

ABSTRACT

Where the Shadows Lie: Tolkien's Medieval View of Free Will, Temptation, and Evil

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J.R.R. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* in such a way that the story “absorbed” specific parts of Tolkien’s own beliefs. Such an absorption allows for distinctly Medieval Christian beliefs to appear throughout the narrative. With careful observation and comparison, I will show how Tolkien's theories of evil, free will, and temptation fit into a broadly Medieval Christian tradition. I will show the connections between some of the foremost philosophical scholars of the Middle Ages and J.R.R. Tolkien by examining his letters and fantasy narrative, in conjunction with the relevant works of St. Augustine, St. Anselm, St. Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus. In my first chapter, I introduce the influences on Tolkien and how he intentionally included such elements in the story. In my second chapter, I investigate how Tolkien adopts a Medieval privation theory to explain evil. I then proceed to investigate the benefits of reading Tolkien's discussion of free will as an illustration of St. Anselm’s two-will theory. Finally, I conclude by briefly examining the role of Grace in Tolkien's narrative and how it influenced his portrayal of evil and free will.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas M. Ward", is written over a horizontal line.

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Where the Shadows Lie:

Tolkien's Medieval View of Free Will, Temptation, and Evil

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CHAPTER 1

Unexpected Christianity: A Case for Medieval Philosophy in *The Lord of the Rings*

The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, particularly all references to anything like ‘religion’, to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is *absorbed* into the story and the symbolism.¹

To many Christian readers, Tolkien’s absorption of religious elements into the world of Middle Earth provides a unique journey through a distant yet familiar world. While trekking with Frodo and Sam, fighting with Aragorn, and lumbering with Treebeard, readers are forced to engage with deep theological and philosophical concepts woven seamlessly throughout the intertwining narratives. Some of the most obvious philosophical elements can be seen in the conflict between good and evil, the relationship between free will and temptation, and the nature of creation. To better understand how such concepts add depth to Middle-Earth, readers should examine the philosophical and theological authors that influenced Tolkien. The purpose of this project is to show that J.R.R Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* should be read as a part of a long Catholic philosophical tradition dating back to St. Augustine. When Tolkien’s legendarium is read as part of this tradition, the depth of his theories on evil, free will, and temptation becomes much more clear. In this first chapter, I will discuss Tolkien’s background, the relevant Medieval voices, and some of the contemporary Tolkien scholars that correlate

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2000), 172.

Tolkien and the Medieval world. In chapter 2, I will discuss Tolkien's view of evil, its implementation in *The Lord of the Rings* narrative, and the contemporary debate over Tolkien's depiction of evil. I will progress, in chapter 3, to discuss the ways that Frodo exhibits a distinct version of free-will found in St. Anselm's two-will theory and the interplay within the will when temptations arise. Finally, I will conclude in chapter 4 by showing how the concept of Grace influenced Tolkien's depiction of evil and free will.

Tolkien's Life and Views

Tolkien's early life provided the formative environment for his creative and academic aspirations. His mother, Mable Tolkien, was one of the most important people in his life, instructing a young Tolkien in homeschool. In addition to instilling a lifelong love and pursuit of knowledge, she raised him in the Roman Catholic church.² Unsurprising to anyone who has read Tolkien's works, his early introduction to Catholicism greatly influenced and guided him throughout his life – even through his youthful antics and pursuits as an Oxford undergraduate.³ But Mable was not the only strong Catholic influence on young Tolkien, Fr. Francis Xavier Morgan proved to be such a major influence and paternal guide that Tolkien named his first son after him.⁴

Fr. Francis also provided Tolkien with his first exposures to the realm of discussing theology and philosophy, even bequeathing Tolkien his personal copy of the

² Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 17.

³ Zaleski, 58.

⁴ Zaleski, 19.

Summa Theologiae in Latin.⁵ The *Summa* seems to have been a useful work that left a lasting imprint on Tolkien's view of the world. His exposure to Aquinas via Fr. Francis was also amplified by Pope Leo XIII's call for Catholics to return to the thoughts of the Angelic Doctor.⁶ With these explicit markers of influence, it will become easier for those acquainted with St. Thomas to identify places where distinctly Thomistic philosophy was absorbed into Middle Earth. Tolkien's early exposures to distinctly Medieval Christian thought provides a specific lens that both aligns with Tolkien's beliefs and amplifies a reading of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Prior to his time at Oxford, as well as during and after, Tolkien engaged in a group called the Tea Club and Barrovian Society (TCBS), a group that engaged in various discussions over "religion, art, and moral behavior."⁷ By the time Tolkien joined the trenches in World War I, he had been encountered multiple environments that shaped his understanding of the real world and influenced his future sub-creative endeavors in Middle-Earth. And while the war brought heartbreak and pain, it was an important environment that pushed Tolkien's faith to take on a devout form and his creative endeavors to burgeon.⁸ Tolkien's contraction of trench fever and return home for treatment, allowed for the much-needed time to further clarify his thoughts.⁹ The

⁵ Jonathan S. McIntosh, *The Flame Imperishable: Tolkien, St. Thomas, and the Metaphysics of Faërie*, (Kettering: Angelico Press, 2017), 20-21.

⁶ Peter Candler, "Tolkien of Nietzsche, Philosophy or Nihilism," University of Nottingham Centre of Theology and Philosophy. <http://theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/papers/~CandlerTolkeinNietzsche.doc> (accessed 12/1/2020), 8.

⁷ Zaleski, 28.

⁸ Zaleski, 69-70.

⁹ Zaleski, 124.

downtime he found during his recovery was where he began to see his myth as more than just another fantasy story – but rather as a myth for England.¹⁰ Such a goal would require a world with more detail, more clarity, and more cohesiveness than England had seen up until that point. And for the world to work in a consistent way, it would need a clear metaphysical system.

When Tolkien was finally appointed to a teaching position at Oxford, Middle Earth had begun to take a coherent form with the foundations in place for an eventually consistent world. It is worth noting that Tolkien’s interests in Catholicism were not merely personal, but also academic. His professional research of Catholicism primarily focused on “the *Ancrene Wisse*, a thirteenth-century rule for anchoresses (female hermits), who typically inhabited cells (anchorholds) attached to churches and devoted their lives to solitary contemplation.”¹¹ While it may seem like an interesting piece of Tolkien trivia, this Medieval rulebook actually helps to illuminate the depths Tolkien went to while pursuing subjects that peaked his interests. Later in life, Tolkien became “[the] president of the Oxford branch of the Catenian Association, an international fraternal order of Catholic professionals.”¹² Such a position reinforces the profound and deep impact that Catholicism had on Tolkien’s thought process. With these facts in mind, it should not be surprising to find both cursory and deep Catholic and Medieval Christian themes throughout Tolkien’s legendarium.

¹⁰Zaleski, 125.

¹¹ Zaleski, 213.

¹² Zaleski, 213.

While a professor at Oxford, Tolkien benefited from his continued inclusion in the Inklings, a group that undeniably influenced his life and writings. The Inklings provided a place to present and discuss current works of literature, as well as discuss philosophy and theology in the company of like-minded individuals. While the true extent of Tolkien's philosophical interests remains unknown, many members of the Inklings were openly interested in different influential scholars from the western intellectual tradition. Among the notable philosophical influences on the Inklings was St. Thomas Aquinas, which is easily be shown in an anecdote about the formation of the Inklings. C.S. Lewis invited Dr. Robert E. Havard to join the group after discovering their "mutual interest in Thomas Aquinas... [by chattering] on about the Angelic Doctor for twenty-five minutes."¹³ When coupling the groups shared Christianity and interest in St. Thomas with Tolkien's personal interests in Aquinas, it seems almost certain that there were many debates over St. Thomas' writings.

On an intuitive level, Tolkien and Thomas seem to go together like cookies and milk. Tolkien's love of philology, his interest in creation and sub-creation, his questions about evil and temptation, and his belief in free-will all mirror themes and discussions from the *Summa Theologiae*. On the other side, St. Thomas was not a philologist, but he had a complex philosophy of language, especially when it applied to describing God. He believed that our terminology could not capture the Divine Essence and thus created a negative system of philosophy – i.e., describing God through what he is not. The connection that should be drawn between the two is that Aquinas clearly cared about the way language worked, much like Tolkien. Regardless of whether or not Tolkien admitted

¹³ Zaleski, 199.

there was any similarity, is the clear connection between Tolkien's creation myth and Aquinas' philosophy of creation. The exploration of this connection will not be done in this paper, but a good discussion of the Thomistic philosophy of creation found in Tolkien's works can be found in Jonathan S. McIntosh's *The Flame Imperishable*.¹⁴ What will be of interest in this paper, is how the Thomistic conception of evil adds to the privation theory found in Medieval Christianity from Augustine to Scotus.

In short, when examining the works of Tolkien, it is worth remembering that the depth of his world required a clear philosophical understanding of the sub-creative world he desired. Tolkien the philosopher did not present his philosophy in the traditional analytical process, instead he chose to embed his theories into the foundations of Middle-Earth. Examining the groups that he was a part of and the education he received, clearly exhibit a pattern of engagement with many influential voices throughout antiquity. The TCBS, his Oxford undergraduate work and later academic career, and the Inklings all provided the grounds for his exploration of philosophical issues through a Socratic discussion-based setting among well-read peers. And finally, his own interests in philology would assist him in his exploration of philosophy by providing similarities in understanding how language works to describe the difficult realities in the world. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that there are many deep philosophical and theological systems at work throughout the *Lord of the Rings*.

¹⁴ Jonathan S. McIntosh, *The Flame Imperishable: Tolkien, St. Thomas, and the Metaphysics of Faërie*, (Kettering: Angelico Press, 2017).

From Augustine to Scotus: Philosophers Present in the Lord of the Rings

While we have good reason to believe that Tolkien was influenced by Thomas Aquinas, it also seems like Thomas' work brought along many distinct Medieval philosophical themes found in other Christian scholars. One of the most important voices that laid the groundwork for Aquinas was St. Augustine of Hippo, a prolific writer and influential bishop in the early church. St. Augustine was the first Christian voice to clearly articulate a defense of many influential Catholic doctrines. Thus, when seeking to create a broadly Medieval view of philosophy, Augustine should be invoked to explicate the two important concepts of evil and free will. One of Augustine's most influential theories was the privation theory of evil. The privation theory of evil states that a substantial evil does not exist, but that all evils are merely perverted goods.¹⁵ The privation theory can be found in multiple works, but most notably in *The Confessions* and in *On Free Choice of the Will*.¹⁶ Augustine's second major contribution uses the privation theory to argue for the first philosophical defense of free will, where free will describes the will's freedom to sin or not to sin.¹⁷ Augustine's defense of the privation theory and free will becomes the traditional Christian approach to explain evil's existence because of free will.

Augustine's solution to the colloquial problem of evil is used in some degree by all of the philosophers considered in this paper. In general, the use of the Augustinian

¹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 124.

¹⁶ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1993).

¹⁷ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 27.

privation theory is used to show how free will explains the existence of evil in the world. St. Anselm of Canterbury provides an interesting adaptation to the Augustinian free-will theory. While Anselm accepts the privation theory, he disagrees with Augustine's definition of free-will as the choice to sin or not.¹⁸ Anselm understands God as omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnibenevolent (completely good), which led him to assume that God possesses any good attribute to the highest degree possible. Anselm believes that freedom is one of these goods, so God's Free Will must be the best version of free will. But the perfect version of Freedom seems contradictory to an Augustinian definition of free-will. Anselm thinks that God's possession of the power to sin sounds impious and logically incoherent because, as Augustine argues, sinning limits an individual's freedom.¹⁹ And so, he articulated a theory of free-will that removes the power to sin from the definition of freedom.²⁰ In doing so, Anselm's theory defines free-will as the power to preserve rectitude for its own sake.²¹ To maintain that the power to sin is separate from freedom, Anselm postulates that the will possess two general dispositions: one towards justice and one towards happiness.²² Humanity's power to sin occurs when people pursue happiness over justice, since it uses the will in the opposite way than it was intended.

¹⁸ Anselm, "On Freedom of Choice," in *Anselm Basic Writings*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2007), 147-148

¹⁹ Anselm, "On Freedom of Choice," 148.

²⁰ Anselm, "On Freedom of Choice," 148.

²¹ Anselm, "On Freedom of Choice," 151.

²² Anselm, "On the Harmony on God's Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Grace with Free Choice (*De Concordia*)," in *Anselm Basic Writings*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2007), 389.

St. Thomas Aquinas can be considered one of the foremost authorities for understanding Catholic doctrine. His disputed question method of philosophy also allowed for other medieval philosophical viewpoints to be presented in addition to his own. This does not mean that reading St. Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*²³ is the definitive SparkNotes version of Medieval philosophy, but rather that Aquinas sows the seeds to understand any Medieval theory discussed in his treatises. Regardless of the amount of influence Aquinas could provide, his discussions on free-will, the fall, creation and evil are all sprinkled throughout Tolkien's work. St. Thomas also provides an important rearticulation of virtue ethics and the concept of *eudaimonia* (i.e., human flourishing or happiness) that requires God's support. Aquinas' picture of Christian *eudaimonism* supports the virtues presented throughout Tolkien's narrative.

Blessed John Duns Scotus, also known as the Subtle Doctor, is the latest Medieval Christian discussed in this paper, and he provides the last major shift in Medieval philosophy. Duns Scotus presents important theories on the language used to define God, important clarifications on Anselm's two-will theory, and a later discussion of Theistic Virtue Ethics. In the discussions of evil, Scotus provides a helpful amalgamation of the traditional Augustinian and Thomistic privation theory with the Anselmian focus on the absence of justice in sinful actions.²⁴ Likewise, Scotus amplifies the two will theory through an added investigation into the nature of moderation and how

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Second and Revised Edition, 1920, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa>. (Accessed 1/31/2021).

²⁴ John Duns Scotus, "Is sin per se a corruption of the good," in *John Duns Scotus Selected Writings on Ethics*, trans. Thomas Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 129-130.

the affection for justice serves as a moderator for the will.²⁵ In the discussion of temptation, Scotus will provide a helpful guide to understand the way temptation attacks the will under the two-will theory.

A Brief Look at Medieval Philosophy at Work in Tolkien's Letters

Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Scotus all present theories of free-will to explain the first sin committed in Catholic doctrine, the Primal Sin of Satan. The discussion of Primal Sin was an interest to Medieval philosophers because of the problem presented by how a perfectly created angel could freely choose to reject God in the Divine Presence. The parallels between this debate and Tolkien's work should be considered because of Tolkien's implementation of sub-creation throughout Middle-Earth. Tolkien touches on the importance of a fall during the discussion of the *Silmarillion* in his letter to Milton Waldman:

In the cosmogony there is a fall: a fall of Angels we should say. Through quite different in form, of course, to that of Christian myth, these tales are 'new', they are not directly derived from other myths and legends, but they must inevitably contain a large measure of ancient wide-spread motives or elements... There cannot be any 'story' without a fall – all stories are ultimately about the fall.²⁶

The Angelic fall Tolkien interjects is his own sub-creative iteration of the Primal Sin occurred. To stay true to his Catholicism Tolkien had to engage with why wickedness can occur in the world of perfect harmony. As a result, his only major variation during his version of Primal Sin is that:

²⁵ John Duns Scotus, *John Duns Scotus Selected Writings on Ethics*, trans. Thomas Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 115-116.

²⁶ Tolkien, *Letters*, 147.

Iluvatar sat and hearkened, and for a great while it seemed good to him, for in the music there were no flaws. But as the theme progressed, it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Iluvatar; for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to him.²⁷

Tolkien's Primal Sin occurs *after* Iluvatar sets his creation in motion; the medieval worldview saw Primal Sin occur within the first moment of Satan's creation. I do not think that Tolkien, nor the Medieval Christians, would consider this change to be too drastic in Tolkien's outline of sub-creation. Especially since his depiction highlights how Melkor's free choice to sin was an entirely selfish act.

Primal Sin, in both Tolkien's myth and the medieval worldview, explains why a finite mortal creature is not capable of restoring itself to its original harmonious state by its own will. If any creature in reality or in Tolkien's sub-creation were able to restore itself, the theory would be articulating a form of the Pelagian heresy. Pelagianism is the belief that humans can achieve salvation by only using their own free-will. It is largely rejected as a heresy for eliminating the role of grace required by the tenets of Christianity. Tolkien's created world does not have the ability to reject Pelagianism through an appeal to the necessity of God's Grace. Tolkien even admits "I am in any case myself a Christian; but the 'Third Age' was not a Christian world."²⁸ The ramifications of a non-Christian, or perhaps pre-Christian, world is that once the initial harmony was lost, it then falls to the creator to reestablish it. In the *Silmarillion*, Iluvatar does so with Melkor's music. The God of Middle Earth is constrained to act much like the Old Testament's God

²⁷ J. R. R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 16.

²⁸ Tolkien, *Letters*, 220.

of Miracles. God acts as He sees fit and intervenes when he needs to fold the discord into a more superb harmony.

Tolkien's discussion of a necessary intervention by the Author of creation also appears in his discussion of Frodo and the Ring. When discussing Frodo's submission to the Ring at the end of the story, Tolkien writes:

[Frodo] was honored because he had accepted the burden voluntarily, and had then done all that was within his utmost physical and mental strength to do. He (and the Cause) were saved – by Mercy: by the supreme value and efficacy of Pity and forgiveness of injury... But one must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is not finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however 'good'; and the Writer of the Story is not one of us.²⁹

And similarly, in another letter:

Frodo deserved all honour because he spent every drop of his power of will and body, and that was just sufficient to bring him to the destined point, and no further. Few others, possibly no others of his time, would have got so far. The Other Power then took over: the Writer of the Story (by which I do not mean myself), 'that one ever-present Person who is never absent and never named'.³⁰

There are a few important points to keep in mind from these passages. The first is the clear refutation to any form of Pelagianism. Frodo could not have overcome the power of Evil in the world by his own will. The second point is that Tolkien assumes there is some quality, or lack thereof, that limits Frodo from completing the journey on his own. If Frodo used absolutely every ounce of his will and still fell short, then he must have a broken will as a result of some prior fall within Middle-Earth. Frodo's will does not seem to be too defective in its functioning, for Tolkien fully believes that he made it as far as he could. Tolkien has touched on a deeper issue, one that Anselm also makes in his

²⁹ Tolkien, *Letters*, 251-252.

³⁰ Tolkien, *Letters*, 253.

discussions of free will. It is impossible for ‘incarnate creatures’ to will to be fully just, to be fully good, or to be fully righteous because they have lost the infused justice that God initially made in them. In Anselmian terms, the only way for a creature to be restored to a just state is through God’s Grace. This is not just a mere forgiveness of sin, although that is included; it is a correcting or fixing of the will, such that it becomes fully aligned with the Divine Will.

Contemporary Tolkien Scholars

In addition to these medieval philosophers, two contemporary Tolkien scholars provide unique contributions to the scholarly debate surrounding Tolkien’s philosophical fingerprint in Middle Earth. Jonathan McIntosh examines Tolkien’s metaphysics found throughout the *Silmarillion* in a strictly Thomistic light in *The Flame Imperishable: Tolkien, St. Thomas, and the Metaphysics of Faerie*. His underlying thesis is that Tolkien’s commitment to Catholicism and its doctrines about the nature of God and creation, necessitated that he follows an orthodox reasoning to establish a coherent sub-created world. In order to make his case, McIntosh begins by examining Tolkien’s Eru under the light of Thomism. This in turn leads to connections between faith and reason in Tolkien’s narrative, as well as how the hiddenness of Eru still allows for the possibility of a theistic interpretation. A majority of his examination then turns to the various Thomistic elements found throughout the creation narrative in the opening chapters of the *Silmarillion*. McIntosh highlights the various ways in which Tolkien uses his sub-creative method to interweave very specific Thomistic elements into the narrative. Some of the similarities McIntosh identifies are seen in Divine Ideas, the Music of Heaven, and

Divine and Angelic freedom. When McIntosh turns to discuss the metaphysics of evil, he utilizes a strong version of the privation theory found in the works of St. Thomas.

McIntosh's main thesis during his examination of evil is to show that Tolkien adopts a Thomistic hierarchy of evil when discussing the different ways in which evil can occur. He examines how Tolkien writes the fall of Morgoth, the corruption of the Orcs, and most importantly the Ruling Ring of Power.

The only shortcoming in McIntosh's account is that he argues for *only* a Thomistic reading of Tolkien. This seems to be too narrow of a reading of Tolkien, who had access to the works of St. Augustine at the very minimum. But it is more than likely that Tolkien was influenced in unseen ways by other writers. Throughout Tolkien's writing, there are clear traces of the broader Medieval tradition that St. Thomas was a part of. This is not a denial of the major influence that St. Thomas plays throughout Tolkien's legendarium; however, the difference between McIntosh's claim for Thomism and my claims for broad Medievalism stem from the many ways that Tolkien fits into a Medieval Christian framework. His discussions of evil, temptation and free will all diverge from a strictly Thomistic reading. I believe that reading Tolkien in a broader Catholic light will more clearly illuminate the deep metaphysical concepts strewn throughout Middle-Earth.

The second major scholarly voice on Tolkien's connection to Medieval Catholicism is Tom Shippey. Tom Shippey is a Tolkien scholar who studied him in depth, in addition to overlapping professorships at Oxford with him. His personal knowledge of Tolkien is vast and detailed, as he shows in both of his books *The Road to Middle Earth* and *J. R. R. Tolkien Author of the Century*. Shippey's major contribution to

the world of Tolkien scholarship is providing a detailed account of Tolkien's journey through life and his creation of Middle Earth. He begins his analysis of Tolkien through an exposition on the connections between Tolkien's philological work and his creative process in making Middle-Earth. As a result, much of Shippey's focus is on Tolkien's invented languages, the philological roots of the names found in the story, and the way the map and places resemble fictional and real locations in the world. Moreover, Shippey also attempts to establish the connection between Tolkien's mythology and real-world myths. Most of the myths he examines are an attempt to exhibit Tolkien's interests in Gothic and Norse myths, specifically Beowulf. In turn, Shippey attempts to read Tolkien's theory of evil as an amalgamation of the Augustinian privation theory and the dualistic evil presented in the Norse and Gothic mythologies that resembles Manichaeism. I will argue that Shippey does not give enough credit to the Medieval influences on Tolkien, as well as dispute his theory that Tolkien adopted a version of the Manichaeism in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

The Shadow of Mordor: The Privation Theory of Evil in Middle-Earth

“In my story I do not deal in Absolute Evil. I do not think there is such a thing, since that is Zero.”¹ The evil Tolkien depicts in Middle-Earth reflects the similar tragedies that he experienced in his own life. As a result, the depiction of evil in *The Lord of the Rings* raises the same philosophical questions about the nature of evil. The most notable, and highly debated question regarding evil, is whether or not it has a substantial essence. There are two traditional ways to interpret evil: the first is the theory of Manichaeism which says that evil is a substantial force that equally opposes and fights with the good. The second theory, which was articulated by St. Augustine, denies Manichaeism and states that evil is not a substantial entity, but rather that it is a privation of some good. Clearly, Tolkien was outspoken about his belief in the privation theory of evil. The lack of an “Absolute Evil” is exactly what the privation theory believes, primarily based on the Christian concept that God did not create any evil. Since God’s creation was Good, there is no logical way for Him to create an equally bad force that competes with the Goodness He desires. However, Tom Shippey believes that Tolkien’s portrayal of evil is more dualistic and unclear than Tolkien’s statements suggest. Shippey thinks that there is a strong element of Manichaeism, or semi-Manichaeism, that competes with Tolkien’s effort to depict evil through the traditional privation theory. He

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2000), 243.

argues that the forces of Evil in Middle-Earth might not originate in an “Absolute Evil” but that they are nevertheless substantial evil forces fighting with the good. This chapter will focus on the scholarly debate and interpretation surrounding Tolkien’s presentation of evil to show that Tolkien maintained his belief in the privation theory despite the vivid depictions of evil forces. Moreover, I will present the progression of the privation theory throughout Medieval philosophy to explain how the apparent substantial evils as really perverted goods. First, this chapter examines the Medieval theories of evil to provide a clear description of the privation theory. Then it progresses to discuss Tolkien’s own views on evil, as found in his Letters and narratives. Finally, I conclude with an examination of the contemporary debate of Tolkien’s depiction of evil to show how the observable evils presented throughout *The Lord of the Rings* are consistent with the privation theory.

The Privation Theory

The first formal defense of the Privation theory can be traced back to St. Augustine’s work *On the Free Choice of the Will*. Augustine opens the dialogue by answering the question “isn’t God the cause of evil?”² While many Christians may try to answer the question by saying that man caused evil, not God; Augustine is attempting to provide an answer that refutes Manicheism. In order to refute Manichaeism, Augustine must show that God is so supremely Good and Omnipotent, that there could be no possible way a substantial evil force could withstand His Goodness. Secondly, Augustine

² Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1993), 1.

tries to show that a Manichean argument is actually absurd since evil does not exist in the way the Manicheans claim. In order to accomplish these goals, Augustine claims that evil occurs in two main forms: 1) when someone does evil, and 2) when someone suffers evil.³ Since God is omnibenevolent, He cannot do any evil – a fairly uncontested logical constraint. But evil is still done by human beings, so we must claim that “everyone who does evil is the cause of his own evildoing.”⁴

The obvious response to Augustine’s answer thus far is to claim that God created the beings who do evil, so he must share some of the blame in creating evil. Augustine’s response to such a claim is to examine the nature of God:

he is the creator of all good things but is himself more excellent than all of them; that he is the supremely just ruler of everything that he created; and...that he created all things from nothing.⁵

Simply stated, Augustine is utilizing an older philosophical move that a higher object cannot be created by a lower one. Thus, a supreme good, like a soul, can only be created by God or through a higher process that He created. Likewise, for God to be able to create human souls, He must exist as a higher good than human souls. And if humans do evil through their use/misuse of their wills, an act which detracts from the goodness of their souls, then God must not be able to do evil like human souls. Augustine’s answer still has another hurdle to overcome; namely that since human beings and angels are the source of evil, do they create evil *ex nihilo* like God creates good things? In order to answer this question, Augustine must explain how someone is able to do evil.

³ Augustine, *On Free Choice*, 1.

⁴ Augustine, *On Free Choice*, 1.

⁵ Augustine, *On Free Choice*, 4.

Augustine attempts to give a definition of how evildoing occurs during his examination of adultery, concluding that:

what makes adultery evil is inordinate desire, whereas so long as you look for the evil in the external visible act, you are bound to encounter difficulties. In order to understand that inordinate desire is what makes adultery evil, consider this: if a man is unable to sleep with someone else's wife, but it is somehow clear that he would like to, and would do so if he had the chance, he is no less guilty than if he were caught in the act.⁶

Thus, Augustine finds that the source of evil is not God, but of an inordinate desire for some good, and that evildoing is nothing other than acting on such a desire. But acting on a desire is much different than a substantial evil, so 'evil' must not exist in a substantial way, which aligns with Augustine's aversion to describing evil in an external object. In addition to inordinate desire, Augustine discusses the nature of all things as either incorruptible goods (God) or corruptible goods. He pays close attention to corruptible goods to explain the nature of what happens to a soul that sins. Corruptible goods are also described as *privatio boni*, or a deprived good. While some may claim that this is merely a relabeling of inordinate desire, Augustine's rhetorical and argumentative move is to reaffirm that God creates all things as good, but that most created goods can be deprived of their original state and thus be 'evil.'⁷ In arguing this way, Augustine is trying to accomplish his goal of showing that Manichaeism incorrectly assumes that there could be a created evil. In his later *Confessions*, Augustine writes,

it was obvious to me that things which are liable to corruption are good...For if there were no good in them, there would be nothing capable of being corrupted...Therefore, either corruption does not harm, which cannot be the case,

⁶ Augustine, *Free Choice*, 5-6.

⁷ Augustine, *Free Choice*, 96-97.

or (which is wholly certain) all things that are corrupted suffer privation of some good...Therefore as long as they exist, they are good.⁸

Augustine's defense of the privation theory is grown and refined in the centuries after his death by many notable philosophers and theologians. St. Anselm and Blessed John Duns Scotus attempt to focus on the implications between free will and the privation theory, while St. Thomas Aquinas examines the privation theory through the disputed question method of analytical philosophy to give a rigorous definition of evil. I will break from a chronological examination of each Medieval scholar to maintain the clarity between the connections of each theory. As such, I will present St. Thomas' view as a close continuation of Augustine's reasoning and then examine St. Anselm's and Duns Scotus' focus on how evil cannot be discussed apart from free will.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas uses an Aristotelian approach to discuss the nature of evil, instead of Augustine's neo-Platonic view. In turn, Aquinas introduces important improvements to the Privation theory – particularly on the issue of the cause of evil. His first observation is that “nothing can be a cause except inasmuch as it has being,” which directly supports the need for the privation theory, and also eliminates the argument that any absolutely evil could produce an effect.⁹ Secondly, Aquinas utilizes the Aristotelian system of causation to explain the four different types of causes for a thing: a formal cause (what is characteristic of it), a material cause (what it is made of), an efficient cause (what brought it about), and a final cause (the end or purpose for that causation). The material cause of evil is said to be the good, or lack thereof, while the

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 124.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Second and Revised Edition, 1920, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa>. (Accessed 1/31/2021), I.49.1.

efficient cause is the agent who does the evil action. Aquinas, however, does not believe that evil has a formal or a final cause because of the nature of privation. For evil to have a distinctive formal cause, it would need a different characteristic than the corresponding corrupted good. In plain English, this means that evil must add something other than a detraction of the original good. But the definition of evil is that it is merely a privation, and thus can have no additional form. Likewise, the final cause of evil is nothing other than a corrupted end, which Aquinas believes does not fit the definition of a true final cause.

Aquinas also provides a helpful proof of why an Absolute Evil could not exist, by combining Augustinian and Aristotelian concepts. In article 4 of question 48 in the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa*, Aquinas uses Augustine's *Enchiridion* 12 in the *sed contra* to support his position that "evil cannot wholly consume a good."¹⁰ He reasons that evil's 'consumption' of a good could be explained in the following way. First, the substance of a good cannot be diminished in any way, but the actuality (i.e., how much there is of something) can be diminished but not consumed. The only type of good that can be destroyed by an evil is the good that is opposed to that evil. However, this type of good is more of a semantic way of describing the relationship between a good and its opposite evil. In the same way that 'evil consumes a good,' darkness can be said to 'consume' light, or blindness 'consume' sight. In reality, the absence of an ability or absence of a necessary substance is the real cause of the loss, which is why an evil cannot actually consume a good. Moreover, since evil can only lessen the good present in the thing's existence, an absolute evil cannot exist because it would necessitate an absence of all

¹⁰ Aquinas, I.48.4.

good. Even if a wholly evil were to exist, it would necessarily destroy itself because it would destroy the good of existence that it relies on, and thus cease to exist as well.¹¹

While Aquinas provides an Aristotelian discussion on evil, especially in its role in creation, St. Anselm and John Duns Scotus investigate the nature of elicited acts of evil, which they refer to as sin. Their argumentative move is to focus on how the sin of a free will logically follows Augustine's own reasons for the privation theory. The heart of their theory is to explain why God is not responsible for evil, and how everything He created is good. Thus, the only way for a good to be corrupted is through a created being with a free will to inordinately desire some good. The heart of Anselm and Scotus' accounts of free will centers around an explanation of how sin can be willed, which will be the focus of the following chapter. However, they still provide insightful contributions to the privation theory.

St. Anselm discusses the concepts of evil and free will in multiple different works, but the most relevant sections pertaining to an outright discussion of the nature of sin can be found in *On the Fall of the Devil* Chapter 19 and in *On the Virginal Conception and Original Sin* Chapter 5. While Anselm's theory of free will and its connection to justice will be discussed in length in Chapter 3, it is important to note that Anselm's conception of free will is established on the belief that justice is essentially embedded in created free wills. Moreover, he believes that the purpose of free will is to preserve the original justice that God created in the will. The result of Anselm's beliefs led to his conclusion that,

only two sorts of things are called evil: an evil will, and whatever is called evil on account of an evil will (for example, an evil human being or an evil action);

¹¹ Aquinas, I.49.3.

therefore, nothing is more evident than that no thing is an evil. Evil is nothing other than the absence of justice.¹²

The distinctly Anselmian concept here is that only a created will can be considered evil, either as an inordinate will or as the cause of an inordinate action – both of which are only evil because of the absence of justice.

The belief that evil is only an absence of justice is clarified within the context of Anselm's two will theory; however, he does provide a helpful explanation in *On the Virginal Conception and Original Sin*:

When a helmsman abandons the rudder and leaves his ship at the mercy of winds and waves, so that it wanders aimlessly and drifts into danger, we say that the absence...of the rudder did this – not meaning that [his] absence is something...but rather that if [he] had been present, [he] would have kept...the ship from running into disaster. In the same way...when justice is absent, the will, to which all voluntary movements of the whole human being are subject, is inconstant, unrestrained, and ungoverned; driven by various appetites, it throws itself and everything subject to it into all manner of evil – and that if justice were present, it would keep all this from happening.¹³

Injustice is merely the scapegoat to explain the sinful actions of people who pursue inordinate desires. It is not the case that injustice is some master evil that can cause the will to commit evil actions through manipulation or trickery. In actuality, the explanation for sin is akin to an unsupervised child – she knows that she should act a certain way but still follows whatever whimsical desire arises.

Duns Scotus' approach to evil reflects his Anselmian interests, leading to deep examinations of evil within the context of free will. The most pertinent section where Scotus discusses sin in its essential context can be found in *Ordinatio* II, dd. 34-37, q. 2

¹² Anselm, "On the Fall of the Devil," in *Anselm Basic Writings*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2007), 200-201.

¹³ Anselm, "On the Virginal Conception and Original Sin," in *Anselm Basic Writings*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2007), 335.

“Is sin per se a corruption of the good?”¹⁴ During his reply, Scotus concludes that there are two ways to discuss sin: as “a corruption of...actual moral rectitude,” and as “willing what is forbidden, thus, the will itself is the material cause of sin...and what is forbidden or prohibited is the formal cause; it indicates the act’s lack of harmony with the higher rule.”¹⁵ While on the surface these definitions of sin may seem verbose and different than the other versions of the privation theory presented, Scotus actually conjoins the two accounts to give a succinct version of the privation theory. “The corruption of actual moral rectitude” is nothing other than injustice in the Anselmian sense. Since free will should be guided by justice, the corruption of moral rectitude (i.e., moral rightness) results in the corruption of justice. Scotus’ second distinction about “willing what is forbidden” is an explanation of an inordinate willing. While such a willing could be considered an absence of justice, following Anselm’s definition, it can also be considered an inordinate desire because the will rejects the proper order dictated by God. As a result, this description of sin aligns with both the Augustinian and Thomistic pictures as well.

In summary, Augustine articulated the privation theory to answer the problem of evil in a way that refuted Manichean dualism. In doing so, he introduced the concept of evil as an inordinate desire that corrupts some good, and that the true cause of evil can be found in the created free will of a rational being. St. Thomas Aquinas addressed evil in a systematic Aristotelian examination of creation. He concludes multiple aspects about evil – most importantly that it has no formal or final cause, that it cannot wholly consume a

¹⁴ John Duns Scotus, “Is sin per se a corruption of the good,” in *John Duns Scotus Selected Writings on Ethics*, trans. Thomas Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 126-134.

¹⁵ Scotus, 129-130.

good, and that no Absolute Evil exists. St. Anselm, on the other hand, uses the Augustinian definition to focus on the true nature of how a free will can commit an evil act. In doing so he proposes that in each and every evil act, the true absent good is justice. And finally, Duns Scotus combines all three approaches into a succinct definition of what it means to sin; to have an absence of justice and pursue an inordinate desire.

Tolkien's Philosophy of Evil

Tolkien's most notable quote on the nature of evil is the one I used to open this chapter: "In my story I do not deal in Absolute Evil. I do not think there is such a thing, since that is Zero."¹⁶ Thus, it should come as no surprise that most scholars interpret *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien's own beliefs as presenting a version of the privation theory. And when examining Tolkien's privation theory as a whole, we see notes of Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, and Scotus. Tolkien is clear that evil does not exist in a substantial form, nor could an absolute evil exist because of its negative property. However, some Tolkien scholars, particularly Tom Shippey, make the claim that Tolkien purported some form of Manichean beliefs in his exercise of sub-creation. In order to remedy this with Tolkien's rejection of a full version of Manichaeism, Shippey adheres to a semi-Manichaeism where there is no Absolute Evil, but that evil is still a substantial terrorist seeking control of Middle-Earth.

In a response to W.H. Auden's review of *The Return of the King*, Tolkien turns to discuss the nature of what makes someone a villain. In doing so, Tolkien draws on real life to explain why the story parallels the reality of evil wills seen within the real world:

¹⁶ Tolkien, *Letters*, 243.

“In ‘real life’ causes are not clear cut – if only because human tyrants are seldom utterly corrupted into pure manifestations of evil will.”¹⁷ Now this quote may seem to suggest that Tolkien differentiated between evil in the real world and evil in his sub-created one. However, this passage directly precedes Tolkien’s claims about a lack of an Absolute Evil. So, when taken as a whole, he seems to be suggesting that without any fully corrupted wills, it is safe to assume that all beings within Middle-Earth participate in at least some basic goodness purely because they exist. Furthermore, it touches on the reality of how evil appears through the actions of individuals. More often than not, the reasons behind evil actions are not inherently bad. While a desire for unadulterated pleasure or unshackled power may lead to an almost utterly corrupted will, it takes a consistent pattern, and action on, immensely inordinate desires for that to occur. And when it does occur, it becomes the Aristotelian Absolute Evil that destroys itself and becomes zero. In short, Tolkien echoes the Augustinian theme that all things possess some level of goodness by merely existing.

Despite the rarity of a complete corruption, Tolkien tells us in his reflections on Frodo’s failure to the Ring that, “one must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is *not* finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however ‘good’; and the Writer of the Story is not one of us.”¹⁸ Tolkien’s statement, without the proper historical context, seems to support the semi-Manicheism from Shippey. Evil may not be the most powerful force, but it is powerful enough to defeat any incarnate creature. However, Tolkien was acutely aware of another theological problem that occurred after St. Augustine’s dialogue on free

¹⁷ Tolkien, *Letters*, 242.

¹⁸ Tolkien, *Letters*, 252.

choice was written – Pelagianism. The Pelagian heresy claims that human beings can return to a state of moral rightness solely through the actions of their own will. In short, Pelagianism cuts out the need for God’s Grace and states that human beings can fix their own fallenness. But Tolkien was not a Pelagian. In fact, part of Tolkien’s project seems to address how created free wills need God’s Mercy. While it will be helpful to keep this in mind for the next chapter, for now it should be noted that Tolkien’s statements here are more of an argument against Pelagianism than an argument for Manicheism. If finite creatures could fully resist the power of evil without assistance, then the Writer of the Story would not need to intervene in any way. But Tolkien’s whole project is an effort to portray the realities of the world in a pre-redeemed context. His point is not that ‘evil is a power that will conquer any creature,’ where evil is an actual substantial thing, but rather that the current state of Middle-Earth is one where only the Writer of the Story can fully defeat evil. But this does not absolve the characters throughout the story from their evildoings or moral shortcomings, Tolkien seems to think that such choices are inevitable.¹⁹ In actuality, readers should view the characters fighting against evil as a resistance, one that would be doomed to fail on its own, but one that *will* succeed because of the Will of the Writer of the Story.

And yet, in spite of his commitment to the absence of Absolute Evil, Tolkien still engaged in a thought experiment about how a created being could become almost completely evil. Peter Hastings once asked Tolkien if he had gone too far in his metaphysics of evil, specifically referencing Treebeards comment that Orcs and Trolls

¹⁹ “Anyway, all this stuff is mainly concerned with Fall, Morality, and the Machine. With Fall inevitably, and that motive occurs in several modes.” Tolkien, *Letters*, 145.

were created by Sauron. Tolkien responds to Hasting's concerns in two ways: first, he articulates a version of the privation theory by citing Frodo's comment in *The Return of the King*: "The Shadow that bred them can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own. I don't think it gave life to the orcs, it only ruined them and twisted them."²⁰ Thus, the Orcs should be viewed as perverted beings, not created ones.

However, Tolkien also examines Treebeards mistaken understanding that the Orcs are created: "He [Treebeard] says [Sauron] 'made' them in *counterfeit* of certain creatures pre-existing."²¹ So it seems that Hastings misinterpreted Treebeard's comment to mean that the evil powers are able to create, when in fact they cannot. But Tolkien goes on to suppose that even if some evil forces were created in a substantial way, they would not be able to fully be bad nor irredeemable:

But if [the highest created beings] 'fell', as the Diabolus Morgoth did, and started making things 'for himself, to be their Lord', these would then 'be', even if Morgoth broke the supreme ban against making other 'rational' creatures like Elves or Men. They would at least 'be' real physical realities in the physical world, however evil they might prove, even 'mocking' the Children of God. They would be Morgoth's greatest Sins, abuses of his highest privilege, and would be creatures begotten of Sin, and naturally bad. (I nearly wrote 'irredeemably bad'; but that would be going too far. Because by accepting or tolerating their making – necessary to their actual existence – even Orcs would become part of the World, which is God's and ultimately good.).²²

The important sub-creative background for this quote is to understand that the highest created beings (the Ainur), possess the ability to create in a similar way as God (Eru/Iluvatar). However, their creative powers were regulated by the Divine Will, such that they could only create certain physical realities. The above hypothetical shows

²⁰ John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Del Rey, 1986), 201.

²¹ Tolkien, *Letters*, 190.

²² Tolkien, *Letters*, 195.

Tolkien's own understanding of a Manichean rebellion in the heavens. If Morgoth's fall included a breach of creating rational creatures, then the world would be Manichean in a way that there would be created evil.²³ But there is an hidden presupposition within the of a created evil, namely, that it must be created in some loose fashion by God.²⁴ So, even if these evil rational beings existed, they would exist in the created world and somehow contribute to the overall goodness, since existence itself is a good that cannot be corrupted. The heart of Tolkien's message indicates that any sinful act, no matter how bad, must make use of, and take place in, the previously created good world. The only tools that can be used must be pulled from the tools God provided, which are things that can never be fully corrupted. Thus, the Morgoth thought experiment shows that the metaphysical world of Middle-Earth necessarily relies on the privation theory of evil to explain good and evil because everything created is "part of the World, which is God's and ultimately good."²⁵

Tolkien also objected to the concept that magic could overpower an individual, as seen in his harsh rebuke of Morton Zimmerman's 1958 screenplay of *The Lord of the Rings*. Apparently, Zimmerman incorrectly assessed that Saruman used a hypnotic voice to overpower and trick characters into agreeing with him. Tolkien rejects this interpretation by examining the real reason that people listened to Saruman:

²³ Morgoth's hypothetical creation of rational beings should be directly contrasted to Aule's creation of the Dwarves. Aule maintained a spirit of sub-creation where he wanted to imitate and be like his Father. While still a sin, Iluvatar still created the Dwarves to honor the heart of the imitation. In the thought experiment with Morgoth, there is no desire to imitate God, only to *be* God. Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 43.

²⁴ The creation of the Dwarves also exhibits how God must grant life to a sub-created being, especially if it is from another sub-created being that does not have the ability to give life. Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 43.

²⁵ Tolkien, *Letters*, 195.

Saruman's voice was not hypnotic but persuasive. Those who listened to him were not in danger of falling into a trance, but of agreeing with his arguments, they were fully awake. It was always open to one to reject, by *free will* and *reason*, both his voice while speaking and its after-impressions. Saruman corrupted the reasoning powers.²⁶

Clearly Tolkien thought that Saruman's evil actions are those where he corrupts the rational power of others, not that he has some dark magical power that allows him to control those who oppose him. Thus, Saruman has to convince someone to agree with him through partial truths or persuasive rhetoric, thereby tricking them into reasoning to his conclusion through perverted truths. However, there is another corrupted reasoning power at work in this discussion as well. Saruman's own reasoning powers should be seen as corrupted and inordinate reasoning powers since he freely chooses to use his rationale as a tool to increase his own personal power. Saruman no longer held the world, or other beings for that matter, in the regard that he should. He saw the world as a way to increase his own power through the use of his prowess to exploit others "for himself, to be their Lord."²⁷ In the terms of the privation theory, Saruman was supposed to use his powers to restore the world into fellowship with Iluvatar, but instead he inordinately desired to become his own Iluvatar and rule like Morgoth and Sauron. In Anselmian and Scotistic terms, Saruman's actions are depraved and evil because of their lack of justice. All of Saruman's actions go against the created order. But despite Morgoth, Sauron, and Saruman subscribing to their own evil desires, all three were created good, for a good purpose, and fell through an inordinate desire that corrupted all of their good attributes.

²⁶ Tolkien, *Letters*, 277.

²⁷ Tolkien, *Letters*, 195. This quote is about Morgoth's attempt to 'create' the orcs. However, the heart of Saruman's actions can also be encompassed in the quote. Instead of seeking to restore the world, Saruman sought to rule the world. Thus, he wanted to subjugate other beings to rule them.

If nothing else is clear from Tolkien's confessions, it is that he had a clear and precise goal with his depiction of evil – to make as accurate of a depiction as he possibly could. He mentions in multiple letters that the historical depiction of evil is always bleak.²⁸ However, Tolkien also accepted the traditional Catholic response to evil, to claim that it is nothing more than a privation of some good. Nevertheless, realistically depicting evil necessitated a real enough evil that it appeared substantial, just like shadows do. To Tolkien, evil was nothing more than a shadow. It appears so real, but it relies on both an object and a light source to exist. Evil needs a good to exist or else it would consume itself. Even Tolkien's hypothetical case of Morgoth's sin of creating rational beings would not make those beings, or even Morgoth, irredeemably bad. They are all part of the Greater Good. One that brings glory to God who created everything.

Shippey's Semi-Manichaeism

When Tom Shippey discusses Tolkien's philosophy of evil, he states that Tolkien presents two different theories. The first is the privation theory of evil that has already been discussed in depth, while the second is the substantial version of evil articulated by Manichaeism. Shippey argues that Tolkien's theory, especially in regard to the ring, supports a version of dualism that comes up just shy of Manicheism. To support his claim, Shippey first mentions how the Inklings, as a group, may have had an affinity towards Manicheism. He cites C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* Book 2 section 2 as proof of this but does not quote the specific passage he has in mind. My best guess is that Shippey is referencing the end of the chapter, where Lewis says,

²⁸ Tolkien, *Letters*, 76, 80.

I freely admit that real Christianity (as distinct from Christianity-and-water) goes much nearer to Dualism than people think...The difference is that Christianity thinks this Dark Power was created by God, and was good when he was created, and went wrong. Christianity agrees with Dualism that this universe is at war. But it does not think this is a war between independent powers. It thinks it is a civil war, a rebellion, and that we are living in a part of the universe occupied by the rebel.²⁹

This depiction of evil could be described as semi-Manicheism, where there are substantial evil powers that exist, but not any that are as powerful as the supreme Good that is God. However, it should also be noted that Lewis' point could be interpreted on a privation theory, where the "Dark Power" is a misused power fighting with the Proper One. Regardless of the different ways to interpret Lewis' views on dualism (and by extension the Inklings), Shippey attempts to use Tolkien's research into Alfred the Great, Boethius, and various Nordic works to support a substantial reading of evil that fits into Tolkien's world where he denied an Absolute Evil. Shippey's main objection to the privation theory is that the theory treats evil as a non-substantial philosophical topic to provide a consistent view, which in turn also leads to a view where evil is "more harmful for the malefactor than the victim."³⁰ With this objection in mind, Shippey attempts to suggest two things. The first is that Tolkien's belief that evil actions ultimately hurt the evildoer more than the victim, is actually a mark against the privation theory. The unspoken premise is that if evil hurts the evildoer more than the victim, then the committed evil action must have some substantial power in order to injure the actor. While such an objection seems to be debatable, it does not defeat a privation theory's

²⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 45.

³⁰ Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2003), 142.

explanation that the misuse of free will damages the way it should function. In other words, continually pursuing an inordinate desire relatively normalizes that desire for that individual will. By this I mean that continually acting in the wrong way makes it easier to pursue inordinate desires as a normal object. This does not excuse the pursuit of such desires, but it does explain how an evildoer can be more damaged than a victim.

Shippey's second attempt to support Tolkien's dualism is with the claim that Tolkien experienced evil at one of its darkest points from 1930-40, much like how Alfred the great experienced the evils of the Viking attacks. Evil was very real and evident for Tolkien, so Shippey thinks we should read his story as one that suggests the dual picture of a philosophical privation theory *and* a Manichean dualism that mirrors the evil in 'real life.'

Shippey's next argument for dualism is the claim that the Ring provides evidence of Tolkien's semi-Manichean beliefs, as particularly shown through Frodo's temptations and use of the Ring. He specifically highlights a passage where Frodo uses the ring to escape Boromir at Amon Hen: "The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points...[with] Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose."³¹ The problem, so Shippey suspects, is that Frodo encounters two competing forces within himself. Shippey uses these two powers to present an unspoken problem for the Augustinian privation theory, since it seems contradictory on Augustine's picture to have an evil power arise. The proper response to Shippey is to cite the necessary choice that Frodo must make through the exercise of his free will. When we do so, then we see that the two powers are more like two competing choices and not two actual powers.

³¹ John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Del Rey, 1986), 451.

Since a free will response will explain this phenomenon, a deeper response will be offered in chapter 3. In a similar fashion, Shippey notes that an external evil arises,

in the valley of Minas Morgul the Ringwraith sends out a command for him to put it on, but Frodo finds no response to it in his own will, feeling only ‘the beating upon him from a great power from outside.’³²

If such an external power exists in a substantial way that cannot be attributed to some privation, then it seems to support the semi-Manicheism of Tolkien. Furthermore, if magic can be used in an oppressive or substantially evil way, it also allows for Shippey to point to Manicheism. On the privation theory, there is no substantial evil since it is merely the absence of the good. However, it is not clear that these instances of evil should be explained by an appeal to the existence of a substantial evil. Both the magic and the Ringwraith can be explained as a corrupted good and a misuse of free will.

A natural next step in the examination of evil is to observe the characteristics of Mordor, as Shippey does in the following way:

even the phial of Galadriel loses its virtue on Mount Doom, for there Frodo is at ‘the heart of the realm of Sauron...all other powers were here subdued.’ Are Frodo’s will, and his virtue, among those powers? To say so would be Manichean. It would deny that men are responsible for their actions, make evil a positive force. On the other hand, to put the whole blame on Frodo would seem... ‘unfair’; if he had been an entirely wicked person, he never would have reached the Sammath Naur in the first place.³³

The language Shippey uses to describe this incident appears to indicate an Augustinian free will theory conjoined with a form of Manichean dualism. However, the rhetoric of this claim pushes the argument towards dualism and not the privation theory. Shippey has already shown that the outside force of the Ringwraith attacked Frodo. So, since Sauron

³² Shippey, *Road to Middle-Earth*, 144.

³³ Shippey, *Road to Middle-Earth*, 144.

and Mount Doom are much more powerful than the Ringwraiths, it appears like they also have a stronger version of the evil power. On the surface, Shippey seems to be arguing that this evil power found in Mordor is some substantial power that takes control of Frodo. Moreover, Shippey also believes that it is wrong to place the whole blame on Frodo, inferring that such a judgement entails viewing Frodo as a wicked person throughout the whole journey. And if Frodo were truly wicked, he would not have made it to Mount Doom. Thus, the consequence seems to be that there is some outside force that overpowers Frodo, who had a truly good will, but not a strong enough will to defeat the evil around him. I will respond to these concerns later in the next chapter, but it should be noted that there is no connection between failing morally under extreme pressure and being a totally wicked person. Yes, the privation theory relies on a doctrine of the Fall to explain why created free wills sometimes do bad things. Yet, the privation theory and fall narrative in Tolkien's story do not exacerbate the pervasiveness of broken free wills. If anything, Tolkien has prolonged the effects of the Fall to show how there are still people who possess strong wills, even when they will eventually fail without Divine assistance.

Despite Shippey's arguments that Tolkien presented a version of Manichaeism, he maintains that Tolkien presents an "uncertainty over the nature of evil."³⁴ If we accept Tolkien's deep thought and clarity throughout the world, agreement with Shippey's claims seem to infer a confused presentation of the metaphysics of evil that threatens the

³⁴ Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (New York, Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), 142.

coherence of Middle-Earth. While it may be true that Tolkien's presentation of evil seems ambiguous, Shippey admits that,

on the level of narrative one can say that *The Lord of the Rings* is neither a saint's life, all about temptation, nor a complicated wargame, all about tactics. It would be a much lesser work if it had swerved towards either extreme.³⁵

Tolkien's presentation was not supposed to be a "philosophical treatise" in the traditional sense. It was supposed to be a presentation of an alternate pre-Christian world where the true nature of evil is displayed along with its conflicting appearance.³⁶ The remainder of this thesis will explain Tolkien's intentional ambiguity, and how his adherence to a tradition of Medieval Christian thought explains the presentation of evil throughout *The Lord of the Rings*.

Evil Corrupting Middle Earth

Tolkien's descriptions of evil are always tied to the concept of free will and corruption. The remainder of this chapter will investigate different types of corrupted goods within *The Lord of the Rings* narrative. This does not mean that the corrupted goods are separate from free choice, on the contrary, every corrupted good arises from some prior free choice. But a cursory observation seems to suggest that there are many examples of apparent evil. Melkor, Sauron, Saruman, the Orcs, Mordor, the Ring and Ringwraiths, all display a strong instance of corrupted things. They are such vivid depictions of evil that they can direct readers towards Shippey's semi-Manicheism.

³⁵ Shippey, *Road to Middle-Earth*, 146.

³⁶ Shippey, *Author of the Century*, 142-143.

The best place to begin a discussion of evil within Middle-Earth is the beginning of the *Silmarillion*. In a typical sub-creative fashion, Tolkien imitates the Catholic narrative that a powerful angel rebelled against God and fell by his own free choice. In the creation narrative of Middle-Earth, Melkor's rebellion against Eru begins with Melkor's own inordinate desires. Tolkien writes:

It came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Iluvatar; for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself...he had gone often alone into the void places seeking the Imperishable Flame; for desire grew hot within him to bring into Being things of his own, and it seemed to him that Iluvatar took no thought for the Void, and he was impatient of its emptiness.³⁷

Melkor's desires echo that of the Christian tradition where Satan fell because of his desire to be equal with God. Jonathan McIntosh argues that Tolkien strictly followed a Thomistic theory of the angelic fall: "For Thomas and Tolkien, as has been said, sub-creation presupposes, is guaranteed by, and so is dependent upon a prior divine act of creation."³⁸ This is an important observation about the nature of sin and sub-creation. Melkor, even in his inordinate desire to create for himself and disrupt Iluvatar's melody, must still use and rely upon the prior act of creation by Iluvatar. In short, Melkor cannot create anything new or different than what Iluvatar already created. He may try to usurp power or glory, but he cannot create anything new. And the desire to usurp or disrupt is consistent with an examination of sinful acts because of the injustice found in willing to oppose the Divine Will. Thus, Melkor's act arises from an inordinate desire, he abandons

³⁷ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 16.

³⁸ McIntosh, 220.

justice in his choice to oppose the Divine Will, and he corrupts the good of the melody by misusing his own powers to create music.

Unfortunately, Melkor's rebellion was not a singular event, nor did he act alone in the future. In addition to his corrupted Ainur servant Sauron, who later corrupts Saruman, Melkor 'created' his own servants by corrupting the elves into orcs:

all of those of the Quendi who came into the hands of Melkor...were put there in prison, and by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved; and thus did Melkor breed the hideous race of Orcs in envy and mockery of the Elves.³⁹

There are three important characteristics of evil to be gleaned from this; 1) per McIntosh, Tolkien follows a Thomistic Creation hierarchy, 2) thus Melkor's acts of rebellion do not create anything, but simply attempt to deconstruct and reverse any progress made, and 3) that even the Orcs, the forces of evil, were once Elves that had to be broken into a lesser good.⁴⁰ McIntosh looks in depth at the parallels between Thomistic Creation Metaphysics and Tolkien's Creation Metaphysics. For the purposes of this project, it should merely be noted that Tolkien believes in a necessary fall which leads to "the evil[s] of a corrupted, or at the very least very *defective*, sub-creative will."⁴¹ Put plainly, the first evil possible in a Creation hierarchy is a fall of a good being, which has already been addressed. The second type of evil is the corrupted sub-creative will, where the fallen being desires to

³⁹ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 50.

⁴⁰ It is important to note that the Quendi (early Elves) who were corrupted by Melkor chose to leave on their own. Tolkien makes clear that this was due to the fear, sown by Melkor, of the coming of Orome. Melkor would essentially lure the Elves from their tribe and then have his servants abduct them and imprison them to corrupt them into Orcs. While tragic, Tolkien makes it clear that the Quendi knew the order of the world, and that by trusting Melkor they would act in an inordinate fear. Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 49-50. Tolkien's response to the fate of the abducted Elves is that "that God would 'tolerate' that, seems no worse theology than the toleration of the calculated dehumanizing of Men by tyrants that goes on today." Tolkien, *Letters*, 195.

⁴¹ McIntosh, 219.

make for himself, or destroy what has been created as an exertion of his own ‘power.’ The Orcs fit into this second layer of evil since Melkor does not attempt to create for himself. Instead, he did not want to make Elves and rule them, but rather he wanted to sub-create things to hinder Iluvatar’s power. Examining the Orcs does not show us how a substantial evil can be created but merely reveals the level of corruption possible in Middle-Earth.

The most powerful tool of evil also happens to be the most problematic for the proponents of the privation theory – the Ring of Power. The Ring is arguably the most sinister device created and used throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, so much so that it appears to support Shippey’s semi-Manicheism. In the previous section, I laid out how Shippey thinks the Ring, and its role as a conduit for Sauron’s diabolical powers, is the primary reason to reject a privation theory. Despite Shippey’s case, Tolkien’s letters show how the Ring presents the illusion of dualism, but ultimately fits within a traditional privation theory found in the rest of the story.

A logical approach to the potential Manichean problem posed by the Ring is to ask, ‘what properties of the Ring, if any, cause it to be a substantial force of evil?’ Tolkien explains that each ring has the ability to prevent decay, preserve “what is desired or loved,” to enhance “the natural powers of the possessor,” to make material bodies invisible and to make “things of the invisible world visible.”⁴² In addition to all of these abilities, the Ruling Ring allows the wearer to “see the thoughts of all those that used the lesser rings, [to] govern all that they did, and in the end [to] utterly enslave them.”⁴³ Thus

⁴² Tolkien, *Letters*, 152.

⁴³ Tolkien, *Letters*, 152.

the regular rings of power appear to easily fit within a privation theory, while the Ruling Ring does not. The magical powers of the rings, apart from the corrupting power found in the Ruling Ring, allow for the wearer to have increased abilities that are not inherently evil, since they fit into world where magical powers exist. Another big concern with the Ruling Ring is that Sauron crafted his will into it, so that it would have the ability to direct any wearer to follow his constant evil council. Likewise, Tolkien writes that “it was part of the essential deceit of the Ring to fill minds with imaginations of supreme power.”⁴⁴ And unsurprisingly, the Ring did so by amplifying the pride and egotistical views of the wearer. Tolkien describes this while discussing the lasting effects of the Ring on Bilbo: “He bore still the mark of the Ring that needed to be finally erased: a trace of pride and personal possessiveness.”⁴⁵

I would like to clarify Tolkien’s view before going further. Firstly, all of the rings of power amplify the wearer in different ways. These magical powers that exist in Middle-Earth should be read as a type of neutral power. Any power from the rings could be used for good or ill, as we can see throughout the story. The Ruling Ring works slightly differently because it possesses part of Sauron’s will – but it is not Sauron himself. The Ring is merely an extension of Sauron that attempts to return to him by overpowering any wearer it can. It subordinates the wearers of the lesser rings to be its servants and uses them as tools to return to its master. The Ring also presents imaginations of supreme power, in conjunction with an amplified pride and desire for personal possessiveness. Thus, the Ruling Ring will enslave and govern the desires of

⁴⁴ Tolkien, *Letters*, 332.

⁴⁵ Tolkien, *Letters*, 328.

any wearer, other than Sauron, by simultaneously tempting and imbibing the wearer with pride. Tolkien's point, in his pre-Christian world, is to show that no mortal creature could resist the temptations of the ring. But an immortal higher being like Tom Bombadil, or the Ainur, would have no problem overpowering the temptations of the Ring due to their superior natures and wills. The interplay between free will and the temptations of the Ruling Ring will be seen further in the next chapter.

As has already been noted, Tom Shippey thinks that the Ring shows a duality of evil, with the Ring itself shifting between a "sentient creature or psychic amplifier."⁴⁶ Shippey's major problem with the Ring is that the infused magic part, which is capable of tempting the wearer, seems to exhibit a Manichean concept that cannot come from the privation theory. However, if we accept that the Ring is an extension of Sauron that psychically amplifies any useful desire for Sauron's purposes, then the question becomes a dispute over how demonic temptation works on the privation theory. Such an interpretation of the Ring still seems to be consistent with the privation theory because the Ruling Ring is not inherently evil in itself, nor is it able to present any temptation that has not already tantalized the wearer in some fashion. The deceit of the Ring is that it presents temptations that are uniquely catered to the pride of each wearer to lead them down a path where Sauron can corrupt them, even if it takes a long time. The real evil of the Ring is that it can make any desire inordinate, and that only a divine being can actually beat the Ring on its own terms.

In direct contrast to Shippey's inference towards a semi-Manichean view of the Ring, is McIntosh's assertion that the Ring fits into Tolkien's Thomistic hierarchy of evil.

⁴⁶ Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth*, 142.

As a version of the evil of domination the Ring has three qualities: rendering the wearer invisible, suppressing one's material/physical presence, and "the *will* or intent to dominate through the production and use of [technology or mechanization]."⁴⁷ McIntosh believes that all three of these qualities deliberately suppress the existence of otherness, which causes creation to work "in the reverse direction by reducing the independence of things into a state of dependence upon oneself."⁴⁸ Invisibility serves to isolate the wearer of the Ring from any outside community or relationship – thus destroying the society made by God. Suppressing one's physical presence serves to alienate the self – thus allowing Sauron to control the body through the use of the Ring. And finally, the Ring, or rather Sauron, desires to rule and dominate all through the use of technology. The last two points from McIntosh's observations suggest a softer version of Manicheism, which McIntosh admits.⁴⁹

Despite Tolkien's interest in the independence and autonomy of evil, as McIntosh suggests, each and every case of evil in Tolkien relies on some prior choice of free will. The Ruling Ring seems to be the only instance within all of Middle-Earth where a form of Manichaeism could be correctly invoked. But the evil of domination should also be understood in conjunction with the evil of submission, something that Tolkien also seems to have considered. My addition of the evil of submission is simply this, there are certain evils that should be courageously resisted by free agents, even if those agents fail. And in Middle-Earth *every* created mortal being (outside of some future sub-created Christlike

⁴⁷ McIntosh, 235-239.

⁴⁸ McIntosh, 234-235.

⁴⁹ McIntosh 237-238.

figure) will fail. Like McIntosh pointed out, if a fallen being wants to create evil they can do so in a sub-creative fashion by undoing the creation that was done, Melkor set the precedent for this. The domination of created beings is just one more extension of this – the undoing of a creature's free will. At times this requires a breaking of their free will, at others merely a temptation from a deep desire. Melkor and Sauron did both, relying on subjugation for weak wills and temptation for strong ones. But evil is not strong enough to totally corrupt a will, for even the Orcs are redeemable in Tolkien's mind.

Conclusion

Through an examination of the privation theory and Tolkien's own writings, it should now be clearer that his portrayal of evil has the same type of appearance as the real thing, something that appears real but does not actually exist. Each and every instance of evil in *The Lord of the Rings* relies upon some free choice that went astray. Moreover, evil itself must rely upon a corresponding good for its own existence. The Ruling Ring is the only potential exception to Tolkien's cohesive picture of evil, but the only truly evil aspect of the Ring is its connection to Sauron. Like a boomerang, it wants to return to a completed state with its creator. This seemingly sentient aspect has led many to object that Tolkien must have some Manichean aspects to evil. However, the Ring can be explained under the terms of the privation theory, and thus be consistent with Tolkien's own opinions of evil. The way to explain evil in Middle-Earth is to examine Tolkien's concept of free will, which should serve to quell any Manichean objections.

CHAPTER 3

The Fight of Frodo: Free Will and Temptation

Having mentioned Free Will, I might say that in my myth I have used 'subcreation' in a special way...to make visible and physical the effects of Sin or misused Free Will by men.¹

Free will is a focal point throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. On a sub-creative level, Tolkien's depictions of free will parallel the reality of the real world; something that produces a convoluted web of effects throughout life. Tolkien's theory of evil follows a similar path as Augustine's, they both rely upon the explanatory power of free will. However, Tolkien also utilizes the entire Catholic tradition that built onto Augustine's early theories about free will and evil. The free will and temptation presented within *The Lord of the Rings* is an amalgamation of the Augustinian, Anselmian, Thomistic and Scotistic views on free will, which results in a complex theory of free will that allows for the possibility of a semi-Manichean inference. In this chapter, I will argue that Tolkien's presentation of free will aligns with the Anselmian two will theory which illuminates why the Ring is able to appear as a substantial version of evil. I will begin by explaining the differing Medieval theories of free will. Then I will present Tolkien's own musings in his letters and then within the story of *The Lord of the Rings*.

¹J.R.R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2000) 195.

The Growth of the Augustinian Free Will Theory

The privation theory is inherently tied to the concept of free choice, which St. Augustine sees as the power to sin or not to sin.² But such a definition of free choice is not satisfying for St. Anselm who believes that God possess all of His qualities as a pure perfection – the most perfect version of a quality. In turn, this concept leads Anselm to understand that the terms ‘Freedom’, ‘Free Will’, and ‘Free Choice’ are used in a univocal way such that God possess the most perfect versions of them. It also presents a problem for the Augustinian description of free will as the power to sin or not to sin. Anselm reasons that if God is the most perfect being in existence, and if He possesses Free Will in the same way as humans do, then the power to sin cannot be a part of the definition of Free Will because God cannot sin.³

Consequentially, Anselm must provide a new definition for free will, as well as explain the way in which rational beings exhibit their power to sin. Anselm’s response is to claim that God intentionally created each rational being with free will to “preserve rectitude of will for the sake of rectitude itself.”⁴ In other words, free will is the ability to maintain a rightness with God because of a desire for that rightness itself. Thus, the power to sin is not really a power, but the ability to reject rectitude and not use free will to preserve rightness. And God could not possibly sin, or force someone else to sin, because God’s Rectitude is His own Will. If someone wills rectitude for its own sake,

² Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1993), 27.

³ Anselm, “On Freedom of Choice,” in *Anselm Basic Writings*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2007), 147.

⁴ Anselm, “On Freedom of Choice,” 151.

they are “preserving rectitude of will in...the same [way] as willing what God wills [them] to will.”⁵

Despite such a ‘discovery’ about the purpose of free will, Anselm is still not satisfied with a loose definition of how the will is influenced by desires. After all, the Augustinian theory combines both the definition and the functioning of free choice together since freedom of choice is the ability to choose to sin and follow an inordinate desire or to not sin. Anselm, on the other hand, defines free will as the power to preserve or abandon rectitude, so he has to find an explanation for how a will can abandon rectitude. His response is to examine the will as a wholistic instrument that the soul uses. Within the instrument of the will, Anselm proposes that there are two dispositions, which he calls affections. The first is the affection for happiness, which disposes someone towards the most advantageous thing for that individual.⁶ This happiness is different from the colloquial term used to discuss a feeling or mental state, since it relies upon an antiquated understanding of happiness as a description of a type of life. In the *eudemonistic* framework that Anselm works, happiness is best understood as a lifestyle where the subject has those qualities of life that are considered the qualities needed for a good life. Interestingly, Anselm uses two different terms to describe the affection for advantage: *commoda*, meaning advantageous, and *beatitudine*, meaning supreme happiness.⁷ In turn, *beatitudine* is nearly impossible for a finite creature to possess on

⁵ Anselm, “On Freedom of Choice,” 160.

⁶ Anselm, “On the Harmony on God’s Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Grace with Free Choice (*De Concordia*),” in *Anselm Basic Writings*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2007), 389.

Earth, so the will always strives for the highest form of happiness it can find in an advantageous desire.

In contrast to the affection for advantage, Anselm theorizes that an equal disposition exists to direct the will towards rectitude, which he calls the affection for justice.⁸ The affection for justice serves to direct the will towards the rectitude that God first gave the soul when he created it.⁹ Thus, the affection for justice fulfills the role of directing the will towards what God wants the will to will.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, the will comes into conflict when the affection for advantage and the affection for justice have different objects, since “not everyone wills justice, and not everyone avoids injustice, whereas...everything that can be aware of it wills the advantageous and avoids the disadvantageous.”¹¹ In short, the will chooses to sin by pursuing the affection for advantage over the affection for justice, or the will can keep its rectitude by maintaining its desire for justice. But how does the affection for justice do this? Anselm believes that the affection for justice can maintain its rectitude by moderating the object of the affection for the advantageous or by willing something for the sake of justice.¹²

⁷ Anselm, “De Concordia Praescientiae et Praedestinationis et Gratiae Dei Cum Libro Arbitrio,” in *Opera Omnia Tomus Primus*, ed. Franciscus Salesius Schmitt (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1968), 3.11 [ed. Schmitt 1, 281.10-11].

⁸ Anselm, “*De Concordia*,” 389.

⁹ This refers back to Anselm’s purpose for the will from “On Freedom of Choice.”

¹⁰ Again referencing “On Freedom of Choice.” Specifically, chapter 8: “So if [God] takes rectitude from someone’s will, he does not will that that person should preserve rectitude of will...[but] preserving rectitude of will in this way is the same thing as willing what God wills him to will... Therefore, if God takes away this much-discussed rectitude from someone, he does not will that person to will what he wills him to will.” A shorter explanation of this is that God gave the will the affection for justice because he wants the will to pursue justice.

¹¹ Anselm, “On the Fall of the Devil,” 191.

¹² Anselm, “On the Fall of the Devil,” 195.

Obviously, there are many instances where someone can use their will to pursue what seems advantageous to them instead of what is just. Because of this, Anselm explains that the will was created with an initial justice, which it lost when it first failed to preserve justice.¹³ In such a case, God is the only being who can restore that justice to the will. But does this mean that a rational creature loses its affection for justice when it sins? Absolutely not! The affection for justice is a constant disposition within the will, which remains active regardless of the presence of the initial justice in the will.¹⁴ The main difference that this absence of justice creates is that it removes the sought-after object from the will.¹⁵ And since the affection for justice is the higher affection, it is brought down to the level of the affection for advantage. In short, the loss of initial justice does not affect the dispositions in the will, but only the ability to possess the object of that disposition. Which in turn means that the affection for justice cannot consistently will justice for its own sake when it no longer has the quality of justice in the will.

Anselm's theory of the dual affections needs one more clarification for it to present a consistent view. His discussion of two competing dispositions lends itself to the interpretation that the will has parts. Despite the fact that the dispositions appear to be

¹³ A typical assumption in Medieval Christianity is the doctrine of inherited sin. Essentially, Adam's first sin is passed down to each human being as a consequence. If someone wants to reject the inherited sin narrative, then I would suggest that they examine Anselm's "On the Fall of the Devil" to see how easy it is to sin in the first moments of creations. For human beings, who also possess all of the characteristics of an animal in addition to our rational capacity, it would not be surprising to find that our wills fail early in our childhood before we have the ability to reason fully. There may be many objections to such an answer, but the point still remains that we inherited a fallen will either from Adam or from our own willing. The answer most likely lies in some combination of the two.

¹⁴ Anselm, "On Freedom of Choice," 153.

¹⁵ Anselm, "*De Concordia*," 393.

“instruments of that instrument,”¹⁶ Anselm maintains that the will itself is “a single, unitary thing.”¹⁷ Each of the dispositions serve a specific function in directing the will towards different objects, but ultimately, they are just the will itself as well. A helpful example of this is how a wrench is one tool but can be used to tighten a bolt or loosen it. In the same way the will is able to will the just thing or the advantageous thing.

Duns Scotus agrees with Anselm’s interpretation of the dual affection theory and provides some important clarifications. The first clarification that Scotus makes is that the affection for justice is primarily used to moderate the affection for advantage. When the will uses the affection for justice to moderate the affection for advantage, it does so in one of three ways: by moderating the intensity, the timing, or the cause.¹⁸ Moreover, the moderating capacity of the affection for justice plays a vital role in reigning in the affection for advantage, since the affection for advantage is a constant disposition that is always at work within the will.¹⁹

A second clarification that Scotus makes is to address how the constant appetitive nature of the affection for advantage seems to make every will inordinate. He discusses how the natural will (another term for the affection for advantage since all creatures will the advantageous),

is not immoderate of itself. It merely inclines in the manner of nature, and there is no immoderateness in that, since it inclines in just the way that it has been given

¹⁶ Anselm, “*De Concordia*,” 393.

¹⁷ Anselm, “*De Concordia*,” 389.

¹⁸ John Duns Scotus, *John Duns Scotus Selected Writings on Ethics*, trans. Thomas Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) 116.

¹⁹ Scotus, 114. Scotus cites Anselm’s *De Concordia* 3.13 to support this position.

the power to incline, and it has no power to do anything else. But it is in the power of the will as free to follow that inclination in its elicited act or not.²⁰

In other words, there is a large difference between a disposition, which only inclines the will towards an action, and an elicited act, which is the will's decision to act upon an inclination. This further clarifies that the dispositions within the will do not do anything to force an act, but instead they merely present the options for the will to choose between. And so, an agent must make an intentional choice in a given circumstance and each choice can be evaluated with the condition that the agent knows the just option. However, both Anselm and Scotus agree that an agent can only return to willing justice for its own sake when God restores justice to the soul by grace.

While Anselm and Scotus focus on the two will theory as an explanation for the conflicts that arise in the will when it has to choose to sin or not to sin, St. Thomas approaches it in a way that blends together the Augustinian privation theory with the Aristotelian view of voluntary and involuntary actions of the will. Aquinas' project is to provide a theistic version of the Aristotelian virtue ethics, so he utilizes the added explanatory power of Augustine's original thesis on free will. Thus, his account provides a detailed discussion of how the Augustinian theory of the will makes decisions primarily for an end. However, Thomistic free will also seeks to explain how the will functions as an intellectual appetite that seeks to form the correct virtuous habits, or to pursue the vicious habits. For this paper, it is helpful to note that Aquinas follows a traditional Augustinian free will approach in lieu of an Anselmian one.

²⁰ Scotus, 116.

Tolkien's Discussions on Free Will

Tolkien's thoughts on evil appear to follow an Augustinian approach on a general level; however, his description of conflicts within the will is similar to an Anselmian description of free will. One such case is when Tolkien discusses how the good side can use free will to pursue advantageous things and that the bad side can use it to do just things. During his notes on W.H. Auden's review of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien raises the point that:

There may be deeds on the wrong side of heroic courage, or some of a higher moral level: deeds of mercy and forbearance. A judge may accord them some honor...[and] deplore the evil deeds [done] on the right side.²¹

While he goes on to say that the bad side will still be held accountable for the evil and crimes their cause commits, Tolkien has highlighted how anyone can do good deeds regardless of their overall moral standing. In other words, the objects that the will chooses to follow does not necessarily dictate which side of a conflict someone is on. Both the good and the evil possess the dual affections. Merely choosing to sin does not remove or destroy the ability to know and will what is just. So, while Tolkien utilizes an Augustinian language to describe how free will can be used to choose the just or the advantageous, justice can still occur on both sides like Anselm postulates.²²

In terms of good and evil, Frodo also exhibits how willing to use the Ring, which is considered an evil object, can still be a good desire. When examining Frodo's use of

²¹ Tolkien, *Letters*, 243.

²² While the bad side may be able to do just things, they cannot do so if it is opposed to the advantageous thing. Thus, those just actions on the bad side do not arise out of a conflict between the affections, but out of a conflict between different advantageous objects that the will can choose between. In terms of the story, Denethor was still able to act in accord with his duty towards the state despite his abandonment of justice. This should be contrasted to Frodo who chooses to bear the burden of the Ring because it is the just cause but fails to act justly in his final moment of temptation.

the Ring at Weathertop, Tolkien writes, “Frodo acted merely in fear and wished only to use (in vain) the Ring’s subsidiary power of conferring invisibility.”²³ Frodo’s desire to use the Ring and disappear was not a bad desire by any means. And it does not seem like anyone faults him as he was surrounded by the Black Riders. He merely wanted to use the Ring to escape his situation, instead of using the Ring to fulfill a desire for Supreme Power. The insight into Tolkien’s philosophy is two-fold: 1) that only God is allowed to judge a situation and know the true intents behind an act, and 2) that it is possible for an individual to will the advantageous object without abandoning their desire for justice. While someone could object that Frodo’s use of the Ring actually runs contrary to justice, Tolkien thinks that Frodo really just wanted to use the Ring as nothing more than a tool.

Unfortunately, Weathertop was only the beginning for Frodo. By the end of the journey “it was *quite impossible* for him to surrender the Ring, in act or will, especially at its point of maximum power, [and] this failure was adumbrated from far back.”²⁴ The Ring preyed upon his desires and tempted him to the point where he could no longer will what was right. However, unlike the others who succumbed to the Ring’s call, Frodo gets a bit of a pass. Yes, he did desire the Ring for himself. But Frodo is honored “because he accepted the burden voluntarily and had done all that was within his utmost physical and mental strength to do.”²⁵ As in the first observation, Frodo may have failed and succumbed to his affection for advantage in one particular moment, but Frodo’s initial choice to become the Ringbearer was based on a will for justice. Thus, his sin and

²³ Tolkien, *Letters*, 331.

²⁴ Tolkien, *Letters*, 251.

²⁵ Tolkien, *Letters*, 251.

rejection of his quest when he succumbs to the temptations of the Ring do not negate his desire and will to undertake the quest. Frodo really wanted to do what was right, and ultimately did everything within his own willpower to complete the job. If we examine Frodo's choice to take the Ring to Mount Doom, on a Macro-level, with Tolkien's conception of the good side versus the bad side, then it will become clear that Frodo is one of the good guys who wills justice more than his own good. However, like every other finite being, Frodo did not possess the willpower to reject the Ring in the fallen world of Middle-Earth.²⁶

Understanding how the Ruling Ring works is an important component in understanding Tolkien's thoughts on free will – after all, it is capable of enslaving the other wearers of the rings of power. On an Augustinian framework this would be concerning since it would require a literal overpowering of the will. On the Anselmian view, however, the Ring shows how a will without the affection for justice will,

fervently desires the advantageous which it must will, because it forsook the truly fitting advantage of the rational nature it no longer has... [and can only follow] the false advantages of the brutish animals, who follow bestial appetites.²⁷

In order to see the connection between the Ring and the affection for advantage we should reexamine the different aspects of the Ring. First and foremost, we know that the

²⁶ While the Fall of Middle-Earth is not *per se* an imitation of Medieval Catholicism, it does bear many similarities. First there is the angelic primal fall of Morgoth, followed by the fall of the Elves (as told in the *Silmarillion*). While the story of how the race of man fell is left out, Tolkien explains that he left that detail out because “Men do not come on the stage until all that is long past.” Tolkien, *Letters*, 147-148.

²⁷ Anselm, “De Concordia Praescientiae et Praedestinationis et Gratiae Dei Cum Libro Arbitrio,” in *Opera Omnia Tomus Primus*, ed. Franciscus Salesius Schmitt (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1968), 3.13 [ed. Schmitt 1, 286.22-25]: *Fervens desiderio commodorum quae non velle nequit, quia vera commoda rationalli naturae convenientia, quae perdidit habere non valet: ad falsa et brutorum animalium commoda, quae bestiales appetitus suggerunt, se convertit*. My translation.

Ring deceives the wearer with images of “supreme power.”²⁸ Supreme power not only correlates to the desire for *beatitudine*, but also parallels why Satan fell in the first place.²⁹ In order to possess “supreme power” one must reject justice, because justice is merely willing what God wants us to will. And since God gave each creature an affection for justice, which directs the creature to what is appropriate to will, God does not want any creature to will Supreme Power. Anselm explains that such a will for Supreme Power is the same as willing to be like God, which is really a desire “to be even *greater* than God in that [that person will] place his own will above God’s will by willing what God [does not] want him to will.”³⁰ Moreover, the other aspects of the Ruling Ring serve as additional temptations on how to get said power. In short, the Ring is an example of a temptation so strong that no finite mortal creature could ever hope to resist it. Especially in a pre-Christian world where no Divine intervention has restored the will to a perfected process.

But why would Tolkien include such a powerful temptation within the world of Middle-Earth? I believe that the answer is two-fold. Firstly, Tolkien is concerned with presenting every event and situation in a specific way, to show, “the history and development of the individual...and the history of the world.”³¹ Most people agree that going through hard times builds character, and that living a life free from difficulty does not make someone a better person. Tolkien clearly agreed, so he placed great temptations

²⁸ Tolkien, *Letters*, 332.

²⁹ Tolkien discusses a similar parallel where Melkor’s desire for power led to his fall. Tolkien, *Letters*, 145.

³⁰ Anselm, “On the Fall of the Devil,” 178.

³¹ Tolkien, *Letters*, 233.

in the narrative to provide a catalyst for individual characters to grow, who in turn mold the world. The Ring was a temptation that seemed insurmountable, but it was ultimately destroyed. As a result, Middle-Earth was able to defeat the vestiges of Sauron and return the world to a better state. The second reason that Tolkien would make a great temptation is to maintain a level of realism in the story. In his response to Amy Ronald's questions about Frodo's failure Tolkien writes, "it is possible for the good, even the saintly, to be subjected to a power of evil which is too great for them to overcome – in themselves."³² Here, Tolkien is referring to a very specific type of evil that can occur. An "evil" that is best understood as a complete and untempered temptation, such as how the Ring tempts each wearer throughout the story. At a glance, we may not like that free will in its current state is not stronger than every temptation. However, if there was not a Fall into sin, for both our world and sub-created world of Middle-Earth, every creature would be able to maintain the rectitude God created them with. And if the initial rightness remained in each mortal creature, then no temptation would be strong enough to make that individual sin. In short, the Ring is insurmountable to saints because of the sinful state of the world, not because of some deficiency God imparted to them when creating free will. Therefore, we should view Tolkien as clearly avoiding Pelagianism since mortal creatures cannot will themselves into rectitude.

Two Wills in The Lord of the Rings

Before examining specific cases of free will in *The Lord of The Rings*, it is useful to have a broad overview of the correlations between Tolkien's opinions, the privation

³² Tolkien, *Letters*, 252-253.

theory, and the Anselmian two will theory. First and foremost, Tolkien agrees with the traditional response to the problem of evil found in the privation theory. Thus, in Tolkien's work, evil is a privation of a good, which occurs through a causal relationship with an individual's free will. Second, Tolkien presents a series of explicit and implicit Fall's throughout the creation myth of Middle-Earth, which mirrors the Medieval theories that discuss the primal sin of Satan as the catalyst for Adam's later sin and fall from Eden. However, unlike his Catholic Faith, Tolkien has not yet had Eru undertake a grand redemptive act, thereby placing Middle-Earth into a pre-Christian state. Third, while Tolkien portrays evil through an Augustinian privation theory, his emphasis on a committed action and rouge sub-creative desires to undo creation, allows for the Anselmian and Scotistic interpretation of the absence of justice to explain the true evil that occurs. And lastly, the temptation of the characters primarily occurs between a conflict of what is advantageous for each individual character and what is that character's duty to do. While there are multiple characters that provide a lens into Tolkien's conception of free will, Frodo is the chief example that should be examined.

The first time we experience the Ring from Frodo's perspective is during his conversation with Gandalf after Bilbo left the Shire and bequeathed the Ring to Frodo. Once Gandalf explains the pertinent history surrounding the Rings of Power, he asks Frodo to examine the ring. Frodo's response was to "[hand] it slowly to the wizard. It felt suddenly very heavy, as if either it or Frodo himself was in some way reluctant for Gandalf to touch it."³³ Let us assume for a moment that both Frodo and the Ring are reluctant for Gandalf to touch the Ring. The Ring's desire is merely an extension of

³³ John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Del Rey, 1986) 54.

Sauron's will the desires the most advantageous object for Sauron's power, which explains its apprehension towards allowing Gandalf to know that it is the Ruling Ring. Examining Frodo, though, is much more interesting. Quite clearly Frodo is being tempted, so some desire must be pushing him to keep the Ring, presumably inspired by the Ring itself. But why would the Ring have a pull-on Frodo? On an Augustinian or Thomistic reading, the Ring could just be tempting Frodo by appealing to objects that arise from an inordinate desire – e.g., willing the supreme power. However, on an Anselmian reading there is both an internal and external account for the Ring's temptations of Frodo. The Augustinian will for an inordinate desire is still active but can now be explained as a conflict within Frodo's own will. The conflict arises as a major issue for Frodo because he lacks his initial justice in his fallen nature – as do most characters in the narrative. As a result, the Ring appeals to Frodo's affection for advantage at the same time as Frodo's affection for advantage desires the Ring. But as we find out later in the story and in Tolkien's own letters, Frodo has a very strong will that still desires justice. Thus, at the outset of the journey, Frodo is fighting the temptations of the Ring while maintaining the ability to freely give it up with only minor difficulty.

Frodo's next temptation occurs when he is almost caught by the Black Rider on his way to Crickhollow. Tolkien writes that,

A sudden unreasoning fear of discovery laid hold of Frodo, and he thought of his Ring...the desire to get it out of his pocket became so strong that he began slowly to move his hand. He felt that he had only to slip it on, and then he would be safe.³⁴

³⁴ Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 83.

There are two interesting pieces of information that occur in this brief altercation between Frodo and the Black Rider. The first is that Frodo's fear prompted an unreasoning response. Thus, Frodo's actions should be viewed as a direct depiction of what is occurring within his will. Which, predictably, is a natural desire for the most advantageous thing in that moment – safety. Frodo's desire is so instinctual that even if he had used the Ring for its power to cause invisibility, he would not have been faulted by Tolkien.³⁵ An examination of the Ring shows that its 'evil power' here is the appeal to Frodo's affection for advantage with the promise of immediate safety. However, we discover later that the Ring cannot be used to escape the Black Riders since their own rings of power allow them to see Frodo when he uses the Ring. Thus, the Ring can appeal to an affection for advantage with a true promise (invisibility) while deceiving the wearer (because the Nazgul can see the wearer). The same is true for Frodo's stronger desire a few pages later, except now the Ring has a foothold to tempt Frodo: "the desire to slip on the Ring came over Frodo...this time it was stronger than before. So strong that, almost before he realized what he was doing, his hand was groping in his pocket."³⁶

During the scene at Weathertop, Frodo desires to use the Ring in the presence of the Nazgul in a slightly different way than his earlier temptation in the woods. Not only does Frodo encounter the overwhelming desire to use the Ring, but he also intentionally acts on that desire. It is an interesting prelude and parallel to how the Ring will continue to tempt him throughout his journey with a growing intensity to return to Sauron.

³⁵ Tolkien, *Letters*, 331. Discussed earlier in this chapter near the beginning of *Tolkien's Discussions on Free Will*.

³⁶ Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 87-88.

Nevertheless, on Weathertop Frodo acts on his affection for advantage and uses the Ring for its power to grant invisibility. Interestingly, this action is not faulted by Tolkien. Frodo did not have many other choices that he could have pursued in that situation. The lack of other options makes it slightly unclear as to whether Frodo acted unjustly while pursuing the most advantageous thing for him at that moment. Moreover, it is equally unclear if Frodo could have acted more justly in trying to hide and not use the Ring (which drew the Nazgul's attention to him). Either way, the most important piece of knowledge to take away from the Weathertop scene is that Frodo intentionally used the Ring for the first time in a circumstance where the full ramifications of that use could be felt. This is not to say that his use of the Ring was fully evil, nor that Frodo was unjust in doing so. However, his use allows the Ring to have a foothold in his will which places the roots for stronger temptations to grow.

Frodo's next two uses of the Ring occur at Amon Hen after Boromir attempts to seize the Ring by force. For Frodo's first use at Amon Hen, Tolkien writes, "there was only one thing he could do: trembling he pulled out the Ring upon its chain and quickly slipped it on his finger."³⁷ In this situation, we again see Frodo use the Ring out of pure necessity, which means that we should not consider it as a desire contrary to justice. Frodo intentionally uses the Ring in a situation where its full power can occur but only for the purpose of escaping Boromir, whose possession of the Ring would have led to a much worse evil. So, in a way, Frodo's use of the Ring was not only advantageous thing to do, but it was also done out of necessity for justice. In order for the just cause to go on, he had to escape Boromir's conquered will. Unfortunately, this scene results in the case

³⁷ Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 449.

Shippey cites to support a Manichean view of evil. Sitting upon the seat of Seeing on Amon Hen:

[Frodo] heard himself crying out: *Never, never!* Or was it: *Verily I come, I come to you?* He could not tell. Then as a flash from some other point of power there came to his mind another thought: *Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring!* The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing point, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so.³⁸

While it could be the case that there are two literal powers fighting within Frodo, it could just as equally be Tolkien's depiction of the two affections in conflict. When reading the two powers as the two affections, then we have an answer to both the two powers and the two voices. Frodo's just voice is crying out to resist the Ring. His advantageous voice is responding to the promptings of Sauron and the Ring. We could object that these two powers are different substantial powers equally seeking control of Frodo's will. Or we could admit that these two "perfectly balanced" powers are the dispositions themselves, locked in a battle within Frodo's will. Neither one strong enough to control Frodo. His justness may not be whole, but it is incredibly strong, still strong enough to battle the purely appetitive temptations seeking control of his will. And ultimately Frodo is "*free to choose.*" If nothing else, these powers seem to be dispositions towards two separate objects: the just thing in destroying the Ring, and the advantageous thing in returning it for power.

Frodo's experiences with the Ring gradually allow it to increase its temptation and feel like a greater burden. The prolonged effects of the Ring are seen in the next major incident outside of Minas Morgul. As Frodo, Sam and Gollum ascend the stairs of

³⁸ Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 451.

Cirith Ungol, the Wraith-king began to lead the forces of Mordor out of Minas Morgul.

As the group huddled in fear, Frodo experienced the strongest force used against him from the Ring up to that point:

And as he waited, he felt, more urgent than ever before, the command that he should put on the Ring. But great as the pressure was, he felt no inclination now to yield to it... There was no longer any answer to that command in his own will, dismayed by terror though it was, and he felt only the beating upon him of a great power from outside. It took his hand, as Frodo watched with his mind, not willing it but in suspense (as if he looked on some old story from far away), it moved the hand inch by inch towards the chain upon his neck. Then his own will stirred; slowly it forced the hand back and set it to find another thing, a thing lying hidden near his breast. Cold and hard it seemed as his grip closed on it: the phial of Galadriel... As he touched it, for a while all thought of the Ring was banished from his mind.³⁹

While lengthier than previous quotes, this section is one of the most jam-packed scenes between Frodo and the Ring. On the one hand the Ring is appealing to Frodo in such a way that it is almost overpowering him. Frodo's will is losing its battle, especially as the Ring increases its power during the approach to Mount Doom. But this still fits the Anselmian narrative, where Frodo maintains a constant affection for justice despite not possessing his initial justice. Now the ramifications of not possessing the initial justice have resulted in the Ring's ability to control Frodo's will through an unrelenting and unsurmountable temptation of the affection for advantage. But in a parallel to Amon Hen, Frodo still maintains his freedom of choice. And once he chooses to take a stand in the face of adversity, Frodo is able to seek the just option – the phial of Galadriel. In turn, Frodo is able to maintain his own justness in that moment and allow the temptation to pass, despite the Ring's attempt to pressure Frodo into failure.

³⁹ John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, (New York: Del Rey, 1986) 356-57.

The final scene between Frodo and the Ring is not told from Frodo's perspective, but Sam's. While brief, it shows how the temptation appealed to Frodo's affection for advantage, especially in a place where no other power, except perhaps Iluvatar's, had any effect. Sam enters Mount Doom to see Frodo standing at the chasm and speaking,

with a clear voice, indeed a voice clearer and more powerful than Sam had ever heard him use before... 'I have come,' he said. 'But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!'⁴⁰

Frodo is overcome. But if we remember that Tolkien believes a Fall has occurred, Frodo is in no position to overcome one of the greatest temptations in the history of Middle-Earth. As Tolkien says, it was "*quite impossible* for [Frodo] to surrender the Ring, in act or will, especially at its point of maximum power."⁴¹ There was no possible way for Frodo's affection for justice, which may have been the strongest in Middle-Earth among the mortal creatures at that time, to overcome temptation in a Fallen state. When Frodo is standing at the threshold of Mount Doom, he is facing the same temptation that Satan felt – that of a pure, unadulterated desire for power. Frodo had to fail. And while Frodo is accountable for his failure, there is still grace in a judgement for him. His choice is understandable, perhaps even natural, for a mortal being in his situation. However, that does not excuse the fact that he chose the Ring over the Right course of action.

Before Frodo's final use of the Ring at Mount Doom, Sam uses the Ring to save Frodo from the clutches of the Orcs at Cirith Ungol. After Frodo is poisoned by Shelob, Sam thinks that his master is dead and that he must choose to stay and defend him or to take the Ring and finish the quest. Sam's internal monologue revolves around Frodo's

⁴⁰ John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, (New York: Del Rey, 1986) 239.

⁴¹ Tolkien, *Letters*, 251.

appointed role as the Ring bearer, which he believes disqualifies him from taking the Ring in Frodo's place. However, Sam eventually resolves that he must finish the quest so that the whole Cause is not lost to Sauron. Thus, it seems like Sam's affection for justice really does win out in his decision to take the Ring and destroy it. Tolkien seems to confirm that the Ring was striving to have Sam leave it, with the narrator's comment that "at once his head was bound to the ground with the weight of the Ring, as if a great stone had been strung on him."⁴² The Ring appealed to Sam's sense of honor and loyalty to Frodo, which Sam overcame with his love for justice, for the cause, and for Frodo. The Ring's only move was to appear as an unbearable burden, which Sam still overcame with a little help from the magic of the Phial.

After accepting the Ring, Sam uses it out of necessity to hide from the Orcs during his rescue of Frodo. Sam's temptation and internal struggle is just as enlightening as Frodo's at Amon Hen and outside of Minas Morgul:

As Sam stood there...he felt himself enlarged...he felt that he had from now on only two choices: to forebear the Ring, though it would torment him; or to claim it, and challenge the Power that sat in its dark hold beyond the valley of the shadows. Already the Ring tempted him, gnawed at his will and reason. Wild fantasies arose in his mind; and he saw Samwise the Strong, Hero of the Age...In that hour of trial it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm; but also deep down in him lived still unconquered his plain hobbit-sense: he knew in the core of his heart that he was not large enough to bear such a burden, even if such visions were not a mere cheat to betray him. The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command.⁴³

Sam exhibits a very concise picture of how the Ring appeals to the affection for advantage, and how the affection for justice is still fostered and powerful in Middle-

⁴² Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 387.

⁴³ Tolkien, *The Return of the Ring*, 185-186.

Earth. Obviously, the Ring appeals to Sam's affection for advantage to take it and conquer the world and to make the world his garden. But the two things that keep him from doing so are his loyalty to Frodo, and by extension the cause, and his realization that the Ring's temptations are too inordinate for him. Sam is a gardener who knows his place and connection to the world. So, despite the temptation to become greater than he could ever become on his own, Sam rejects the objects presented by the Ring and chooses to preserve the just order of the world. He does not need the world to become his garden because he knows that his garden is his world.

Outside of Frodo and Sam, who present the clearest picture of how the Ring affects the will, we can examine a variety of other characters. The easiest character to examine is Gollum, who was consumed by his affection for advantage and completely desired the Ring. While some may argue that he almost found redemption in Frodo as a new master, he never quite made it that far. Thus, we can simply claim that Gollum is the antithesis of Frodo, a weak-willed Hobbit who allowed the Ring to dictate his desires. Two other important characters who have brief scenes with the Ring are Gandalf and Galadriel. When offered the Ring, Gandalf cries out,

No! ...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...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! ...The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength.⁴⁴

Gandalf, an angelic figure, rejects the Ring because he knows that it is too strong of a temptation for his will. While Gandalf could accept the burden himself, his affection for justice directs him to reject it because of the evil he would do in the name of the good.

⁴⁴ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 67-68.

Likewise, Galadriel rejects the Ring when Frodo offers it to her: “you will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord, you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night!”⁴⁵ The description of becoming a great leader in the near future echoes Sam’s temptation. And in an echo of Gandalf, Galadriel rejects the Ring to pass her test.

There is only one other character to discuss who encountered the Ring of power. In a similar antithetical pattern as Frodo and Gollum, Faramir is the antithesis of his brother Boromir. Once Faramir and his men had morphed from capturing to escorting Frodo and Sam, Frodo and Faramir began to talk about his quest and what happened to Boromir. After speculating that Isildur took some weapon or device from Sauron in the past war and, piecing together that Frodo’s quest is to destroy whatever Isildur took, Faramir concludes that Boromir was more than likely to try to take Isildur’s Bane for himself to save Gondor. Faramir’s response is starkly different than his brothers, saying,

But fear no more! I would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway. Not were Minas Tirith falling in ruin and I alone could save her, so, using the weapon of the Dark Lord for her good and my glory. No, I do not wish for such triumphs...I do not ask you to tell me more. I do not even ask you to tell me whether I now speak nearer the mark.⁴⁶

Where Boromir sought to take the Ring for himself to save Gondor, Faramir showed himself to be a true man of character by rejecting the mere thought of it. Where Gandalf and Galadriel both knew what they were rejecting, Faramir did not even want to know if his guess was correct. Thus, in a similar fashion as Gandalf, he used his affection for justice to reason what would happen if he were to use whatever Frodo was carrying.

⁴⁵ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 410.

⁴⁶ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 314-315

Intriguingly, Faramir claims that he does not want to take Isildur's Bane because he knows that it is from the Dark Lord. While logically he can conclude that it is meant to tempt him and make him serve Sauron's purposes, he shows that he truly loves rectitude for its own sake. He merely wants to do what is right, not to have power or victory if it meant doing something that sacrifices that rightness. This does not make Faramir any better than Frodo in act or will but shows that he resembles Frodo's love for justice.

Conclusion

Tolkien was very conscious that he needed to form a version of free will where the temptations of the Ruling Ring would not overpower the wearer immediately. As a result, his presentation of free will seemed to support an inconclusive dualism, presenting both a privation theory and a Manichean theory of evil. However, if free will is examined under Anselm and Scotus' two will theory, then Tolkien's theory of evil no longer appears to be dualistic at all. The Ring is only used by Frodo and Sam in times of extreme need where they are not necessarily abandoning their desire for justice, excluding Frodo's failure in the end. Likewise, the slow temptation of the Ring preyed upon the times where Frodo used it out of necessity so that it could weaken his affection for justice. Similarly, Gandalf, Galadriel, and Faramir all show how the temptation of the Ring could be overcome – through a conscious rejection of accepting it. Thus, Tolkien created an object that allowed characters to show the difference between a love of justice and a love of happiness.

CHAPTER 4

The Unbearable Buren: How Grace Completes Tolkien's Theory of Free Will

One final question remains: why would Tolkien create such a powerful evil force that even the characters with the strongest and purest wills are bound to fail? Why did Tolkien make evil stronger than the mortal creatures of his story? The answer lies in a simple aspect of Middle-Earth that Tolkien intentionally wrote: "I am in any case myself a Christian; but the 'Third Age' was not a Christian world."¹ As we have seen, Tolkien did not hide Christian elements from his world, quite the opposite actually. Moreover, Tolkien provides deep personal insight in his letters that explains how these concepts should be viewed in Middle-Earth. Undoubtedly, Tolkien saw evil as a grave problem for the world, but a small problem for the great goodness of God. He also thought that the effects of free will were important enough to show all of them throughout the narrative. Tolkien's colloquial language about evil and free will allowed for its simple complexity to spark debates over how the Ruling Ring fits into Tolkien's privation theory. Likewise, Tolkien's depictions and discussions of free will leave the Augustinian version and branch into the Anselmian two will theory. A theory which ties in nicely with Tolkien's emphasis on the concepts of Duty and Honor. Justice, in its traditional sense, encompasses the heart of what Tolkien presents as a good man. Aragorn, Faramir, Gandalf, Frodo, and Sam all exhibit a type of goodness that envelops multiple good

¹J.R.R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2000), 220.

making qualities. And more often than not, doing what's right in Middle-Earth means fighting against what is best for the individual. The Cause, it would seem, is something higher and better than something beneficial for the individual. So, naturally we should read that there is justice fighting for what is right, on the one hand, and the desire for advantageous power on the other. Nevertheless, Tolkien created Middle-Earth as a world where God had not yet fulfilled the redemptive act necessary to restore the world to a just state from its initial Fall. There is no sub-created Christ figure, an incarnate Iluvatar perhaps, that has corrected the world yet. Part of this is due to Tolkien's belief that the story found in the Gospels "is an infinitely greater thing," than his story.² But this still leaves the world of Middle-Earth in its imperfect fallen state. In church talk, God could influence the world by intentionally doing things, but he had not redeemed the individual souls of characters from their sinful state. The process of redemption and mercy that exists in the 'real world' had not yet occurred in a similar fashion in Middle-Earth when Frodo took the Ring to Doom.

Tolkien's attention to the necessity of grace does not come from any one particular philosophical or theological theory. In actuality it is a cornerstone of the Christian faith and can be found in every orthodox discussion of the shortcomings of free will. Grace has a major explanatory role in the theories of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Scotus. Augustine attempted to show that evil did not exist because humans have free will, which resulted in a conflict between Augustine and the Pelagians who used his theory to justify their heresy that humans can become righteous by exercising their free will. One of the foundations of the Christian faith is that human beings cannot save

² Tolkien, *Letters*, 237.

themselves – we need a savior to redeem us. As a result, Augustine responded to the Pelagians by arguing that his theory of evil and free will was an attempt to explain how God saves us from our fallen state. In his reconsiderations of *On Free Choice of the Will* he says that,

unless the will is liberated by grace from its bondage to sin and is helped to overcome its vices, mortals cannot lead pious and righteous lives. And unless the divine grace by which the will is freed preceded the act of the will, it would not be grace at all. It would be given in accordance with the will's merits, whereas grace is given freely.³

There are a few important considerations that regulate all Catholic theories of free will. The first is that grace is needed to save each individual from the bondage of sin that is inherited from being born onto the earth. It is not possible to will oneself to righteousness on our own, we need God to fix an integral part of us. Secondly, grace is free. There is nothing we can do that will result in the rectification of our free will. Restoration to rectitude only occurs when God allows it to through grace. And finally, God's grace precedes any desire of the will for grace. Basically, if God gives grace before someone wills grace, then that grace is given freely and without constraints. If God decided that each person deserved grace based on their desire for grace, then grace would be contingent upon each individual's desire to will grace. On Augustine's picture, grace is given prior to a will, so that the only contingent piece of the puzzle is someone desiring to accept the grace that God has given.

In a similar way, Anslem saw that Grace is a necessary component for his two will system. We already saw how the affection for justice is a constant disposition of the

³ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1993), 127.

will, such that it always directs someone towards the just thing. However, Anselm also discusses how the loss of infused justice – that is, the justice initially created in each will – casts the will into the rule of the affection for advantage. The reign of the affection for advantage does not stop the will from choosing just things, but it does stop the will from choosing justice when it is directly opposed to what is advantageous. Anselm believes that,

once [the will] has abandoned the rectitude it received, it cannot regain it unless God restores it. And I think it is a greater miracle when God restores to a will the rectitude it has abandoned than when he restores to a dead man the life he has lost.⁴

Anselm sees grace as the *only* way for the will to be restored to a state of balance. Not only that, but he also sees it as a bigger miracle than resurrecting someone. Grace restores the will to a place where it should be but is not.

Tolkien was very aware of the need for Grace as he wrote his narrative. During Chapter 2, I referenced that Tolkien wrote “one must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is *not* finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however ‘good’; and the Writer of the Story is not one of us.”⁵ Tolkien clearly had many good characters do many good things. However, just because good characters typically do good things, does not mean that we should ignore the fact that they sometimes do bad things as well. Tolkien even observed such a phenomenon during his lifetime and held the view that only God will be able to discern the good from the bad. However, Shippey inferred that it would be the wrong judgement to place the blame on Frodo for failing to destroy the Ring, since Frodo

⁴ Anselm, “On Freedom of Choice,” in *Anselm Basic Writings*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2007), 161.

⁵ Tolkien, *Letters*, 252.

was a good character who was trying to do the right thing. But it is the right judgement. Frodo was fully culpable for his action, but that does not mean there was any lack of Mercy or Grace. Tolkien even admits this in the same letter,

he was honoured because he had accepted the burden voluntarily and had then done all that was within his utmost physical and mental strength to do. He (and the Cause) were saved – by Mercy: by the supreme value and efficacy of Pity and forgiveness of injury.⁶

Frodo’s fall was inevitable, but it was also fully accounted for. God remained in control throughout the entire ordeal, in order to ensure the victory of the Cause.

Tolkien echoes this concept late in his letter to Amy Ronald in a discussion of how Frodo failed: “in this case the cause (not the hero) was triumphant, because by the exercise of pity, mercy and forgiveness of injury a situation was produced in which all was redressed and disaster averted.”⁷ The quest to preserve Middle-Earth succeeded through a display of mercy, pity, and forgiveness. But most of this mercy, pity, and forgiveness occurred from the Author’s desire to intervene. Tolkien believes that Frodo did absolutely everything that he possibly could, writing that,

Frodo deserved all honor because he spent every drop of his will and body...to bring him to the destined point...Then Other Power then took over: the Writer of the Story (by which I do not mean myself), ‘that one ever present Person who is never absent and never named.’⁸

In every scene where Frodo can be examined, we find that there is a constant struggle to bear the burden of the Ring. Yet, in his current state he was never able to win the victory on his own. In the pre-redeemed world of Middle-Earth, Frodo needed a deeper

⁶ Tolkien, *Letters*, 252.

⁷ Tolkien, *Letters*, 253.

⁸ Tolkien, *Letters*, 253.

fellowship than the one to take back the Ring. And ultimately the Grace of the Author was bestowed on him to finish the quest to partially rectify the world.

In a draft of a letter to Mrs. Eileen Elgar, Tolkien further comments on Frodo's failure to surrender the Ring at Mount Doom. Tolkien admits that Frodo failed as a hero in a simplistic understanding of the story. However, he also suggests that a moral framework "in the World" exists and that it is quite different than the simple reading – namely, that the element of "Pity or Mercy...is also an absolute requirement in moral judgement (since it is present in the Divine nature)."⁹ God's Grace gives both pity and mercy because it is part of His nature, and thus any moral judgement He makes will be reliant upon how He dolls them out. Likewise, our own moral judgements, especially in the sub-created world of Middle-Earth, should reflect such an understanding. God still provides His Mercy to the characters in the story, even though there is not a sub-created Christlike figure that sacrificed himself to fix the world.

Shippey's critique that Frodo presents a duality between free will and fate should be ringing in our ears. All Tolkien has said is that Frodo is culpable for his actions but off the hook because of God's Grace. It still seems like Frodo was put in a situation he could never win (which is true) and should be judged for that failure of his will in full (which is also true). And yet, Tolkien factors the role of Grace into his judgement of Frodo, in addition to factoring in how Eru has constrained Himself on acting within the created world. Tolkien gives a full account of Frodo's failure in the letter referenced above:

I do not think that Frodo's failure was a *moral* failure. At the last moment the pressure of the Ring would reach its maximum – impossible, I should have said, for anyone to resist, certainly after long possession, months of increasing torment, and when starved and exhausted. Frodo had done what he could and spent himself

⁹ Tolkien, *Letters*, 326.

completely (as an instrument of Providence) and had produced a situation in which the object of 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.¹⁰

Let us map this onto Shippey's two views of Frodo failing and Frodo being defeated by Evil. Frodo clearly failed in Tolkien's view. However, it was not the type of failure that Shippey had in mind. Frodo failed out of necessity, there was no other option for Frodo at the end of the journey. His lack of infused justice resulted in an inevitable failure, especially under the circumstances where his affection for advantage was granted increasing amounts of leeway. By the end of the journey, Frodo was only in a position to submit to the Ring. Likewise, on the interpretation that Frodo was defeated by evil, we see that Tolkien thinks that Frodo failed in a non-moral way. The reason is that Frodo's failure did not occur from a lack of trying, but because he was in a position where he could only have succeeded – and would have succeeded it seems – if he had had the infused justice that was present before the fall. But Frodo did not have that justice yet. So, "he (and the Cause) were saved – by Mercy."¹¹ God's Grace accounted for Frodo's failure so that Frodo failed in a way for God's Grace to be shown to be all powerful.

Most people like to think of Tolkien as a storyteller, one who constructed an unparalleled narrative that became the forebearer for the current fantasy genre. However, Tolkien was also an academic in an unorthodox way. He presented deep philosophical and theological themes throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, both original theories and creative twists on old ones. If nothing else, this project has explored only two of the large

¹⁰ Tolkien, *Letters*, 326.

¹¹ Tolkien, *Letters*, 252.

philosophical themes found throughout *The Lord of the Rings* – Free Will and Evil. But the real conclusion from this thesis is to read Tolkien through his own light of sub-creation. In doing so, we will see that Tolkien was more than a philologist and storyteller, but also a philosopher and theologian who rivaled his contemporaries in originality.

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