There is certainly a pattern at work, and maybe a problem, although not necessarily one that involves race.

Rather, it is part of a problematic moral valuation, deeply rooted in ‘Western’ culture, which comprises intensely value-laden hierarchical polarities, with the first term valued over the second: light vs dark, high vs low, inner vs outer, culture vs nature, and male vs female [30]. The toxic effect of these valuations on race, gender, class and beyond have been and remain considerable. Given their ubiquity and antiquity, however – at least since Plato, and amplified a hundred-fold by Christian theology – it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, for Tolkien not to use them. And if readers accept them uncritically, then there could indeed be a problem with Tolkien’s moral cosmology. But that is a risk, not an ineluctable result, and I personally feel that in this case, it is a price worth paying. Otherwise, there would have been no story.

III

Is there a connection between the two parts of this paper? The distorting and destructive effects of those value-laden polarities depend on them being kept apart, with the first item uncontaminated by the second. But as Tolkien’s work reminds us, just as the Incarnation subverted one such polarity – the divine ultimate becomes a singular, limited, vulnerable being – so the Crucifixion and Resurrection subvert perhaps the ultimate polarity: life and death. (As long as neither one is reduced to the other, that is.)

But I personally can only hope that the symbolic significance of that conclusion extends beyond its formally Christian provenance. And that hope returns us back to imperfection and uncertainty.

References

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3. TLoTR: xxii.
4. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2006): 176
5. Letters: 189.
6. Letters: 148, 406.
7. TLoTR: 1137.
8. J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988 [1964] pp. 9-73: 18.
9. OFS: 49-50.
10. Letters: 146.
11. OFS: 10.
12. Letters: 151-52.
13. TLoTR: 352.
14. Letters: 267, and cf. 285; Franco Manni, 'A Eulogy of Finitude: Anthropology, Eschatology and Philosophy of History in Tolkien,' pp. 5-38 in Roberto Arduini and Claudio A. Testi (eds), *The Broken Scythe: Death and Immortality in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Zurich: Walking Tree Books, 2012): 35 (cf. Letters: 267); TLoTR: 1063, 1137.
15. Letters: 146.
16. OFS: 62; Letters: 267.
17. Letters: 267.
18. See Patrick Curry, 'Fantasy in Transhumanism and Tolkien', *The Ecological Citizen* 4 (2020) 23-4.
19. Manni: 14.
20. Manni: 15; Letters: 236.
21. Letters: 236; cf. 284.
22. Manni: 14.
23. Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992): 258. (Note that a revised edition was published in 2014 by Brush Education.)
24. Zwicky: 524.
25. From the song 'Anthem' on the album *The Future* (1992).
26. I first broached this question in 'Enchantment in Tolkien and Middle-earth', pp. 99-112 in Stratford Caldecott and Thomas Honegger (eds), *Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings: Sources of Inspiration* (Zurich: Walking Tree Books, 2008); reprinted in my *Deep Roots in a Time of Frost: Essays on Tolkien* (Zurich: Walking Tree Books, 2014), pp. 83-94.
27. Letters: 329.
28. Letters: 237.
29. Letters: 274.
30. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).