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GOOD AND EVIL IN THE LORD OF THE RINGS
by W. H. Auden

In what Tolkien has termed The Primary World, man is, so far as we know, the only creature capable of making moral judgements and choices; the only creature, therefore, on whom moral judgements can be passed. This capacity for moral choice seems to us to be essentially related to another characteristic unique to man, his gift of speech. Many animals possess a code by which individual members of a species can communicate to each other vital information about food, sex, territory, the presence of enemies, but such codes never develop into what we mean by speech: so far as we know, no animal can give names to things, or address another animal in the first or second person singular.

In the Secondary World of Middle-earth, there exist, in addition to men, at least seven species capable of speech and therefore of moral choice—Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, Wizards, Ents, Trolls, Orcs. Of these, dwarves, hobbits, wizards, and ents are like us in that each individual is both good and evil: one may resist temptation more successfully than another, but even the best may fall, and even the worst may repent. The elves are unlike us in that they are an "unfallen" race, that is to say, though they have knowledge of good and evil, no elf has ever as yet thought or done evil, and it is impossible for the reader to imagine one doing so in the future. (This is true, at least, of the elves in The Lord of the Rings. Thranduil and the wood-elves in The Hobbit have human weaknesses.) Although not subject to natural death, they are not angels, for every angel is a species-in-itself, and the Elves are a species in the terrestrial sense, who marry and beget children.

At the opposite pole to the Elves, there is Sauron, who is unlike any one of us in that he is an incarnation of absolute Evil. Though the text does not specifically say so, I think we may take it that Sauron, like his predecessor Morgoth, is a fallen Vala. He cannot therefore be annihilated, only reduced to impotence, "a mere spirit of malice that gnaws itself in the shadows, but cannot again grow or take shape." Unlike us, too, are the Trolls of Mordor and the Orcs, for they appear to be irredeemably evil and incapable of repentance: on meeting either, there is only one thing to do: kill. I must confess I am not quite happy about these beings, for their existence seems to imply that it is possible for a species that can speak, and, therefore, make moral choices, to be evil by nature. I can readily believe that Sauron, by cross-breeding and training of creatures already in existence, can produce the pterodactyl-like creatures ridden by the Nazgûl, for these are "dumb" animals, who can be used for evil purposes but cannot be called evil in themselves. I am not so ready to believe that the Orcs were bred by Morgoth and the Mordor Trolls by Sauron, for neither are simply animals. If Evil can not only seduce the good but also create beings who are evil from the beginning, then one cannot, as Tolkien does, call God "The One"; there must, in that case, be Two, a good One and an evil One.

And I have a moral, as well as a theological, objection. In the Primary World we are all aware of our deplorable tendency, when our interests, still more the interests of our social group, come into conflict with others, to identify our cause with Good and that of our enemies with Evil. There have been Just Wars: most of us would agree that it was as morally necessary for England and the United States to resist Germany and Japan by force of arms as it was for Rohan and Gondor to resist the armies of Saruman and Sauron. Individual men can be wicked: Hitler was not another Sauron, but he seems to have come as
close to being one as is possible for a mortal. It would, however, be
grossly unjust to say that all Germans and Japanese, even the majority,
were wicked.

Even in a Secondary World, I feel that irredeemable wickedness
should be ascribed only to individuals who are nameable or countable--
Sauron, the Lieutenant of Barad-dûr, the nine Nazgûl--not to anonymous
crowds. When it comes to the men who fought on Sauron's side, I am
happy to see that Tolkien recognises this. If we knew more about the
historical reasons for the enmity between Gondor and the Haradrim or
the Easterlings, we can be certain we should find that Gondor was not
completely innocent. Consequently, reconciliation is possible; Aragorn
can pardon and make peace with them.

As we grow older in the Primary World, we realize more and more
how much an individual's notions of good and evil and his power to re-
sist temptation depend, not upon his reason and will, but upon the kind
of family and society into which he happens to have been born and by
which he has been educated. At any given time in history, some families
and some societies are in a better state of moral health than others.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, full justice is done to this fact. It is in-
deed "providential" that it should have been a hobbit, Bilbo, who found
the Ring, and a hobbit, Frodo, who has the task of taking it to Mount
Doom. (Both of them, incidentally, come, by hobbit standards, of "good
stock"). The hobbit society is an exceptionally "good" society, happy,
friendly, and unaggressive; but then, in comparison with most of the
peoples of Middle-earth, the hobbits have been exceptionally fortunate.
The Shire where they live is fertile: everyone has enough to eat, and
there is room for everyone. When Bilbo gives his farewell feast, the
Hobbits have been their own masters for more than two thousand years,
and, except for an invasion by orcs and a bad winter some two hundred
and fifty years before, they have suffered no collective misfortune,
either from nature or outside enemies. Indeed one is inclined to feel
that the sufferings inflicted upon them by Saruman and his Big Men were
probably very good for them; after such an experience they could not be
smugly satisfied with themselves.

On the other hand, we are made to feel that Gollum, whatever the
defects in his character, has been exceptionally unfortunate. How dif-
f erent his life might have been, had Deagol not happened to fish the
Ring up out of the Great River. Even during the many years when he
possessed it, its possession brought him no pleasure.

All the "great pleasures" under the mountains had turned
out to be just empty night: there was nothing to find
out, nothing worth doing, only nasty furtive eating and
resentful remembering. He was altogether wretched. He
hated the dark and he hated light more: he hated every-
thing, and the Ring most of all.

And, after losing the Ring, his life becomes one long torment, mental
and physical. In part his very wretchedness is due to the fact that he
has not become wholly evil. When he led Frodo and Sam through the
Dead Marshes and up the pass of Cirith Ungol, he would have suffered
less if he had only had one thought in his mind--how to steal the Ring--
instead of also feeling genuine gratitude to and affection for Frodo.

The first emotion he arouses in all who meet him--Bilbo, Aragorn,
Gandalf, Frodo, Sam--is pity, so that, though they all know how dan-
gerous he is, not one of them has the heart to kill him. It is a fine
touch, I think, that by the time of the final scene on Mount Doom, we
should be told that he has become insane and therefore no longer morally

--6--
responsible for his actions.

The conflict between Good and Evil on Middle-earth involves physical warfare, and there, as in the Primary World, warfare is the exercise not of power or authority, but of impersonal force or violence. Courage may win a battle, but wars are won by the side which has most force at its disposal, more soldiers and better weapons.

Many fairy-tales suffer from the defect that, in them, Good triumphs over Evil simply because it is stronger, but this is not a defect which can be avoided by giving Good no strength at all. In The Lord of the Rings Sauron's opponents are a formidable lot but, in sheer strength, Sauron is, even without the Ring, their superior. Nevertheless, as Gandalf points out, such force as they do possess still has its part to play.

We have not the Ring. In wisdom or great folly, it has been sent away lest it destroy us. Without it we cannot by force defeat Sauron's force. But we must at all costs keep his eye from his true peril. We cannot achieve victory by arms, but by arms we can give the Ring Bearer his only chance, frail though it may be.

Frodo's Quest is successful and Sauron is overthrown. One of Tolkien's most impressive achievements is that he succeeds in convincing the reader that the mistakes which Sauron makes to his own undoing are the kinds of mistake which Evil, however powerful, cannot help making, just because it is evil.

A good person always enjoys one advantage over an evil person, namely, that, while a good person can imagine what it would be like to be evil, an evil person cannot imagine what it would be like to be good. Elrond, Gandalf, Galadriel, Aragorn are able to imagine themselves as Sauron and can therefore resist the temptation to use the Ring themselves, but Sauron cannot imagine that anyone who knows what the Ring can accomplish, his own destruction among other things, will refrain from using it, let alone try to destroy it. Had he been capable of imagining this, he had only to sit watching and waiting in Mordor for the Ring Bearer to arrive, and he would have been bound to catch him and recover the Ring. Instead, he assumes that the Ring has been taken to Gondor where the strongest of his enemies are gathered, for this is what he would have done had he been in their place, and launches an attack on that city, neglecting the watch on his own borders.

Secondly, the kind of evil which Sauron embodies, the lust for domination, will always be irrationally cruel, for such a lust is not satisfied unless others not only obey but obey against their will. When Pippin looked into the Palantir of Orthanc and so revealed himself to Sauron, Sauron had only to question him to learn who had the Ring and what he intended to do with it. But, as Gandalf says, "He was too eager. He did not want information only: he wanted you quickly, so that he could deal with you in the Dark Tower, slowly." Even Men who are avid for power (how much more a fallen Vala) are generally masters of their physical passions, and can resist without difficulty the temptations of gluttony, sexual lust, and sloth, if these might interfere with their ambition. But they are powerless to control their rage if their wills are thwarted. When Sauron learns that Saruman has double-crossed him, his mind is so obsessed by rage that he neglects urgent business.

...our Silent Watchers were uneasy more than two days ago. But my patrol wasn't ordered out for another day, nor any message sent to Lugburz either: owing to the Great Signal going up, and the High Nazgul going off to the war, and all that. And then they couldn't get Lugburz to pay attention for a good while, I'm told.

Lastly, all alliances of Evil with Evil are necessarily unstable

-7-
since, by definition, Evil loves only itself, and its alliances are based on fear or hope of gain, not affection. As Dr. Johnson said:

Combinations of wickedness would overwhelm the world did not those who have long practised perfidy grow faithless to each other.

Sauron's greatest triumph has been his seduction of the great wizard Saruman, but though he has succeeded in making him a traitor to the cause of Good, he has not managed to completely enslave him, so that Saruman tries to seize the Ring for himself, and one result of his attempt is that Merry and Pippin are saved from torment and death. As Theoden says, "Oft evil will shall evil mar."

The Lord of the Rings ends, as a fairy-tale should, with what Tolkien calls a eucastrastrophe, (when a fairy-tale ends unhappily, like the French version of Rapunzel, the reader feels that the story has been broken off in the middle) but we are spared the pious fiction of the conventional concluding formula: And so they lived happily forever after.

Good has triumphed over Evil so far as the Third Age of Middle-earth is concerned, but there is no certainty that this triumph is final. There was Morgoth before Sauron, and who can be sure that, before the Fourth Age is over, a successor to Sauron will not appear? Victory does not mean either the restoration of the Earthly Paradise or the advent of the New Jerusalem. On Middle-earth as in the Primary World, the happiest solution involves loss as well as gain. With the destruction of the Ruling Ring, the three Elven Rings lose their power as Galadriel had foreseen.

If you succeed, then our power is diminished, and Lothlorien will fade, and the tide of time will sweep it away.

Even Frodo, the Quest Hero, has to pay for his success.

I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me.

If, as I believe, a good story is one which can persuade us to face life neither with despair nor with false hopes, then The Lord of the Rings is a very good story indeed.

The following corrections should be sufficient for unambiguous completion of Scott Smith's crossword (11:4):

1) Definitions 10 and 11 across refer to words K and Q, respectively.
2) The square below the right leg of the M should be cross-hatched.
3) The definition for the unnumbered ten-letter horizontal word is:
   "Ancestral family line of Gardners and Fairbairns."

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News of any commercialization of Middle-earth themes will be welcome here; so far no such authorization has been given, but it is likely at this stage that Prof. Tolkien will rather enjoy fun uses of his work, as long as they don't make money for someone else at his expense. It would be good, then, to put all Tolkien-entrepreneurs in touch with Allen & Unwin. Their chances are excellent.