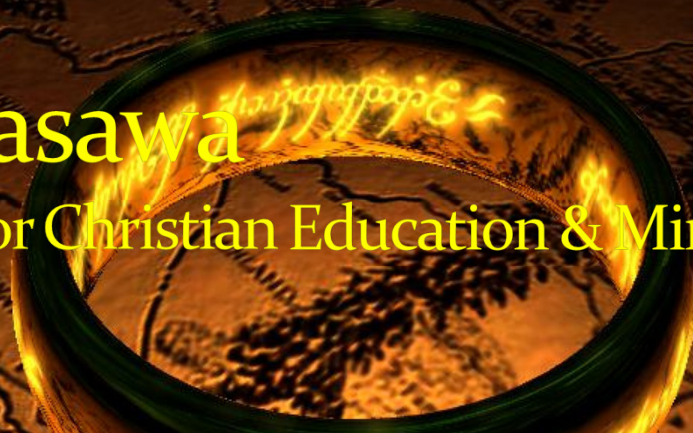


# The Theology of Tolkien's

# LORD OF THE RINGS

Mako A. Nagasawa

The Anástasis Center for Christian Education & Ministry

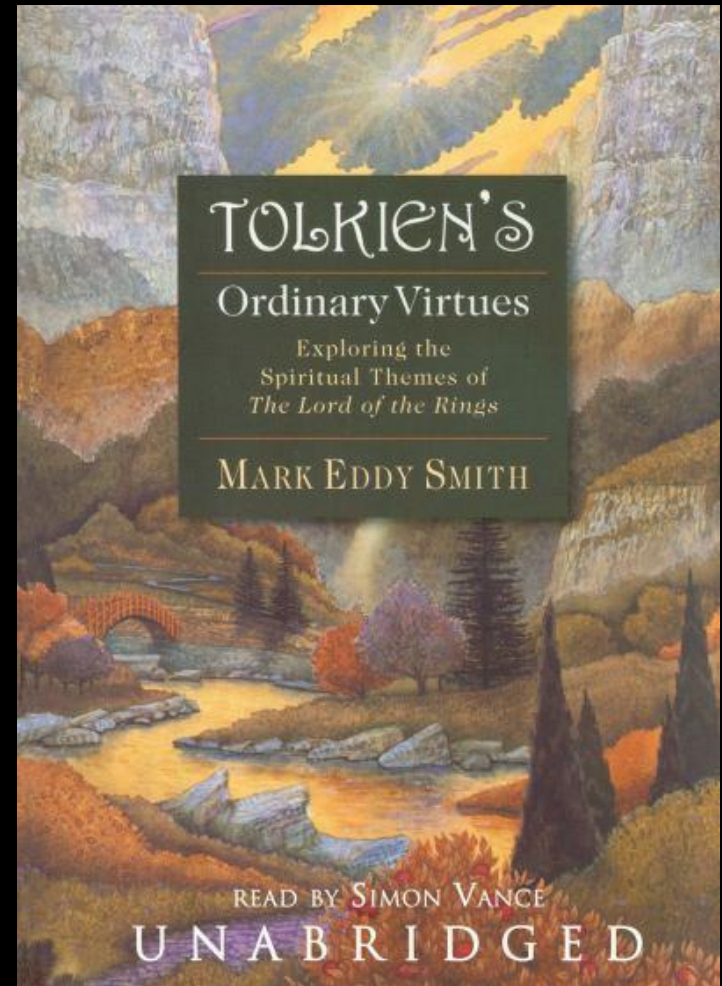


# The Theology of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

1. Introduction: J.R.R. Tolkien
2. Theodicy: A Good God and the Problem of Evil
  3. Identity: The Role of Humanity
  4. Salvation: The Defeat of Evil
5. Ethics: What is the Right Thing to Do?
6. Epistemology: How Do We Know?

# Major Themes in LOTR

- Friendship based on goodness
- Accept limits
- Renounce power
- Self-sacrifice



# Why Destroy the Ring?

‘Alas, no,’ said Elrond. ‘We cannot use the Ruling Ring. That we now know too well. It belongs to Sauron and was made by him alone, and is altogether evil. Its strength, Boromir, is too great for anyone to wield at will, save only those who have already a great power of their own. But for them it holds an even deadlier peril. The very desire of it corrupts the heart. Consider Saruman. **If any of the Wise should with this Ring overthrow the Lord of Mordor, using his own arts, he would then set himself on Sauron’s throne, and yet another Dark Lord would appear. And that is another reason why the Ring should be destroyed: as long as it is in the world it will be a danger even to the Wise.** For nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so. I fear to take the Ring to hide it. I will not take the Ring to wield it.’ (*FotR*, bk.2, ch.2)



# Why Destroy the Ring?

‘But what then would happen, if the Ruling Ring were destroyed as you counsel?’ asked Glóin.

‘**We know not for certain,**’ answered Elrond sadly. ‘Some hope that the Three Rings, which Sauron has never touched, would then become free, and their rulers might heal the hurts of the world that he has wrought. But maybe when the One has gone, the Three will fail, and many fair things will fade and be forgotten. That is my belief.’

‘Yet all the Elves are willing to endure this chance,’ said Glorfindel ‘if by it the power of Sauron may be broken, and the fear of his dominion be taken away for ever.’ (*FotR*, bk.2, ch.2)



# Why March on Mordor?

'His doubt will be growing, even as we speak here. His Eye is now straining towards us, blind almost to all else that is moving. So we must keep it. Therein lies all our hope. This, then, is my counsel. We have not the Ring. In wisdom or great folly it has been sent away to be destroyed, lest it destroy us. Without it we cannot by force defeat his 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 be...**'



# Why March on Mordor?

‘..We must make ourselves the bait, though his jaws should close on us. He will take that bait, in hope and in greed, for he will think that in such rashness he sees the pride of the new Ringlord: and he will say: “So! he pushes out his neck too soon and too far. Let him come on, and behold I will have him in a trap from which he cannot escape. There I will crush him, and what he has taken in his insolence shall be mine again for ever.”’ (*RotK*, bk.5, ch.9)



# Why Pity Gollum?

‘Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity.’

‘I am sorry,’ said Frodo. ‘But I am frightened; and I do not feel any pity for Gollum.’

‘You have not seen him,’ Gandalf broke in.

‘No, and I don’t want to,’ said Frodo. I can’t understand you. Do you mean to say that you, and the Elves, have let him live on after all those horrible deeds? Now at any rate he is as bad as an Orc, and just an enemy. He deserves death.’





# Why Pity Gollum?

‘Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many – yours not least. In any case we did not kill him: he is very old and very wretched. The Wood-elves have him in prison, but they treat him with such kindness as they can find in their wise hearts.’ (*FotR*, bk.1, ch.2)



# Did Frodo Succeed or Fail?

‘...the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many – yours not least...’ (*FotR*, bk.1, ch.2)



# Ethics Based on What?

- Received Morality, Hope in Greater Powers of Goodness
- Consequentialism / Utilitarianism and Calculation



# The Theology of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

1. Introduction: J.R.R. Tolkien
2. Theodicy: A Good God and the Problem of Evil
  3. Identity: The Role of Humanity
  4. Salvation: The Defeat of Evil
5. Ethics: What is the Right Thing to Do?
6. Epistemology: How Do We Know?

# Ethics Based on What Epistemology?

- Received Morality is based on “Hearing” and Hope
  - Men from Elves
  - Elves from Valar
- Consequentialism / Utilitarianism is based on “Sight” and Calculation



# Why Sight Fails

- Saruman sees the might of Mordor and is persuaded to join forces with Sauron



# Why Sight Fails

- Sauron sees Pippin in the palantir, and thinks that Saruman has the Ring and is showing Sauron the hobbit who had it





# Why Sight Fails

- Aragorn reveals himself to Sauron, who thinks Aragorn has defeated Saruman, now has the Ring, and will move to strike from Minas Tirith



# Why Sight Fails

- Denethor tries to see what Sauron sees, but despairs, and finally is shown by Sauron the Corsair ships sailing up the Anduin River; Aragorn is on those ships, but Denethor commits suicide.



# Why Sight Fails

- Sauron believes that Aragorn, wielding the Ring, is deluded by the Ring into marching on Mordor; odds are 7,000 men to 10,000 orcs plus trolls and Nazgul.



# Why Sight Fails

- A predisposition to “see” the world through your own pre-existing lens, *and not question the lens*



# Why Didn't Saruman Study Hobbits?

'Maybe not,' answered Gandalf. 'Hobbits are, or were, no concern of his. Yet he is great among the Wise. He is the chief of my order and the head of the Council. His knowledge is deep, **but his pride has grown with it**, and he takes ill any meddling. The lore of the Elven-rings, great and small, is his province. He has long studied it, seeking the lost secrets of their making... But there is only one Power in this world that knows all about the Rings and their effects; and as far as I know there is no Power in the world that knows all about hobbits. Among the Wise I am the only one that goes in for hobbit-lore: an obscure branch of knowledge, but full of surprises. Soft as butter they can be, and yet sometimes as tough as old tree-roots. I think it likely that some would resist the Rings far longer than most of the Wise would believe. I don't think you need worry about Bilbo. (*FotR*, bk.1, ch.2)



# Why Didn't Sauron Suspect?

'Despair, or folly?' said Gandalf. 'It is not despair, for despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt. We do not. It is wisdom to recognize necessity, when all other courses have been weighed, though as folly it may appear to those who cling to false hope. Well, let folly be our cloak, a veil before the eyes of the Enemy! For he is very wise, and weighs all things to a nicety in the scales of his malice. **But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power; and so he judges all hearts. Into his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse it, that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it. If we seek this, we shall put him out of reckoning.**' (*FotR*, bk.2, ch.2)



# Why Didn't Sauron Suspect?



‘Indeed he is in great fear, not knowing what mighty one may suddenly appear, wielding the Ring, and assailing him with war, seeking to cast him down and take his place. **That we should wish to cast him down and have no one in his place is not a thought that occurs to his mind. That we should try to destroy the Ring itself has not yet entered into his darkest dream.** In which no doubt you will see our good fortune and our hope. For imagining war he has let loose war, believing that he has no time to waste; for he that strikes the first blow, if he strikes it hard enough, may need to strike no more. So the forces that he has long been preparing he is now setting in motion, sooner than he intended. Wise fool. For if he had used all his power to guard Mordor, so that none could enter, and bent all his guild to the hunting of the Ring, then indeed hope would have faded: neither Ring nor Bearer could long have eluded him. But now his eye gazes abroad rather than near at home; and mostly he looks towards Minas Tirith. Very soon now his strength will fall upon it like a storm.’ (*TT*, bk.4, ch.5)

# Epistemology: How Do We Know?

- “Evil, that is, has every advantage but one – it is inferior in imagination. Good can imagine the possibility of becoming evil – hence the refusal of Gandalf and Aragorn to use the Ring – but Evil, defiantly chosen, can no longer imagine anything but itself.”
  - W.H. Auden, *The New York Review of Books* (Jan 22, 1956)





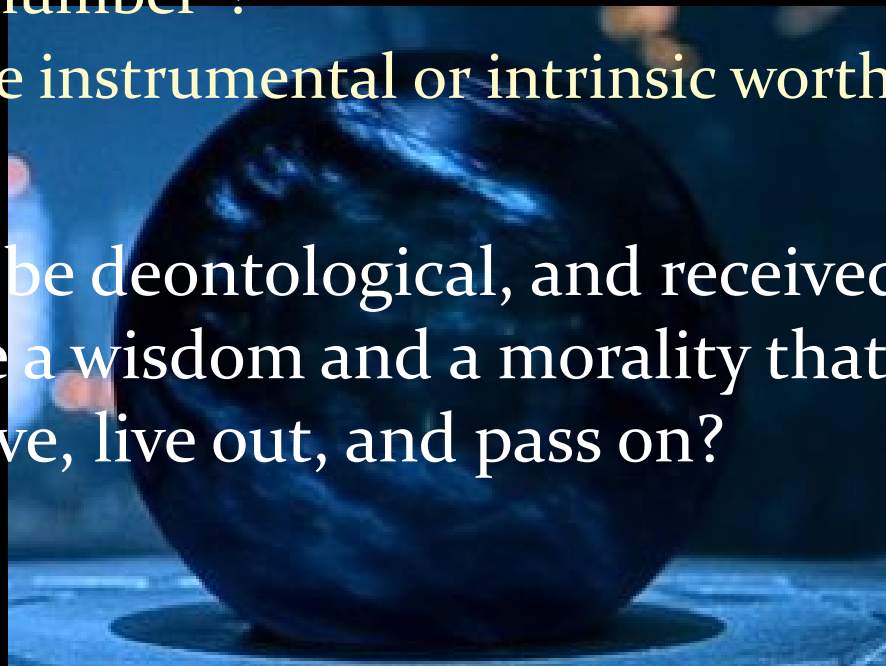
# Epistemology: How Do We Know?

- Logically, your *epistemology* should come before your ethics, and should shape your *ethics*
- Unfortunately, your *ethics* shape – and sometimes determines – your *epistemology*
  - ‘I like beer and wine, therefore Islam must be wrong.’
  - ‘I like near-unlimited sexual freedom, therefore Christianity must be wrong.’



# Epistemology: How Do We Know?

- Utilitarian calculations don't work
  - “The greatest good for the greatest number”: You cannot maximize two variables at once
  - What is “good”?
  - What is the “greatest number”?
  - Do human beings have instrumental or intrinsic worth?
- Therefore, ethics must be deontological, and received, not utilitarian. Is there a wisdom and a morality that we were meant to receive, live out, and pass on?



# Epistemology: How Do We Know?

- If you want power and self-assertion, you will not be open to giving up power and self-sacrifice
- But your pre-condition itself might be morally wrong!



# Epistemology: How Do We Know?

- Most troubling of all, what if we have to account for our own personal corruption?
  - Why were even Hobbits vulnerable to the Ring?
  - Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam needed to go to the Undying Lands to be healed

- What if we are not neutral observers of good and evil?



# Epistemology: How Do We Know?

- Notice: Tolkien's literary peers
  - Fyodor Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamozov* (1880)
  - Lord Acton, 'Power tends to corrupt, absolute power corrupts absolutely' (1887)
  - George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (1945)
  - William Golding, *The Lord of the Flies* (1954), *The Inheritors* (1955)
  - T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (1958)
  - Kurt Vonnegut, *Billy Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)
  - Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973)

(Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*)



# Epistemology: How Do We Know?

- If the human problem is *internal* to each of us, not simply *external*,
  - Is there a God good enough and personal enough to heal human nature?
  - Has anyone developed a new, healed human nature? Any other possible solutions?
  - What is the evidence for the solution? For that specific God?
  - Are we open to fairly deep change, including renouncing the desire to define good and evil on our own?

# Epistemology: How Do We Know?

- A good and personal God?
- An original wisdom and moral vision to be received?

# The Story That Fills Full This Story



- Augustine of Canterbury in 597 AD, in Kent, preaching to King Aethelbert, king of the Anglo-Saxons, the first English king to become a Christian
- Tolkien's original purpose – imagining earliest Christian mission to the Angles (English)



# The Story That Fills Full This Story



“I will take the Ring.”

# The Story That Fills Full This Story



“I will resist the Ring.”

# The Story That Fills Full This Story



“I will destroy the Ring.”

# The Story That Fills Full This Story



“I am who you should have been.”

# The Story That Fills Full This Story



“It can be conquered. You can be cured, by me.”

# The Story That Fills Full This Story

“This is the Great Hope: that Eru will himself enter into Arda and heal Men and all the Marring.”

J.R.R. Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring: The Later Silmarillion*, “Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth”

“...an unlooked-for thing... which could have been accomplished in no other way than by God the Lord of all... an unlooked-for salvation...”

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk.3, ch.6

# The Story That Fills Full This Story

A good God will triumph over evil

“The one was deep and wide and beautiful, but slow and blended with an immeasurable sorrow, from which its beauty chiefly came. The other had now achieved a unity of its own; but it was loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated; and it had little harmony, but rather a clamorous unison as of many trumpets braying upon a few notes. And it essayed to drown the other music by the violence of its voice, but it seemed that its most triumphant notes were taken by the other and woven into its own solemn pattern.”

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, “Ainulindale”

# The Theology of Tolkien's

# LORD OF THE RINGS

Mako A. Nagasawa

The Anástasis Center for Christian Education & Ministry

