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"The Gift of Death": Tolkien's Philosophy of Mortality

Abstract

Explores “why Tolkien chose to call death a ‘gift,’ and in what way the underlying moral vision [...] of Middle-earth is tied up with that concept.”

Additional Keywords

Immortality and mortality in J.R.R. Tolkien; Life after death in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Views on death

"The Gift of Death"

TOLKIEN'S PHILOSOPHY OF MORTALITY

GRANT C. STERLING

Introduction

One of the most striking notions of Professor J.R.R. Tolkien's fascinating world is the notion of the "Gift of Death." He introduces this concept in the "Quenta Silmarillion" with these words:

But the Quendi [the Elves] shall be the fairest of all earthly creatures, ... and they shall have the greater bliss in this world. But to the Atani [Human Beings] I will give a new gift.' Therefore he willed that the hearts of Men should seek beyond the world and should find no rest therein; but they should have a virtue to shape their life...¹

and later:

It is one with this gift of freedom that the children of Men dwell only a short space in the world alive, and are not bound to it, and depart soon whither the Elves know not.²

So to mankind Eru Ilúvatar, the Creator, gives a Gift: the gift of Death. In this paper I wish to explore the question of why Tolkien chose to call death a "Gift," and in what way the underlying moral vision of his great sub-creation, Middle-earth, is tied up with that concept.

First, though, a note about terminology. Tolkien believed that fully sentient spirits were indestructible, even perhaps by an act of God.³ Hence no sentient being ever *really* dies, if by 'death' is meant the utter destruction of the person. So in this paper I will use the word "death" to refer to the destruction of the physical form: the spirit then leaving the body. What distinguishes the sentient races in Tolkien, then, is the degree to which their physical forms are susceptible to death, and the destination of their spirits after their body is slain: and it is the latter which is of principal importance. As for the term "immortal," I will follow Tolkien's own usage by restricting it to those beings whose spirits remain in the world after their bodies are slain.⁴

The Fate of the Races in Middle-earth

Let me begin with a short account of the ultimate fate of the beings in Tolkien's Middle-earth.

The highest beings in the world, in terms of power, majesty and glory, are the mighty Valar, whom "Men call Gods." The Valar existed before ever the World came into being, and they indeed participated in the great Music which formed the pattern that the world would later take. The Valar do not naturally have incarnate forms,⁵ and hence cannot die. The only exception, perhaps, is Morgoth, the Great Enemy. In his desire to dominate the very structure of Middle-earth, Morgoth voluntarily took on a fully

incarnate form, and hence became susceptible to being slain.⁶ In the end, though, when he is finally captured and convicted by the Valar of his crimes, we read that he was cast beyond the confines of the world into the Void, there to await the Final Battle, the Dagor Dagorath, at the end of time: but Tolkien does suggest at one point that this might have been metaphorical for his having been executed and unable to reform his body for many ages.⁷ In any event, the rest of the Valar dwell now forever in Valinor, until that last battle is fought: they do not die naturally, and are not slain.

Second in strength to the Valar are the Maiar, Tolkien's generic name for the spiritual beings who were with the Valar before the creation, but lesser in strength. Like the Valar, the Maiar cannot die naturally. But unlike the Valar, many of the Maiar chose to take fully incarnate forms, and so though they are not subject to natural death they can be killed. The fate of those that were slain is unclear. Sauron, for example, simply rebuilt his physical form over many years and began anew: until the destruction of the One Ring removed so much of his power that he could not reform again. Thus after his final defeat Sauron is unable to gain a new body, but remains only a "spirit of hatred, unable to ever take shape again." But it is possible that Sauron's ability to reshape himself, and his consequent doom, are unique, a product of the Ring. It may be that slain Maiar share the fate of mankind (except when supernaturally resurrected, as was Gandalf). Unfortunately Tolkien has not given us information on the fate of the other incarnate Maiar who were killed, such as the Balrogs....

When the Valar and Maiar entered into the world, they became bound to it until it is destroyed. They cannot die naturally, and they cannot escape the world either, for their power is now part of it, and the fate that dictates its events dictates theirs as well. Mighty though they be, the Valar and Maiar are subject to the laws of the world.

Next we must mention the Firstborn, the Elves, first of the creatures of the World to arise to life, older than all save the immortal spirits. The difference between the Elves and the two greater powers, large though it seems, is really one of magnitude and not kind. For like the Valar and Maiar, the Elves are beings of the world, constrained within the limits of the world. Like the greater spirits, their fate and the fate of the world are inextricably linked; the Music dictates both. Like the greater spirits, the Elves do not die naturally. Their physical bodies may be slain, but this

simply causes their spirit to go to the Halls of Mandos, wherein they will dwell for a time until they are reborn into new bodies.⁸ Hence, the elves are immortals.

The fourth of Tolkien's races to be mentioned are the Dwarves, though of them little can be said here. *The Silmarillion* does not tell us their fate after death, instead giving two uncertain possibilities:

Aforetime it was held among the Elves in Middle-earth that dying the Dwarves returned to the earth and stone of which they were made; yet that is not their own belief. For they say that Aulë the Maker, whom they call Mahal, cares for them, and gathers them to Mandos in halls set apart; and that he declared to their Fathers of old that Ilúvatar will hallow them and give them a place among the Children in the End.⁹

So according to one elven tradition, the Dwarves, alone among the sentient races, really do die forever, ceasing utterly to exist. But given Tolkien's belief in the indestructibility of the spirit, it seems almost certain that this tradition is incorrect, and that they share the fate of the Elves.¹⁰

Finally, we are led to discussion of humanity.¹¹ Among so many immortal beings, how do humans fare? The answer has already been given: human beings do indeed die, and dying they leave the confines of the world completely, and the Elves know not whither they go. While other races share immortality, humans have the Gift of Ilúvatar, Death and mortality.

The "Gift"

Though (mortal) death is called by Eru a "Gift," the immortals have trouble seeing it so. Indeed, it is even called the "Doom of Men."¹² Witness the words of the messengers the Elves sent to Númenor, who reply to the Númenorean claim that Elven immortality is to be envied with the uncertain reply: "Indeed the mind of Ilúvatar concerning you is not known to the Valar..." The Elves generally do not understand death, and being genuinely forced to confront it can be a terrible experience.¹³ Arwen, one of only two Elves to be supernaturally given a human, mortal nature, says this when her husband Aragorn dies and she sees her own death before her:

But I say to you, King of the Númenoreans, not till now have I understood the tale of your people and their fall. As wicked fools I scorned them, but I pity them at last. For if this is indeed, as the Eldar say, the gift of the One to Men, it is bitter to receive.¹⁴

To the immortals, even the Valar, death is a mystery unsolved, a kind of fate they recognize but cannot fully comprehend.

But what do men themselves say of their own fate? Do they understand how it can be a gift? Perhaps some do. Aragorn says to Arwen:

Take counsel with yourself, beloved, and ask whether you would indeed have me wait until I wither and fall from my high seat witless and unmanned. Nay, lady, I am the last of the Númenoreans and the latest King of the Elder Days; and to me has been given not only a span thrice that of Men of

Middle-earth, but also the grace to go at my will, and give back the gift. Now, therefore, I will sleep.¹⁵

Aragorn accepts that he is to die, and even gives up his life willingly, before his end comes to him by the force of nature. For him, death is the inevitable counterpart of the gift of life, and nothing to be feared. This was the attitude of the highest men of the First Age, preserved in the early years of Aragorn's ancestors, the Númenoreans.¹⁶

But the attitude of the fathers of Men, the Edain, did not long endure, even in proud Númenor. For what was intended as a gift had been mixed with fear. Morgoth, the Great Enemy," cast his shadows upon it, and confounded it with darkness, and brought forth evil out of good, and fear out of hope."¹⁷ Though this attitude was prevalent among the lesser men of Middle-earth who had long lived under the shadow of evil, it did not at first appear in Númenor. But then it came there, too. The Númenoreans began to envy the immortality of the other races, saying:

Why do the Lords of the West sit there in peace unending, while we must die and go we know not whither, leaving our home and all that we have made?¹⁸

and, later,

Why should we not envy the Valar, or even the least of the Deathless? For of us is required a blind trust, and a hope without assurance, knowing not what lies before us in a little while. And yet we also love the Earth and would not lose it.¹⁹

Whereas the Kings of Númenor had previously acted as Aragorn would later act, choosing the time of their own death when they were still of sound mind, by the time of King Atanamir this changed, for he "lived to a great age, clinging to life beyond the end of all joy;"²⁰ refusing to accept the gift until it was thrust upon him against his will.

What was the significance of this change in attitude? Its consequences were immense. The desire to avoid death, which at first had been a "gift," drove the Kings of Númenor to covet the immortality which they saw as lying in the Undying Lands of Valinor. In this desire was the root of their downfall, because they would later try to seize the Undying Lands, thinking that the immortality lay in the lands and not in the natures of the beings who dwelt there. The result of this terrible confusion was the destruction by Ilúvatar of the invading Númenoreans and fair Númenor as well.

And this desire for immortality had a second consequence as well. For across the sea Sauron, former servant of Morgoth and still a reflection of his master's evil, used the fear of death as his snare when he gave to nine mortal men the rings which turned them into his most feared henchmen, the Nazgûl.

Sauron saw that the fear of death, which was the legacy of the time of Morgoth, still lingered on the lesser men, and so he was able to seduce them to his aid by offering immortality. Indeed, as a sign that the shadow was growing even upon Númenor, three of his new ringwraiths

were Númenorean lords. But his gift of immortality was but a sham. "They had, as it seemed, unending life, yet life became unendurable to them."²¹ The natural span of human life could be artificially lengthened by the rings of power, but it did not bring joy to its long-lived recipient.

Tolkien on the life-span of races

This passage illustrates a vital part of the fabric of which Middle-earth is wrought, a fundamental meaning crafted so skillfully by the late Professor into his work that it might escape notice. To Tolkien, it was vitally important that it be seen that immortality was not an advantage without cost. Truly, calling death a "gift" was no facade, but a genuine insight into the human condition.

On Tolkien's view, each race has been given a set span of years. When that time is exhausted, the individual can no longer find joy in life or the world, and continued existence becomes a mere burden. No beings, not even the mightiest powers in Arda, the Valar, are immune to this. For him, each race begins with a "fixed quantity" of life, and if life is somehow extended beyond this the result is that the individual feels "stretched," as Bilbo complains. Short of the direct intervention of Ilúvatar himself, conveying extended life onto a mortal will only bring ever-increasing discontent. This applies, though to a lessened degree, even to those few mortals who are allowed to venture to the Undying Lands, Frodo, Bilbo, Sam and Gimli. In one of his letters, Tolkien put it this way:

Frodo was sent or allowed to pass over the Sea to heal him—if that could be done, before he died. He would have eventually to pass away: no mortal could, or can, abide for ever on earth, or within Time. So he went both to a purgatory and to a reward, for a while: a period of reflection and peace and a gaining of a truer understanding of his position in littleness and in greatness, spent still in Time amid the natural beauty of "Arda Unmarred", the earth unspoiled by evil.²²

And again:

I have said nothing about it in this book, but the mythical idea underlying is that for mortals, since their 'kind' cannot be changed for ever, this is strictly only a temporary reward: a healing and a redress of suffering. They cannot abide for ever, and though they cannot return to mortal earth, they can and will 'die' — of free will, and leave the world.²³

Thus we see again that death is truly to be thought of as a reward. Without it, life would become unendurable, utterly without joy, and yet the world could never be escaped. Frodo, Bilbo, Sam and Gimli, though they are surrounded by the greatest and most perfect beauty possible in the world, will all *freely choose* to die instead, and pass out of the world altogether.

The 'immortals' have much longer durations of joy, but even these wane eventually. For the elves, first comes the dissatisfaction with the lesser lands of Middle-earth and the desire to take ship for Valinor. But finally, Valinor too will become a burden. The gift of death is a gift "which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy."²⁴ Even the

mighty Valar will tire of their immortality and yearn for death in the end.

So behind the fictional story of Middle-earth lies a clear message, a Christian message. As Tolkien saw it, although God intends that we love the world (the messengers from Valinor to Númenor also say "The love of Arda was set in your hearts by Ilúvatar, and he does not plant to no purpose"), yet He also intends that we see death, in its appropriate time, as a blessing, for through it we may escape the world and serve Him in other ways, and receive from Him a greater reward.²⁵ The immortals do not die, but it is also true that they are bound to the world for better and for worse. Mortal men must die and venture into the unknown, but they should see that Ilúvatar does not do anything without a purpose.

And so we see that in Tolkien, death is truly a 'gift of Ilúvatar,' and that failure to understand that gift may lead to terrible crimes, while accepting it leads to greater contentment and wisdom. Indeed, so important was this idea to Tolkien that on several occasions he identifies it as the main theme of *Lord of the Rings*.

"But I might say that if the tale is 'about' anything (other than itself), it is not as seems widely supposed about 'power'. Power-seeking is only the motive-power that sets events going, and is relatively unimportant, I think. It is mainly concerned with Death, and Immortality; and the 'escapes': serial longevity, and hoarding memory."²⁶

Notes

1. *The Silmarillion*, J.R.R. Tolkien (ed. Christopher Tolkien), Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977, p.41.
2. *Ibid.*, p.42.
3. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981, #211.
4. N° 212.
5. The forms of the Valar are not real physical forms, but rather mere appearances for the benefit of the mortals with which they interact. See *Letters*, #212.
6. See *Morgoth's Ring*, J.R.R. Tolkien, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993, p.399.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 403.
8. The exception to the reincarnation of the elves is Feanor, who we read never returned to a body. In some of the latest revisions, in *Morgoth's Ring*, we also find that some elves refused the call of Mandos upon death, and remained in the world as disincarnate spirits. See p. 223.
9. *Silm.*, p.44.
10. It is even believed by them that the Fathers of the Dwarves are reborn in their descendants, hence the line of "Durins".
11. Note well that Tolkien explicitly says that his most famous creations, the Hobbits, are essentially related to humans. Presumably, therefore, they share the fate of humanity. See *Letters*, #131, et al.
12. By the Messengers from the Elves, among many others. See *Silm.*, p.265.
13. For a fascinating look at one elven attitude towards death, see the "Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth" in *Morgoth's Ring*.
14. *The Lord of the Rings*, vol. 3, *The Return of the King*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1965, Appendix A, p.4~8.
15. *Ibid.*, p.427.

The narrator assures us they were only teasing, but Mr. and Mrs. Knight do give the bears their cabbages and bananas. In *WITW* and *Mr. Bliss*, motor-cars breed a sometimes violent and unseemly lust.

For the sin of driving, Mr. Bliss and Mr. Toad lose control of their homes, a representation of their own personal loss of control. Mr. Bliss and Mr. Toad both own large houses. Toad owns stately Toad Hall, commonly called the "best house in these parts." Mr. Bliss has a great house on a hill with "tall rooms, and a very high front door, because Mr. Bliss wore such tall hats" (4). They are both country gentlemen, a man and a toad of property, not exceedingly rich, like the Dorkinses in *Mr. Bliss* but wealthy enough to buy a car on a whim, and their homes are their castles.

Home is, unsurprisingly in these works, deeply connected with food. When Toad is locked away in a dungeon, a piece of buttered toast calls him back home:

The smell of that buttered toast simply talked to Toad, and with no uncertain voice; talked of warm kitchens, of breakfasts and bright frosty mornings, of cozy parlour firesides on winter evenings, when one's rambles were over and slippered feet were propped on the fender; of the purring of contented cats, and the twitter of sleepy canaries. (146; ch. 8)

Home is the balance to Romantic seeking, either picnicking, as is proper, or driving, which is unseemly. It is respite and renewal. In the chapter, "Dulce Domum," Mole returned to his home after living awhile with Rat on the riverbank and learned the:

special value of some anchorage in one's existence. He did not at all want to abandon the new life and its splendid spaces, to turn his back on sun and air and all they offered him and creep home and stay there; the upper world was all too strong, it called to him still, even down there, and he knew he must return to the larger stage. But it was good to think he had this to come back to, this place which was all his own.... (103)

"I am Blessed!" remarks Mr. Bliss when, after running all night, he spots his home on the hillside in the distance.

The return home is a common motif in fantastic literature, perhaps a necessary balance to the estrangement of the fantastic, the presence of what Tolkien called *Faerie*, the other world *The Hobbit* is sub-titled "There and Back Again," and the last line of *LotR* is Sam's greeting to his wife: "Well, I'm back." Mole's homecoming is enacted easily enough, a tribute to his more dignified pursuit of the ecstatic. For Mr. Toad and Mr. Bliss there is a "Scouring of the Shire" to face. As a direct result of their misadventures in motor-cars, they are required to fight for their lost homes.

Mr. Bliss and Mr. Toad are comic Odysseuses, home from their Great Wanderings to find their homes over-run. Penelope's suitors are played by, respectively, the stoats and weasels in *WITW* and the Girabbit in *Mr. Bliss*. The stoats and weasels jump on the opportunity of Mr. Toad's

incarceration to steal into his home in great numbers, set up guards against Toad's friends and eat up his larder during big and unruly celebrations. The Girabbit begins to literally eat Mr. Bliss out of house and home, breaking into the dining room and eating "its way through the ceiling into the best bedroom and through the next ceiling into the attic, and up the attic chimney" (39) until its head, eating a piece of the rug, stuck out the top of the house like a flag.

Toad's friends, Badger, Rat and Mole, aid him in routing the stoats and weasels, while the Bears, of all creatures, scare the Girabbit out of Mr. Bliss's house for a small fee.

Mr. Bliss and *The Wind in the Willows* end happily with banquets, friends and lavish eating. Mr. Toad, one is assured, "was indeed an altered Toad!" (257; ch. 12), although one doubts it. And as for Mr. Bliss, "Old Bliss has got the best of it after all!" (47) the Bears remark. For the moment each is contented doing what Tolkien and Grahame endorsed as one of life's great deeds: eating, and eating well among friends. And each, at least for the moment (for who can tell with Toad), has given up the horrid and spiritually jejune habit of driving.

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16. Since the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen so nicely illustrated Tolkien's attitude towards Death and mortality, Tolkien called it the most important part of the Appendices, and regretted that it could not be part of the main narrative. See *Letters*, N°181, et al.
17. *Silm.*, p.42.
18. *Ibid.*, p.264.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 265.
20. *Ibid.*, p.266.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
22. *Letters*, N° 246.
23. *Ibid.*, N° 154.
24. *Silm.*, p. 42.
25. It may be interesting to compare here the attitude toward death given by the Stoics. They held too that one has an appointed purpose on the earth, but that when it was clear their time had run, they should accept death willingly, committing suicide if necessary, rather than to "refuse to yield, until life was reft from them" as did the later kings of Númenor.
26. N° 211. See also N° 186, and N° 208, where he expresses similar sentiments.