ABSTRACT

Two Conceptions of Death in J.R.R. Tolkien's Works: An Ambrosian and a Thomistic Account

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J.R.R. Tolkien says that the "real theme" of *The Lord of the Rings* is "about something much more permanent and difficult" than the desire for power; namely, "Death and Immortality."[1] In this thesis I explore the similarity between two accounts of death in Tolkien's works and those of two Catholic theologians: Ambrose of Milan and Thomas Aquinas. In doing so, I argue that the Elvish account correlates strongly with the theology of Ambrose, whereas the conception espoused by Men resembles the theology of Aquinas. Finally, I propose that these two accounts in Tolkien's works are synthesized in the story of Aragorn and Arwen to form a complete conception of death, one which merits serious attention within Catholic theology on death.

[1] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2000), no. 186.

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TWO CONCEPTIONS OF DEATH IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S WORKS:

AN AMBROSIAN AND A THOMISTIC ACCOUNT

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The theme of death in Tolkien's works is one to which he himself repeatedly calls attention.[2] For Catholics, death has a principal but enigmatic role in man's salvation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says all the following regarding death: "man's nature is mortal," death is "contrary to the plans of God the Creator," and "the obedience of Jesus has transformed the curse of death into a blessing."[3] Furthermore, the Catechism says that "it is in regard to death that man's condition is most shrouded in doubt."[4] Death, then, is a perplexing matter, and yet one of utmost importance. Recognizing this, Tolkien presents two accounts of death in his works which, particularly when placed together, illuminate man's relationship with death.

The aim of this thesis is threefold. Firstly, it places J.R.R. Tolkien's thoughts on death in conversation with Catholic tradition, thereby demonstrating the relevance of his ideas and their place in Catholic theology. Secondly, this thesis attempts to reveal the strong correlations between the Elvish account of death in Tolkien's work and the Ambrosian account, as well as the account of Men with the Thomistic account. Finally, this thesis offers a brief synthesis of the two accounts in Tolkien's works, showing how

[2] Tolkien, *Letters*, nos. 131, 181, 186, 208, 212, 245.

[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC]*. 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2019), 1006-1009.

[4] Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, quoted from *CCC*, 1006.

together they constitute a unique and valuable conception of death which stands, moreover, well within the bounds of official Church teaching. This thesis is not, however, an attempt to argue for the superiority of the views held by either Aquinas or Ambrose, though the departure of the latter from official Church teaching will be addressed.

Context

J.R.R. Tolkien

J.R.R. Tolkien was an Oxford don, an Old English scholar, a philologist, and, most notably, a mythographer (a writer of mythologies) whose fictional works proved to be some of the most influential writing of the 20th century.[5] He was also a devout Catholic, and yet, unlike his friend and fellow author C.S. Lewis, he was not a theologian, nor did he want to be one. His Catholic faith nevertheless found expression in his stories. In a letter to a priest named Robert Murray in 1953, less than a year before the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien states that the book "is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision."[6] Similarly, in 1965, Tolkien wrote in a letter to W.H. Auden that he did not "feel under any obligation to make [his] story fit with formalized Christian theology, though [he] actually intended it to be consonant with Christian thought and belief."[7] The result of this intentional (even if retroactive) concurrence between Tolkien's religious

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[5] Philip 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, 2015), 4.

[6] Tolkien, *Letters*, no. 142.

[7] Ibid., no. 269.

views and the ideas expressed in his books is that one can hope to ascertain the author's theological views by analyzing his stories.

The theme of death in Tolkien's works may be accounted for not only by his Catholicism, but also by his youth. In Stratford Caldecott's book, *Secret Fire: The spiritual vision of JRR Tolkien*, he conveys the centrality of death in Tolkien's life and works:

> Tolkien, of course, had a particularly strong sense of mortality, thanks to the early death of his parents and his experience of the War in which he and C.S. Lewis lost most of their close friends. This personal fascination with the meaning of death helps to endow his mythology with a seriousness and even urgency that is rare in fantasy writing. He was wrestling with a universal human concern, and consequently his mythology becomes a vehicle to explore the human condition itself."[8]

Tolkien was not only writing for others, then: the question of death's meaning and the proper response to it was a persistent and central concern in his own life.

This thesis does not attempt to argue that the similarity between Tolkien's accounts of death and those of the theologians discussed is a result of direct inspiration, but it is nevertheless important to understand Tolkien's theological influences. John Halsall says that "it is hard to deny that Tolkien's primary philosophical influences demonstrate a largely Augustinian outlook, whilst simultaneously drawing from other theological strands from the late patristic to the early medieval period."[9] In other words, Tolkien's knowledge of Catholic theology was vast and spanned much of Church history. Halsall further argues that that Tolkien "crafted into his own mythology a variety of

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[8] Stratford Caldecott, *Secret Fire: The spiritual vision of JRR Tolkien*, (Long: Darton, Longman, and Todd: 2003), 87.

[9] Michael John Halsall, *Creation and Beauty in Tolkien's Catholic Vision: A Study in the Influence of Neoplatonism in J. R. R. Tolkien's Philosophy of Life as "Being and Gift"*, (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020), 22.

Neoplatonic strands, and did not rely on a single source."[10] In demonstrating the similarity between Tolkien's conception of death with that of Ambrose, a Neoplatonist, this thesis will reveal the influence of Neoplatonism on Tolkien's works (though that is not the purpose of the thesis).

The two theologians with which Tolkien's views will be compared are Saint Ambrose of Milan and Saint Thomas Aquinas. Accordingly, a brief explanation of the historical context in which these theologians wrote will help situate Tolkien's views within the broader Catholic theological tradition. Moreover, this context will explain why these theologians were chosen for the purpose of a comparison with Tolkien.

Saint Ambrose of Milan

Saint Ambrose is best known for his pivotal role in the conversion, and subsequent mentorship, of Saint Augustine of Hippo. However, his theology merits consideration in its own right.[11] Born in 339 CE—a time when Christianity had lost its "immediate Jewish context" and began to adopt Platonic thought—Ambrose demonstrated an early interest in classical Greek philosophy.[12] As bishop of Milan, he wrote extensively on the compatibility of Christianity with Platonic thought, being "guided by the work of the Jewish theologian Philo and the Christian theologian Origen" both of whom integrated Platonic philosophy with their theology.[13] While this thesis will

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[10] Ibid., 20.

[11] David Albert Jones, *Approaching the End: A Theological Exploration of Death and Dying.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25-26.

[12] Ibid., 26.

[13] Ibid., 27.

examine Ambrose's views in isolation, the reality is that his theology was greatly impacted by Plato and these other Platonic thinkers. Further studies might therefore demonstrate that the resemblance between the Elvish and Ambrosian accounts of death extends to several other theologians' accounts of death as well. Notably, however, Augustine is not among those who might be included in this group, for his exegesis of Genesis "shows it to be the very opposite of the Platonic fall myth."[14] As a result, his view of death stands "in sharp contrast to that of Ambrose," aligning far more closely with Aquinas' theology of death.

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Other than Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas is "the most prominent theologian in the Catholic Tradition."[15] Moreover, his theology of death is immensely important, with his arguments regarding death's unnaturalness being reflected in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.[16] Aquinas was born in the early 13th century and studied at the University of Naples, where he became a Dominican friar and first began using Aristotelian philosophy in his theological reasoning.[17] Like Ambrose, Aquinas' views on death are not necessarily unique to him; in fact, his theology of death is largely no more than an attempt "to synthesize the genius of Augustine with that of Aristotle."[18] Even so, the thoroughness and lasting influence of his account make him "the most

[14] Ibid., 37.

[15] Ibid., 89.

[16] *CCC*, 1008.

[17] Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 1.

[18] Jones, *Approaching the End,* 89.

significant [theologian] for the theology of death," at least within the Catholic tradition.[19]

Catholic Thought on Death

One might reasonably categorize Catholic thought on death into two schools: the Neoplatonic and the Aristotelian. The Neoplatonists hold that in death the soul remains unaffected, or perhaps better off insofar as it is liberated. Specifically, they maintain that the "rational human soul," wherein humanhood resides, is freed from the body in death.[20] By the 4th century, the "harmonization of the Christian Gospel with Platonic philosophy," had become a widespread endeavor, one which produced (among many other things) a unique and enduring conception of death.[21] Perhaps none articulate this conception so clearly or at such length as Saint Ambrose of Milan.

In contrast to this conception of death arose another, one based on an Aristotelian philosophical attitude. Just as the Neoplatonic view of death could be boiled down to a Platonic understanding of the relationship between body and soul, so too can the Aristotelian view be derived from Aristotle's "notion of the soul as a form (*eidos*)."[22] No theologian adopted Aristotelian thought as effectively or as influentially as Thomas Aquinas, who used this "notion of the soul" to ultimately argue for death's unnaturalness. Notably, the official stance of the Catholic Church today uses the Thomistic (and therefore Aristotelian) understanding of the soul's relationship with the body (as its form)

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[19] Ibid., 89.

[20] Sebastian Ramon Philipp Gertz, *Death and Immortality in Late Neoplatonism: Studies on the Ancient Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo.* (Leiden: BRILL, 2011), 1.

[21] Jones, *Approaching the End,* 26.

[22] Gad Freudenthal. *Aristotle's Theory of Material Substance Heat and Pneuma, Form and Soul.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 86.

to explain man's oneness: his being "not two nature united, but rather. . . a single nature."[23] In turn, the Church uses this understanding to demonstrate the injury done to man in death. So, then, it is with an Aristotelian philosophical outlook, as integrated with Christian doctrine by Aquinas, that the Church currently explains its theology on death.

The two theologians analyzed in this thesis were therefore chosen because they epitomize the two attempts to integrate Neoplatonic and Aristotelian philosophical attitudes with Christianity, with Ambrose subscribing to the Neoplatonic view and Aquinas implementing an Aristotelian philosophical framework. However, one could similarly draw comparisons between Tolkien's two accounts of death and other theologians within the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian philosophical schools.

Tolkien's Two Accounts of Death

In Chapters Two and Three we will examine Ambrose and Aquinas' accounts of death, which will then, in Chapters Four and Five, be compared with the accounts of Elves and Men in Tolkien's works. However, a brief preliminary overview of Tolkien's accounts at this point will help establish the significance and relevance of the theological accounts in Chapters Two and Three.

The Elves of Tolkien's tales are "sufficiently longeval to be called by Man 'immortal'"[24] The term "immortal," however, is not entirely accurate when speaking of the Elvish fate. Although they have no set span of years, they may still be slain; and more than that, their life does not extend beyond the length of the world itself. In other words,

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[23] *CCC,* 365.

[24] Tolkien, *Letters*, no. 245.

their lives are indefinite but not eternal. Regarding their own fate, and their perspective on Man's fate, Tolkien says in a letter:

> "Their own tradition was that they were confined to the limits of this world (in space and time), even if they died, and would continue in some form to exist in it until 'the end of the world.' But what 'the end of the world' portended for it or for themselves they did not know (though they no doubt had theories). Neither had they of course any special information concerning what 'death' portended for Men. They believed that it meant 'liberation from the circles of the world', and was in that respect to them enviable. And they would point out to Men who envied them that a dread of ultimate loss, though it may be indefinitely remote, is not necessarily the easier to bear if it is in the end ineluctably certain."[25]

So, the Elves' perpetual longevity informs their account of Man's. This account consists in a view that Man's death is an escape; and that it is "the *Gift of Ilúvatar* (God)" to Men.[26] The Elves therefore maintain a very positive conception of Man's death, one which we will see has strong resemblances with the Ambrosian account of death.

Regarding Man's perception of his own mortality, we find a largely negative view. They lament not only the shortness of their lives, but the fact that they die at all. In "The Downfall of Númenor," Tolkien's most overtly death-themed story, we find a tale of Men rebelling against the gods in pursuit of immortality, saying "why should we not envy. . . the Deathless? For of us is required a blind trust, and a hope without assurance, knowing not what lies before us in a little while. And yet we also love the Earth and would not lose it."[27]

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[25] Ibid., no. 245.

[26] Ibid., no. 245.

[27] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2001), 265.

Although this indignation toward the gods and Elves is not shared by all men, the regard for death as an evil is typical of Men in Tolkien’s tale. Those who depart from this view, choosing instead to regard death as a good, are those who possess this “hope without assurance.” Among these are Aragorn and Húrin, both of whom we will look at more closely.

Now, with these general overviews of the two accounts of death in Tolkien’s tales, we can begin our analysis of Ambrose’s theology of death.

CHAPTER TWO

An Ambrosian Account of Death

Introduction

The majority of Ambrose's teaching on the theology of death can be found in two primary sources. The first is now called *On the Death of Satyrus*, a book containing two sermons written by Ambrose following his brother's death. In the first sermon, given at his brother's funeral, Ambrose expresses his grief and laments his loss.[28] In the second sermon, entitled *De fide resurrectionis*, or "On belief in the resurrection," he begins by rebuking himself for his previous display of grief, then offers a thorough account of the goodness of death. However, his most extensive and cohesive theology of death is found in a later work, written nearly a decade later, entitled *De Bono Mortis*, or "On the good of death."[29] Both of these primary sources will be used for the following analysis.

Life is a Punishment, Death an Escape

Ambrose posits that man was created immortal but given mortality as a remedy after the Fall. To defend this position against the view that death is a punishment, Ambrose distinguishes between two types of death in Scripture: bodily death, or "the separation of the body and soul," and the "death of sin."[30] Only this second type of death,

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[28] Jones, *Approaching the End,* 28.

[29] Ibid., 31.

[30] Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, Translated by W.T. Wiesner. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1970), 2.3-2.4.

he argues, is penal, though it does not refer to ordinary mortality but to death of the soul. Scriptural passages which label death a punishment for sin, therefore, are speaking of the "death of sin." And yet, Ambrose does not deny that mortality came as a result of sin, raising the question: if it is not a punishment, why did it come as a result of sin?

The answer, Ambrose asserts, is that death came "as a remedy. . . for of a truth death was no necessary part of the divine operation, since for those who were placed in paradise a continual succession of all good things streamed forth."[31] In other words, death's goodness is the result of life's badness. Ambrose dedicates a significant portion of both his major works on death to arguing this point. Because of sin, life is inevitably wretched. Therefore, to those who call death a loss, Ambrose answers that "there can be no sweetness in the midst of the bitterness[...] and pains of this life."[32]

This claim may seem to be falsifiable, but Ambrose is not speaking merely of the balance between suffering and happiness, which none can deny varies from person to person. Rather, Ambrose is arguing that even happiness is stained by sin, for even when we are happy we look toward happier circumstances, making happiness dissatisfying. Moreover, he contends that we "are rather broken down by pain at adversity than cheered by the enjoyment of prosperity."[33] Ambrose speaks at length of the misery of life, repeatedly emphasizing the wretchedness of the human condition. We are born, he says,

[31] Ambrose, *On the Death of Satyrus*, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/34032.htm, 47.

[32] Ibid., 18.

[33] Ibid., 18.

"with frail bodies, deceitful hearts, weak minds, anxious in respect of cares, slothful as to labour, prone to pleasures."[34]

Considering his estimation of life's wretchedness after the Fall, Ambrose reasonably views death as an escape. In fact, among the many goods Ambrose assigns to death, he emphasizes the escape from the evils of life more than any positive good attained after death. Rather than shun death, or hope for longevity, Ambrose says we ought to pray "that we be taken out of this foolish world, that we may be free from our daily pilgrimage."[35] While Ambrose affirms the indestructibility of the soul, it is not a requirement for his position. If the soul ceases to exist, then there is no feeling after death, in which case "there is certainly no grief arising from suffering."[36] Death, therefore, is undoubtedly an escape for all. Whether any good awaits the soul after death does not affect the conclusion that it is better to die than to live forever.

Ambrose remains consistent with this position in stating that it is acceptable to await death longingly, and foolish to await it begrudgingly. Of course, this claim follows almost necessarily from the above contention that life is an evil from which death is an escape, and yet it might seem dubious given the universal disinclination to dying. Ambrose suggests, however, that this aversion to death is not universal. Instead, "it seems good to righteous men but is feared by most, and although it frees all, it delights few."[37] Death seems good to good people. At this point one might ask: if death is good because it

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[34] Ibid., 29.

[35] Ibid., 33.

[36] Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 4.13.

[37] Ibid., 2.3-2.4.

is an escape from worldly troubles, why should the wise be any more partial to it than anyone else? Do not all people share in the pains of life, if not equally, at least irrespective of their wisdom and righteousness? Ambrose answers that "since we are slaves to bodily pleasure and earthly delights, we are afraid to bring an end to this earthly course, in which there is more bitterness than pleasure."[38] We are as addicts to the few pleasures in life, miserable but unable to let go. Therefore, Ambrose argues that "holy and wise men," being at least aware of their enslavement to worldly pleasures, "have lamented the length of this earthly pilgrimage."[39]

To substantiate this claim, Ambrose offers several biblical examples. Job, Jeremiah, David, Solomon, Paul: all expressed a longing for death.[40] Some of these men even regretted their births, hence Ambrose's assertion that the wise of all ages have sympathized with Job's outcry: *pereat dies illa, in qua natus sum* ("may the day perish when I was born").[41] Now, to argue that this declaration is rooted in wisdom, as Ambrose does, and not merely in momentary weakness, may seem an indefensible position. Indeed, it not only dismisses of life as a potential good but also brings the permissibility (or even obligation) of suicide into consideration. Nevertheless, it is consistent with Ambrose's conception of the fallen world and the misery of life. As for the main concerns—the disregard for life's goodness and the permissibility of suicide—we will see Ambrose's responses later in this chapter.

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[38] Ibid., 2.3-2.4 (p.89).

[39] Ibid., 2.3-2.4 (p.89).

[40] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 30, 32, 34, 40.

[41] Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 2.3-2.4.

Hope beyond Death

Not only is death good because it allows escape from the body, but also because it allows entrance into union with God. In other words, death is both an escape *from* and an escape *to*. Hence Ambrose's prayer for death is twofold: "that we be taken out of this foolish world," and that we "return to that country and our natural home."[42] Again, in speaking of what follows death, Ambrose professes more than mere rest from the evils of the world, saying "we will go where the paradise of joy is. . . where there are no clouds, no thunder. . . where there will be no use for sun or moon. . . but only the splendor of God will shine."[43] So, death is an entrance into our proper homes. Moreover, it is a return to the land in which we were once at home. This earth, whatever good it may have, is but a shadow and a reminder of our true home; thus the sun of this earth speaks to the glory of God in heaven. An implication of this teaching is that even if this earthly life is truly good, death remains an escape to a better place.

Entrance into this eternal dwelling with God, however, is only for those who die in Christ. That is, the promise of heaven is only for the faithful, while the freedom of the soul and rest from the evils of life is granted to all. In other words, death is always an escape *from*, but only an escape *to* for those awaiting salvation. For all others, it brings punishment. In these instances, however, "it is not death that is evil, but life, because it was not really life, for what kind of life is one filled with vice and sin?"[44] Ambrose holds,

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[42] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 33.

[43] Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 12.53.

[44] Ibid., 4.13.

then, that the punishment which sometimes follows death is only accidental to it, and is, moreover, fully warranted.

A Consideration of Nature

Ambrose regards nature as an indispensable consideration for discovering the meaning of death. In his examination of nature, Ambrose concludes that the body is naturally mortal, that the soul is by nature imperishable, and that the soul in a more natural state when separated from the body. Finally, Ambrose contends that the resurrection of the body is in accordance with nature as well. Once we have covered Ambrose's teaching on the naturalness of death, we will look at some of the implications he derives from these views.

Naturalness of Bodily Death

To begin with, Ambrose asserts that bodily death is natural because it happens to everyone. "The order of nature is not to be loosed," he says, "for what is common to all cannot admit of exception in individuals."[45] Ambrose here associates ubiquity with naturalness, arguing that whatever happens without exception must be the will of God; and if it is the will of God, then it must be natural. This reasoning fails to explain the ubiquity of sin itself. However, one might argue that sin while sin is universal, it is not necessarily so, whereas death happens universally regardless (one might think) of personal decisions. Death, then, is natural because it happens to everyone.

Nature of the Soul

[45] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 46.

The death of the soul, understood as its cessation, is an impossibility in Ambrose's view. His primary argument for the soul's immortality rests on his understanding of the soul as the animating principle of life, in which case, he asks, "how can it receive death, since death is contrary to it?"[46] In other words, the soul is itself life. The body dies because it loses the soul which confers life, but the soul cannot lose itself. "We have," Ambrose concludes, "a rational explanation, but this is human."[47] More specifically, it is Platonic; using a nearly identical argument Plato calls the soul "the immortal principle of the mortal animal."[48] We will see that this argument resembles Aquinas', except that Aquinas employs an Aristotelian understanding of forms instead of a Platonic argument.

When defined as cessation or nonexistence, death cannot happen to a human soul; but there is another sense in which Ambrose argues the soul can die. Returning to his categorization of the three types of death, we find "the death of sin, of which it is written: *the soul which sins shall die.*"[49] The punishment for sin, then, is the death of the soul, but in what does this death consist? The death of the soul is separation from God and a loss of grace; and it is called "death" not because the soul ceases to exist but because it loses the life it had in God. This, then, is the sense in which the soul can die.

Of course, the application of the term "death" to the soul is not unique to Ambrose—on the contrary, it can be found in Christian theology of all ages, beginning

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[46] Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 9.42-10.43.

[47] Ibid., 9.42-10.43.

[48] Thomas Miller Marshall, "Plato's Doctrine of the Immortality of the Soul," (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015), 96.

[49] Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 2.3-2.4.

with Christ Himself. St. Augustine says that while the soul is indeed “immortal, it has nevertheless a kind of death of its own,” which, he goes on to say, is sin.[50] Aquinas, as we will see, similarly posits a death of the soul resulting from sin. A final notable example is the 19th century Lutheran theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who writes at length about the death of the soul. In his book, *The Sickness unto Death,* Kierkegaard calls the death of the body “another minor event in. . . an eternal life,” but that of the soul “the truly horrifying thing.”[51] Furthermore, he says that in bodily death there is “infinitely more hope than in. . . life itself,” while the death of the soul is not a cause for hope but, on the contrary, is caused by despair, the “sickness of the spirit.”[52] Ambrose, then, is not alone in his understanding of the soul’s death which, compared to that of the body, is evil rather than good, and momentous rather than trivial.

Indeed, Ambrose suggests that bodily death is trivial, for in it the human being remains essentially untouched. “The soul,” he explains, “is what uses, the body that which is used. . . one is what we are, the other what is ours.”[53] If death is no more than the separation of body and soul, and if identity resides in the soul, then ‘we’ do not die. The soul is immortal, so we are immortal. To bolster this argument he offers another, saying that death itself exists “neither among the living nor among the dead,” because for the former it has not happened, and for the latter a new life has already begun.[54] In other

[50] Augustine. *The City of God*, XIII.2, quoted in Jones, *Approaching the End*, 41.

[51] Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness Unto Death*, Translated by Alastair Hannay, (London: Penguin Group, 2004), 38-39.

[52] Ibid., 38, 43.

[53] Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 7.27.

[54] Ibid., 7.30.

words, death ("the separation of body and soul") is not experienced; it neither takes place over a period of time, nor is a state in which one can be.[55] It merely signifies the transition between embodied life and disembodied life. For these reasons, Ambrose concludes that "there is no death."[56] Even so, this argument is intended more to diminish the gravity of death and dismiss the fear of it than to genuinely deny its existence, for the rest of Ambrose's theology of death assumes its existence, at least as an occurrence with intrinsic significance.

Returning to the discussion of death's naturalness, Ambrose looks at the state of the separated soul to determine whether it functions better or worse than when embodied. In doing so, he determines that the soul functions better without the body, and that death is therefore natural. Moreover, because Ambrose places humanhood entirely in the soul, he need not also consider whether bodily death is bad for the body. In other words, if the state of the separated soul is preferable to its embodied state, no further consideration of the body or of body/soul unity is necessary.

In what way does the soul operate better without the body? Ambrose offers three reasons. Firstly, the soul is better off freed of the body because the body is inherently confining. While embodied we rejoice in freedom and despise all chains. This preference for freedom does not rest in any good that such freedom confers; rather, the freedom itself is desirable. In the same way, our soul has an innate "desire to escape from that prison-house of the body."[57] The body, then, restricts the soul as though it were a cage.

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[55] Ibid., 7.30.

[56] Ibid., 7.30.

[57] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 20.

After all, why would something destined for freedom prefer to remain in "the narrow limits of the limbs?"[58]

The second reason Ambrose gives for the soul's superior operation outside of the body is that it is able to understand things more clearly and directly without relying on the senses (a point which Aquinas will oppose). The separated soul therefore has a superior mode of understanding, being able to see "with clear gaze those things which before, dwelling in the body, it could not see."[59] Rather than aid in understanding, the body confuses the intellect. To corroborate this point, Ambrose says that "with our hands or our eyes and ears we are unable to grasp fully that heavenly truth, because things visible are temporal, while those that are invisible are eternal."[60] It is therefore not through any deficiency of the body that it hinders the soul; rather, it is a natural consequence of embodiment that the soul cannot attain to heavenly heights. At least, such is the case for material bodies whose mode of understanding relies on sensation; the resurrected, spiritual bodies will seemingly not have such inherent limitations. The point remains that the nature of the soul is to understand more clearly after its separation from the earthly body. Death, therefore, is a movement towards nature.

Finally, the separated soul not only understands more perfectly, but it also acts more perfectly. In this life, acting virtuously entails resisting the body. Virtue becomes far more achievable, then, when the body is abandoned altogether. In death the soul "is no longer deceived and mocked" by the body, but rather "performs functions proper to it

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[58] Ibid., 20.

[59] Ibid., 21.

[60] Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 3.10.

without any association with the body."[61] If the soul's good consists in acting virtuously, death serves only to aid this good. In this third sense, then, the separated soul operates better than the embodied soul. One must therefore conclude that death is natural, for it allows the soul to roam freely, understand clearly, and act virtuously (or at least free of vice), all according to its nature.

In this final aspect of the soul's nature lies Ambrose's response to the objection raised earlier in this section that life should not be lamented lest its goodness be overlooked. For Ambrose, life indeed may be good, but only insofar as it demonstrates virtue. Therefore, what good there is in life only increases in death, for then virtue comes more naturally to the soul. Accordingly, one should not say that life itself is good, because it is only good insofar as it imitates death. By acting virtuously, a living man "obtains the good of death in such a way that it acts more in relation to the soul than in relation to the bond and union of soul and body."[62] In other words, it is permissible for the wise to pray for death because dying ends all evil and increases all good.

At this point an element of Ambrose's theology must be briefly addressed: namely, the negative view of the body. Throughout his work on death, Ambrose repeatedly refers to the body in wholly negative terms, calling it a "prison-house," a "hindrance," an "incasement of trouble," a "miserable house," "the bonds of the flesh," and, finally, an "enemy to you."[63] This assault on the body per se contrasts not only Aquinas, but the official teaching of the Catholic Church and the majority of Catholic

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[61] Ibid., 3.10.

[62] Ibid., 4.14.

[63] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 20; Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 4.13.

theologians throughout history. This dissent is not, however, grounds for dismissing his views as unimportant or heretical. On the contrary, the presence of this view throughout history demands its consideration. Moreover, while an important part of his theology of death, Ambrose's negative view of the body does not negate the legitimacy of many of his arguments. We will see, for instance, that one of Tolkien's characters employs very similar arguments and reaches many of the same conclusions, but manages to omit disparaging remarks toward the body.

The Resurrection of the Body

To conclude the discussion of the naturalness of death, we will look briefly at Ambrose's beliefs about the resurrection. He offers a few arguments for the naturalness of the resurrection of the body. Among these is his claim that "it is natural that all things living should rise again, but contrary to nature that they should perish."[64] In other words, destruction is simply contrary to God's design (a belief which we will see Aquinas shares).

It is difficult, however, to reconcile this view with Ambrose's position that death is a good and natural thing. After all, death entails the (at least temporary) destruction of the body. Moreover, if the resurrection is natural because it restores to life that which has been destroyed, is death not by the same token unnatural for having destroyed the body in the first place? It seems that one cannot hold both death and the resurrection to be natural. Ambrose, however, disagrees with this mutual exclusivity, arguing that death is no more unnatural than the setting of the sun or the planting of a seed. Just as the sun disappears

[64] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 57.

over the horizon and the seed is buried in the soil, but each return in fullness, so too the death of the body is merely a part of its natural cycle. In this way it is not proper to consider death an act of destruction, for, ultimately, "nothing perishes in death."[65]

This answer raises yet another concern with the consistency of Ambrose's theology: if separation is the natural and best state for the soul to be in, why must it suffer embodiment not only in this life but for the rest of eternity? To this objection Ambrose offers no explicit answer; however, he contends that the resurrected bodies will not be subject to the same limitations as the current, fallen bodies. Hence, he says of the resurrected bodies that in them "man's nature shoots forth more abundantly."[66] Accordingly, Ambrose would presumably assert that the soul desires most to be in the resurrected body, secondly to be separated, and lastly to be trapped in its current body, making death a movement towards nature.

The Fate of Pagans

In order to compare Ambrose's theology of death with the accounts given in Tolkien's works, we must look at what Ambrose believes about the fate of pagans (because Tolkien's characters are in the position of pre-Christian pagans).[67] Although he offers no indication that pagans may be granted actual salvation (union with God), Ambrose does maintain the possibility of bliss after death for people of all ages. Throughout his two main works on the theology of death, he repeatedly remarks that no

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[65] Ibid., 3.

[66] Ibid., 54.

[67] J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Man Who Understands Hobbits," interviewed by Charlotte and Denis Plinner, (*The Telegraph*, March 22, 1968).

evil can await the blameless soul. Whatever evil comes after death is in just punishment for life's sins. In other words, the virtuous need not fear punishment in death. However, this does not guarantee that these souls will be granted union with God or eternal bliss, but only that they will be spared punishment and receive the aforementioned goods of death common to all. Even so, one can conclude that the virtuous of all ages indeed have nothing to fear in death, instead rightfully expecting the "sweetness of the fullest joy because they have come from the prison of their corruptible body into light and liberty."[68] This state calls to mind the doctrine of limbo, giving an unusually positive portrayal in

which all virtuous pagans are granted joy, rest, and freedom outside of heaven.

The Proper Response to Death

Ambrose's theology of death can be summarized as follows: death is an escape from the evils of life into a more natural mode of existence and into union with God in heavenly paradise; furthermore, the final resurrection renders separation from the body a temporary condition. This section will look at some of the implications of this theology that Ambrose himself derives. Some of these implications are obvious. For instance, given that death is natural, it is also good, for what is God's design is good. Moreover, it is *intrinsically* good and does not merely bring about some good effect for certain people (i.e., instrumental). The first implication, then, is that death should be regarded as good in itself because it is in accordance with nature.

[68] Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 11.48.

A second implication of death's naturalness is that it is not to be feared. On the contrary, "one must pass through it bravely," for "it is a passage from corruption to incorruption, from mortality to immortality, from troubles to tranquility."[69] This is true for all, even while punishment awaits some. For these people, namely those who failed to "preserve[...] the discipline of the virtues," death is indeed dreadful. However, it is not the fault of death itself. Rather, in these cases death merely "pays the price of life."[70] In other words, when death brings about evil, the blame properly belongs to the life that preceded it. Death itself is still intrinsically good, releasing the soul from its wicked body and putting an end to a wretched life.

A third implication, central to Ambrose's purpose in writing on death, is the conclusion that one should not grieve for the departed. He offers four reasons why this is the case, each of which has been discussed above: death is "common and due to all," it "frees us from the toils of this world," it either offers us entrance into a "more lively vigour" or else gives us our due punishment, and it is only temporary.[71] This final reason serves to console those who cannot bear the separation from loved ones, ensuring them that this separation is transient. Hence, Ambrose asks "what grief is there which the grace of the Resurrection does not console?"[72] So, death is not to be mourned over.

To summarize, Ambrose's theology of death offers three main implications for the proper response to death— death is to be regarded as good, it is not to be feared, and

[69] Ibid., 4.15.

[70] Ibid., 4.13.

[71] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 3.

[72] Ibid., 3.

it is not a cause for grief—these three implications constituting the central aim of Ambrose's writing on death. Before concluding this chapter with a deeper examination of the proper approach to death for those awaiting salvation, we must look at what Ambrose believes about the fate of pre-Christian pagans.

We have at this point seen the many positive attributes of death in the eyes of Ambrose, as well as some of the implications these attributes have on how death ought to be practically regarded. It remains to consider what normative claims Ambrose makes regarding how death ought to be *approached*. For instance, should one seek martyrdom, or even suicide? Should one hasten death by avoiding medical treatment? These may seem absurd questions, but they are difficult ones for Ambrose to address in light of his other claims. Put simply, his answer is that death should not be pursued. Though it is permissible and even wise to desire death, this desire is not actionable.

The reason for this is twofold: firstly, necessity demands that we not abandon life even if it is suffering, and secondly, to seek death is a mark of despair. To support the first reason Ambrose quotes Paul, who said "I desire to be dissolved and be with Christ, for it is a much better thing: but to remain in the flesh for your sake is the more urgent need."[73] The basis of this necessity, according to Ambrose, is that we are called to good work and cannot forsake this responsibility. So long as we are alive, there is a purpose for our being alive, and we must try to fulfill this purpose rather than flee from it. The second reason is more complex. Ambrose portrays the despair of those who cannot bear loss of loved ones, who as a result "demonstrate their madness in not enduring death, and yet seeking it." In other words, it is not wisdom but madness that drives men to suicide—not

[73] Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 2.7.

a recognition of the good in death but a false belief in its wickedness. Desiring immortality, but unable to attain it, "they fall into that which is contrary to their desire, being separated for ever from those whom they desired to follow."[74] Though this second reason does not address the possibility of a suicide undergone for the purpose of fleeing the evils of life in search of the solace of death, it nevertheless affirms the strong Christian opposition to suicide. Moreover, it presents what Ambrose considers the precisely *wrong* way to approach death—in despair born out of a desire for immortality.

What, then, is the right way to approach death? Neither to be sought out nor feared, death ought to be approached patiently, willingly, and, above all, hopefully. Patiently, because one cannot actively pursue it. Willingly, because it is in the hands of God and need not be feared. Hence Ambrose praises David for having "exposed himself to death. . . for the safety of his suffering people" in the fight with Goliath.[75] Hopefully, because death is good and leads to the restoration of what has been lost. After arguing that death frees the soul from life's wretchedness, Ambrose says: "if I am mistaken in this. . . I am gladly mistaken, and so long as I live will never suffer myself to be cheated of this hope."[76] Thus, hope is not only the proper disposition insofar as it reflects an accurate assessment of the meaning of death; Ambrose believes that hope in death is a consolation necessary for facing life well.

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[74] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 11.

[75] Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 3.8.

[75] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 45.

[76] Ibid., 134.

CHAPTER THREE

A Thomistic Account of Death

Introduction

Saint Ambrose of Milan and Saint Thomas Aquinas have radically different accounts of death, opposing one another at nearly every single point. For instance, Ambrose holds that death is intrinsically a good thing insofar as it is natural and frees the soul from the hindrance of the body, whereas Aquinas holds the opposite view: death is intrinsically an evil insofar as it is unnatural and impedes the proper functioning of the soul. Hence, Aquinas not only opposes the conclusions reached by Ambrose, but his supporting arguments as well, allowing for a thorough comparison between the two accounts.

Death is a Punishment

Aquinas holds that man was originally given immortality as a gift, and that death came as a punishment. In sinning, "man's mind withdrew from subjection to God" so that no longer "was the body wholly subject to the soul; whence arose death."[77] In this way, death is the direct consequence of sin. It may also be aptly considered a punishment, Aquinas argues, because it involves the revocation of a divine Gift. Aquinas holds that

[77] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica [ST]*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. (Claremont, CA: Coyote Canyon Press, 2018), II-II. Q164. A1.

man was created mortal and given immortality as a gift to complete his nature (a view we will examine more closely in the next section). Because man lost his immortality "on account of his fault," one must conclude that "the privation of that favor is a punishment of that fault."[78]

This claim demonstrates a central difference between the accounts of Aquinas and Ambrose, the latter of whom acknowledges that death came as a result of sin but not that it is a punishment. The reason for this difference in interpretations of Scripture can be explained by looking at the two theologian's views of life after the Fall. Whereas Ambrose argues that life became a misery and an evil with the introduction of sin, Aquinas maintains that life is still in itself good, for it is in accordance with the nature of the unity of body and soul (as we will see). This means that in Ambrose's estimation, death was a positive consequence, while in Aquinas', it was a punitive consequence. Of course, whether or not this is the actual reason for the difference of interpretations, it at least explains how the theologians can maintain their respective views. So, then, Aquinas holds that death came as a punishment insofar as it is a negative consequence of man's sin which caused him to lose his "Divine favor."[79]

A Consideration of Nature

The Nature of the Body

Thomas Aquinas acknowledges that bodily death is in one sense natural and in another sense unnatural. It is unnatural in the sense that it is destruction, and destruction

[78] Ibid., II-II. Q164. A1.

[79] Jones, *Approaching the End*, 114.

is not in the nature of things. Here Aquinas demonstrates a shared view with Ambrose that God's design for Creation is such that all things desire their own preservation, and it is "contrary to nature that they should perish."[80] With respect to the body, the natural biological processes promote continued life, whereas death occurs when these processes fail or when external factors overwhelm the body's intrinsic self-sustaining order. Accordingly, one can say that death is contrary to the nature of the body.

At the same time, one can easily see that all things composed of matter are perishable, and even tend to decay in the course of time. This is a consequence of what Thomas calls "universal nature."[81] In today's language, we call this the conservation of matter. However, Thomas is not merely pointing out the empirically discoverable law of conservation; rather, he is applying the previous claim, that the nature of each thing seeks its own preservation, to the universe itself. In this way, the nature of the universe (that is, the aggregate of all matter) conflicts with the nature of the body. When the preservation of two things conflict, the lesser eventually gives way to the greater. Individual material objects, being subordinate to the universe, are therefore perishable. In this way bodily death is natural, not in accordance with its particular nature but with nature more generally.

So, then, man was created mortal in that he would have died in accordance with nature, for the conflict between universal nature and the particular nature of bodies predates the Fall. This means, according to Aquinas, that prelapsarian immortality must have been bestowed upon man as a gift. Herein lies a difficulty with Aquinas'

[80] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 57.

[81] Aquinas, *ST.* II-II Q164. A1.

understanding of prelapsarian nature. If man was made mortal and yet granted immortality, it seems that God ordained an unnatural state of affairs. However, as we saw above, immortality is in accordance with the nature of the body itself, whereas mortality arises from the body's material composition (which is also in accordance with nature). On can say, then, that God actually completed human nature by making the body "exempt from the necessity resulting from such a matter."[82] In other words, the prelapsarian state of affairs was not unnatural but an instance of human nature (otherwise in conflict with another aspect of nature) made complete through the grace of God.

The Nature of the Soul

In looking at the nature of the soul, Thomas argues it is immortal. The full proof for this claim requires an Aristotelian understanding of forms and is beyond the scope of this thesis. In brief, the soul is indestructible because it is "the form of the body" and "existence belongs to a form, which is an act, by virtue of itself."[83] While a material object exists only "as it acquires the form" and ceases to exist when it loses the form, "it is impossible for a form to be separated from itself." Consequently, the soul cannot lose its existence. For this argument to be complete, one would also need to prove the soul's incorporeality and self-subsistence, which Thomas does elsewhere.[84] The soul is therefore indestructible, and Thomas reaches this conclusion not through theological claims but through philosophical ones. In other words, like Ambrose, Thomas would

[82] Ibid., II-II. Q164. A1.

[83] Ibid., I. Q75. A6.

[84] Ibid., I. Q75 A1-2.

argue that the immortality of the soul is not an article of faith but a logically provable position, relying however on Aristotle rather than Plato to form this argument.

This point alone, however, does not tell us whether or not death is natural. Allowing that the soul is indestructible, one must then assess its preference for embodiment or separation. Thomas therefore addresses the question of death's naturalness by looking at the nature of the soul to determine whether it is better for it to be united with the body, in which case death would go against the nature of the soul. In this assessment, he concludes that death is unnatural. Embodied souls operate through the use of the senses and imagination, or "by turning to phantasms," and can understand nothing without doing so.[85] Because the separated soul cannot make use of either the imagination or the senses, one might expect it to be entirely incapable of understanding. Yet Thomas suggests that "the soul has one mode of being when in the body, and another when apart from it, its nature remaining always the same."[86] Thus, the separated soul is capable of a different sort of understanding, but it remains to consider whether the new mode is preferable to the old.

We saw that Ambrose, in making the same argument, concludes that the separated soul operates in a superior mode of existence, not needing to rely on the sense. Yet Aquinas maintains that this is not the case. Humans, he explains, have an inferior intellectual capacity relative to other intellectual beings (angels), so that our bodies (the imagination and the senses) are necessary for "perfect and proper knowledge."[87] Without

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[85] Ibid., I. Q89. A1.

[86] Ibid., I. Q89. A1.

[87] Ibid., I. Q89. A1.

them, the soul's understanding "would be confused and general."[88] Perfect understanding requires use of the senses. Because the nature of each thing is conducive to its perfection, Aquinas concludes that death is unnatural insofar as it forces the soul into a less suitable mode of being, one incapable of perfect understanding.

We have seen, then, that with respect to both the body and the soul, death is unnatural. For the body, death is contrary to the particular nature but in accordance with nature as a whole, and therefore the divine gift of immortality was a necessary addition to fulfill human nature. For the soul, death is not only unnatural but an impossibility. Lastly, in looking at the nature of the soul, Thomas finds that it functions best when embodied and that death is therefore unnatural. It remains to consider whether death is unnatural when its object is man as a whole, the unity of body and soul.

The Nature of Man

The most important question in Aquinas' understanding of death's naturalness is whether it is in accordance with man as a whole, understood as the unity of body and soul. This question's importance resides in the fact that it is man—not his composition—that is the proper subject of death. One cannot, therefore, look solely at the independent natures of the body and soul to establish the meaning of death. Here again Aquinas disagrees with Ambrose, who argues that the soul alone needs to be considered in a determination of death's naturalness because personhood resides in the soul. Although Aquinas similarly assesses the independent natures of the body and soul, this enquiry

[88] Ibid., I. Q89. A1.

serves primarily to demonstrate that the unnaturalness of death is consistent in all respects: body, soul, and the unity of the two.

In looking at man as a whole, Aquinas finds that death marks an end, a destruction, a rending. While the soul persists, the human is destroyed. This is a necessary consequence of Aquinas' understanding of human nature, in which "neither a human soul nor the matter it informs is a substance. Rather, the two together compose a substance—the human being," and "composition is not identity."[89] Put simply, body and soul make up the human, but are not themselves the human. Even so, some have tried to maintain that Aquinas' understanding of human nature "allows for a human being to exist postmortem as composed of his soul alone."[90] Robert Pasnau, for instance, concludes from his reading of Aquinas that "my separated soul is not anyone other than I, and in a sense it is I, but it is not fully I, not I in the strictest sense."[91] Hence, whether or not the human being continues to exist after death, one can firmly say that the human being in its full and proper state is destroyed. Because Aquinas holds that destruction is not in the nature of things, we must again conclude that death is unnatural.

We have, then, a comprehensive account of death's unnaturalness: it not only destroys the proper unity of body and soul, but in doing so corrupts the former and forces the latter into a less suitable mode of being. The implications of this unnaturalness will now be examined.

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[89] Jason Eberl, "Aquinas on the Nature of Human Beings." *The Review of metaphysics* 58, no. 2 (2004), 337.

[90] Ibid., 339.

[91] Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: a Philosophical Study of Summa Theologiae 1a, 75-89*, quoted in Eberl, "Aquinas on the Nature of Human Beings," 339.

Implications of Death's Unnaturalness

There are three major implications of the unnaturalness of death. The first is that death is an intrinsically bad thing. It destroys man and, in doing so, harms the soul and corrupts the body. The second is that one ought not speak of death as though it occurs only to the body, leaving the soul unaffected. Rather, it is man who dies, and in this death his body perishes while his soul persists, affected. The third implication is that death is properly the object of fear. In fact, Aquinas regards the fear of death as "the greatest fear of all;" for fear is born out of love and death robs one of every earthly good.[92] Although imminent and ineluctable death ought not to be feared "on account of its being inevitable," when death can be avoided (that is, postponed) one may rightfully fear it, so long as in doing so the fear does not become inordinate.[93] Mortal fear becomes inordinate when it causes one to "incur evils of the soul."[94] In other words, the fear itself becomes sinful when it causes one to sin in some other way, for sin is a greater evil than death.

Hope in Death

The Beatific Vision

We have now seen that Aquinas holds a view of death in which it is unnatural: an evil to be feared which leaves the soul incomplete and "confused." Despite this overall negative meaning of death, Thomas affirms a positive aspect as well. Christians ought to have hope in death because only after dying can they receive the beatific vision of God;

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[92] Aquinas, *ST.* II-II. Q125. A2.

[93] Ibid., I-II. Q42. A2.

[94] Ibid., II-II. Q125. A4.

that is, “the vision of His essence.”[95] Once again, Thomas considers the nature of the soul and the different modes of understanding possible for each of its states. He says that “our soul, as long as we live in this life, has its being in corporeal matter; hence naturally it knows only what has a form in matter.”[96] Accordingly, only the separated soul can receive that which has no form in matter: the beatific vision, in which man’s perfect happiness lies.

The necessity of the soul’s separation from the body in order to receive the beatific vision raises an interesting problem for Aquinas: if perfect human happiness consists in the beatific vision, and yet also requires the body (which allows the soul’s “proper operation, wherein its happiness consists”) one might wonder whether perfect human happiness is even possible.[97] Thomas argues that it is possible, but only after the resurrection of the body when our spiritual bodies “will be wholly subject to the spirit.”[98] These bodies will satisfy the soul’s desire to be embodied while allowing it to operate in a mode of understanding previously only possible for the separated soul. In this way, perfect human happiness will be attainable.

There is a parallel between this view and Ambrose’s view that the resurrection of the body restores whatever is lost in death. Both theologians’ accounts of death require a belief in the resurrection to avoid certain problematic conclusions. For Aquinas, the resurrection satisfies the otherwise mutually exclusive requirements for perfect

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[95] Ibid., Ia Q12. A11.

[96] Ibid., Ia Q12. A11.

[97] Ibid., I-II. Q4. A5.

[98] Ibid., Ia-II Q4. A6.

happiness: the body and the beatific vision. For Ambrose, the resurrection provides an answer to the legitimate concern over the loss of loved ones in death; namely, the consolation that this loss is temporary. There is another comparison to be made here between Aquinas and Ambrose. Both understand the resurrected bodies to have certain capacities, and freedom from certain limitations, which the current earthly bodies do not have. For instance, Ambrose's repeated critiques of the body—that it acts as a cage and impedes the proper functioning of the soul—do not apply to the resurrected body. Similarly, Aquinas' understands the resurrected bodies to be capable of both modes of understanding necessary for human happiness: the current mode which befits the nature of the soul, as well as the separated mode which can access the beatific vision.[99] So, both theologians require not only a belief in the resurrection, but a belief that the resurrected bodies will be free of the limitations associated with our present, earthly bodies.

For Whom the Hope Exists

Although the recipients of the beatific vision rightfully look forward to death, this hope is not for all. Specifically, there are two groups of people who do not have access to this hope, at least not on legitimate grounds. Firstly, those who will not receive salvation cannot hope for the beatific vision. Of course, these people may yet come to salvation and, in turn, gain reason to hope for union with God. The second group of people consists of those who, whether in a state of grace or not, do not know of God's promise of Heaven. In this group may be counted the virtuous pagans. Aquinas says that "it is impossible for any created intellect to see the essence of God by its own natural power. . .

[99] Ibid., I-II. Q4. A5.

hence it is necessary that some supernatural disposition should be added to the intellect in order that it may be raised up to such a great and sublime height."[100] In other words, perfect union with God surpasses the natural limitations of the soul. Because of this, one could not obtain through reason alone the hope of the beatific vision. Hence, a knowledge of Divine revelation, and more specifically of God's promise of Heaven, is necessary for one to have legitimately grounded hope in death.

The fate of pre-Christian pagans here comes into question. If hope in death is only for those who will be granted union with God, as previously discussed, and if salvation is only for those who live "in the age of grace," then death has a purely negative meaning for the ancients.[101] Aquinas explains however that the requirements of faith differ in each age, and that the possibility of salvation was therefore open to the pre-Christian pagans provided that they believed certain articles of faith explicitly. Among these articles were none which had not yet been revealed to humanity. So, for instance, people before Christ were not expected to believe explicitly in either the Trinity or in the coming Redeemer, but only implicitly either through "their belief in the faith of the patriarchs and prophets or in their belief in divine providence."[102] This latter qualification means that the Gentiles who explicitly believed in God and trusted in His goodness had good reason to hope for salvation. As a result, death contained hope for these individuals.

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[100] Ibid., Ia Q12. A4-5.

[101] Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*. Translated by James V McGlynn, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), Q.14 Article XI.

[102] Ibid., Q.14 Article XI.

The limits of this hope can be compared with Ambrose, who holds that death contains hope for all people insofar as it is an escape, and that it contains even greater hope for the virtuous, who can reasonably expect bliss whether aware of Divine revelation or not.

Conclusion

To summarize Aquinas' views on death, man was created mortal insofar as he is composed of matter, and yet the nature of his body is to desire immortality; therefore, in order to complete human nature, God granted man immortality as a Divine gift. The loss of this gift—the institution of death—was man's punishment for sin. The wrongness of death is further demonstrated in looking at both the nature of the soul and the nature of man, understood as the unity of body and soul. Regarding the former, the separated soul operates in an unnatural and incomplete mode of existence. Regarding the latter, death is an act of destruction in which man's soul persists but does not remain unaffected. Death is therefore unnatural, intrinsically evil, and to be feared. Even so, for some people death has a positive aspect which outweighs the negative. This is the beatific vision, and the faithful of all ages may rightfully hope for it. Because the requirements of faith vary in each age according to what has been revealed, it sufficed for pre-Christian pagans to believe explicitly in the existence and providence of God. As for the faithless of every age, death is wholly an evil that robs one of every earthly good, deprives the soul of its body, and offers no hope.

Official Church Teaching

While it is not the primary purpose of this thesis to determine which of the theologian's views are more correct, it should be noted that Aquinas' views on death align nearly perfectly with the current teaching of the Catholic Church, which he is at least partially responsible for developing. First of all, the Catechism does not diminish the severity of death (as does Ambrose), agreeing with Aquinas that it is an act of destruction against man, for the unity of body and soul "is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the 'form' of the body."[103] The Church further agrees with Aquinas in ascribing the same positive and negative meanings to death: firstly, death is negative insofar as it is the punishment for sin, an unnatural rending of body and soul, and a thief which robs man of all earthly goods (which, unlike Ambrose, the Church affirms as genuine goods); secondly, death is positive insofar as it is the final Baptism that brings us into union with Christ. Beyond these central claims, the Church is largely reticent in making authoritative claims about death. For this reason, at least some of Ambrose's theological claims can be reconciled with those of the Church.

Finally, it must not be supposed that Ambrose's views are to be dismissed because of their departure from official Church teaching. For one, we will see that Ambrose's views are relevant insofar as they are present, albeit in a less extreme form, in Tolkien's works. Moreover, Tolkien himself offers the disclaimer that the views expressed in his works, particularly those of the Elves (which align with Ambrose's), do not "necessarily have anything to say for or against" Christian doctrine, but serve rather to promote a certain perception of death regardless of its origin (as a punishment).[104]

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[103] *CCC*, 365.

[104] Tolkien, *Letters,* no. 212.

Regardless of their often-problematic underlying theological claims, then, Ambrose's views are relevant insofar as they correspond with what Tolkien considers a proper response to death.

CHAPTER FOUR

An Elvish Conception of Death in Tolkien's Works

Introduction

Tolkien offers two in-depth accounts of mortality—that of the Elves and of the Men. We might wonder, then, which view aligns with the author's? The answer is that neither account can be taken to voice Tolkien's personal beliefs, though taken together they offer of a nearly complete conception of mortality and undoubtedly reveal something of Tolkien's own thoughts about death.

Sources of the Accounts

The most insightful source for both accounts of death can be found in the tenth volume of *The Tales of Middle-Earth*, entitled *Morgoth's Ring*, in which editor Christopher Tolkien includes a dialogue written by his father that deals extensively with the Elvish and human ideas about mortality. The dialogue in its published form was probably written in 1959, five years after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* and many years after writing his first drafts of *The Silmarillion*, though Christopher Tolkien suggests it is "perfectly possible that he was working on it at intervals over a substantial period of time," though no earlier than 1955.[105] This means that Tolkien wrote the dialogue in light of *The Lord of the Rings*, not vice versa. Because of this, the ideas expressed in the dialogue are likely consonant with, and perhaps even intended to

[105] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 304.

elucidate, those present in Tolkien's other major works. The interlocutors in this dialogue are Finrod Felagund, "wisest of the exiled Noldor. . . eager moreover to discover all that he could concerning Mankind," and Andreth the Wise-woman, "wise in thought, and learned in the lore of Men."[106] This dialogue not only goes into much greater depth on the issue of death than any other writing of Tolkien's, it is also, according to Christopher Tolkien, "referred to elsewhere as if it had for [Tolkien] some 'authority'."[107] In addition, other works such as *The Silmarillion, The Lord of the Rings,* and *The Children of Húrin* will be referenced to demonstrate the consistency of these accounts throughout the corpus of Tolkien's works. Finally, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, as well as Tolkien's commentary found in *The Tales of Middle-Earth*, will be used to provide clarification where it is helpful to do so.

Tolkien's Purpose for Providing Two Different Accounts of Death

Tolkien's presentation of these two perspectives on death is strategic, for each account offers unique insight—the Elves because of their outside perspective and authoritative instruction, and the Men because of their personal connection and concern with death—and yet neither account represents Tolkien's own views. This distancing of himself from the views expressed by his characters is important for Tolkien, who understands his role to be that of storyteller, not theologian. Although his stories are "built on or out of certain 'religious' ideas," Tolkien does not include these ideas explicitly, "still less preach them."[108] In fact, he regards storytelling as incompatible with

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[106] Ibid., 304.

[107] Ibid., 303.

[108] Tolkien, *Letters*, no. 211.

“theological disquisition,” stating moreover that he is not equipped for the latter. Tolkien’s purpose is not merely to expound the truth, but rather to examine the struggles of those facing death and discover the proper responses to mortality.[109] It is therefore reasonable to concentrate on the characters’ ideas rather than to explicitly insert his own. The author’s own view is in this sense irrelevant to the purpose of the story.

Given the complexity of the theology of death, as epitomized by Ambrose and Aquinas’s very different perspectives, Tolkien’s use of multiple perspectives allows him to form a more complete conception of mortality than could be provided by an objective narrator’s “theological disquisition.” Tolkien himself suggests this benefit when he says (of storytelling in general) that “it provides a strong thread on which a multitude of things that [the author] has in mind may be strung to make a new thing, various, unpredictable, and yet coherent.”[110] The use of a range of characters and dialogue to present multiple perspectives, then, enables Tolkien to synthesize a complete and multidimensional account of death.

The Insight of the Elvish Perspective

Although it is tempting to assume that the Elves are impartial and trustworthy observers regarding the fate of Men (which would perhaps allow us to further conclude that their views stand in for Tolkien’s), such an assumption cannot be made. The fate of the immortals—to be bound to the world until its end—shapes how they perceive the doom of mortals. Therefore, while their perspective is important, it is not unbiased. Even

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[109] Ibid., no. 181.

[110] Ibid., no. 183.

so, the Elvish perspective is valuable. Firstly, it serves as a counterbalance to the account of men. If men are unduly affected by the dread of death, the Elves are correspondingly affected by their extreme longevity. In other words, the Elves' possession of immortality allows them to critique man's desire for it. Thus, Finrod the Elf says to Andreth the Wise-woman, "You do not see yourselves clearly. But it may often happen that friends and kinsman see some things plainly that are hidden from their friend himself."[111] Secondly, the Elves were "instructed by the Great who know."[112] The Valar were themselves present at the making of the world and witnessed the unfolding of Eru's design, albeit incompletely. Because the Elves receive much of their knowledge directly from the Valar, it would seem that their ideas about death are far more authoritative than those of Men.

Such is not entirely the case, however, for three reasons. To begin with, there is no indication that the Valar told the Elves everything they know about Man. What they did reveal can presumably be trusted, but unless explicitly accredited to the Valar, Finrod's views must be taken as his own and, at most, derived from the Valar's instruction. Secondly, though the Valar were granted knowledge of all things in Arda (the universe) Man's fate is not confined to Arda. Hence, even the knowledge of the Valar proves incomplete. This point will be made clearer later in this chapter. Lastly, the Elves' claim to divine instruction must be weighed against Man's (whenever the two seem to conflict) because Man also claims divine insight, albeit from "out of the darkness."[113]

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[111] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 315.

[112] Ibid., 308.

[113] Ibid., 309.

This voice which speaks to Men, if it can be trusted at all, can be trusted more absolutely, for it appears to be the voice of Eru himself.[114]

The fact remains, however, that the Elvish account of Man's mortality deserves serious consideration not only because of their unique perspective but also because of their claim to a tangible and trustworthy divine instruction. Although Man appears to have been the recipient of divine revelation from Eru Himself, even this revelation had to be passed down through the generations and must therefore be subject to some level of doubt; moreover, Finrod notes that "not all the voices that come out of the darkness speak truth to those minds that listen for strange news."[115] There is the possibility—indeed the likelihood—that Man's views are derived not only from Eru but from Morgoth as well. The dubiousness of the voice's speaker alongside the difficulty associated with relying on inherited lore causes Andreth to admit that "truth (if it can be found) must be winnowed. And in every winnowing there is chaff with the corn that is chosen, and doubtless some corn with the chaff that is rejected."[116] In contrast, the Elves know the source of their instruction and can be sure of its trustworthiness.

Death according to Elves: an Ambrosian Account

In this chapter, I will look at the Elvish view of Death in Tolkien's works and compare it with the Ambrosian conception of death. In doing this, it will become

[114] Ibid., 309.

[115] Ibid., 310.

[116] Ibid., 309.

apparent that there is a strong resemblance between these two accounts, despite certain significant differences (such as the Elves' unwillingness to disparage the body or consider life altogether evil).

Death is Natural, but Tainted

The basic claim of the Elvish conception of Man's death is that it is not wrong at all—that it is natural. In his conversation with the Wise-woman Andreth, Finrod says "Ye [Men] also, we hold . . . are Children of Eru, and your fate and nature is from Him."[117] Moreover, given that their fate appears to be not just Death, but Death after a relatively short span of years, Finrod asks "must we not believe that your brevity is also part of your nature?"[118] His argument rests on the claim that Eru (that is, the Creator, God) is infinitely more powerful than Morgoth (a created and fallen angelic being, analogous to Satan) and would not suffer his designs to be foiled. If Eru's design for Man was immortality (or perpetual longevity), man would be immortal (or long-lived). Hence, Finrod says "to change the doom of a whole people of the Children, to rob them of their inheritance: if he could do that in Eru's despite, then greater and more terrible is he by far than we guessed; then all the valour of the Noldor is but presumption and folly."[119] This claim demonstrates Finrod's understanding that the change from immortality to mortality is a great one; to institute such a change would require the power to fundamentally alter the fate of a created people and exercise control over not only temporal matters but

[117] Ibid., 308.

[118] Ibid., 308.

[119] Ibid., 312.

eternal ones. If man were created immortal, Finrod concludes, his current mortality must be the result of a re-designing of his nature by Eru himself; apart from Andreth's own contention that man was made deathless, however, there is no reason to suspect man was ever immortal.

Both the Elves and Ambrose, then, maintain not only that Man's death is in accordance with nature, but also base this claim on an assumption that whatever occurs universally must be God's design, and whatever is God's design is nature. Of course, this reasoning overlooks the possibility of death being introduced by God as a punishment, in which case it is in some sense the doing of Satan, or Morgoth, while nevertheless beyond Satan's power to effect of his own accord.

Finrod goes on to explain why Men dread death as an evil. Though Morgoth cannot change nature, he can pervert it. One way he accomplishes this perversion is simply through changing how nature is perceived. Hence Finrod says that "*death* is but the name that we give to something that he has tainted, and it sounds therefor evil; but untainted its name would be good."[120] This tainting may be achieved in multiple ways: for instance, through leading men to believe that death is the final end, or that beyond it awaits more evil.

In *The Children of Húrin*, Morgoth uses this exact tactic to try to instill fear and despair into Húrin, his captive. Having tried by several means to break Húrin's will, Morgoth vows to bring evil to Húrin's family, saying "my hate shall pursue them to the ends of the world. . . they shall die without hope, cursing both life and death."[121] Not

[120] Ibid., 310.

[121] J.R.R Tolkien, *The Children of Húrin,* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2007), 64.

believing that Morgoth has any power beyond death, Húrin answers "you are not the Lord of Men, and shall not be. . . beyond the Circles of the World you shall not pursue those who refuse you."[122] In a final attempt to cause despair, Morgoth concedes that "beyond the Circles of the World I will not pursue them. . . for beyond the Circles of the World there is Nothing. But within them they shall not escape me, until they enter into Nothing."[123] To this Húrin simply answers: "You lie."[124] This, then, is one glimpse of how Morgoth deceives men and taints death.

Although Húrin, a man, is able to withstand Morgoth's lies, not all men in Tolkien's works are able to do so. Moreover, Húrin is only able to do so because he is learned in the lore of the Elves and Valar, and because he is given divine insight at the time of this trial (he prefaces one of his claims by saying that it was "put into [his] heart this hour.")[125] So, then, Húrin's resistance to Morgoth and alignment with the Elvish conception of death does not suggest that men in general would be in consensus with his views. This story does, however, corroborate Finrod's claim that Morgoth perverts man's perception of death.

The view that the fear of death is the true evil, and not death itself, recalls several claims made by Ambrose. For instance, Ambrose holds that death "seems good to righteous men but is feared by most," and "fear of death is no small evil."[126] We saw

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[122] Ibid., 65.

[123] Ibid., 65.

[124] Ibid., 65.

[125] Ibid., 65.

[126] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 11; Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 2.3-2.4.

Finrod agrees with this view, arguing that the fear of death is the direct doing of Morgoth, perverting something good into something dreadful. The wise among men, in his view, would not fear death but rather would regard it as a good, as is the case with Húrin who looks hopefully on death as an escape from Morgoth.

Another similarity between the Elvish and Ambrosian views of death is the reasons for which men regard death as an evil to be feared. In his portrayal of Morgoth's deception, Finrod suggests that the fear of death is based on the expectation bred by Morgoth of either nonexistence or some evil worse than life itself. Similarly, Ambrose says the following regarding the fear of death:

> "The foolish fear death for two reasons. The first is because they call it an annihilation. But there can be no annihilation of a man since the soul survives the body. . . The second reason is because they dread punishments, terrified, to be sure, by the fables of the poets, the barkings of Cerberus, the gloomy whirlpool of the river Cocytus. . . yet I would not deny that there are punishments after death. But why refer to death what is after death? . . . Therefore, there are no punishments which are referred to death."[127]

The lies of which Finrod accuses Morgoth, then, are the very ones the foolish accept in Ambrose's account.

A Hopeful Escape

We have seen that Húrin looks forward to death as the thing that will set him free from the Circles of the World and, therefore, from Morgoth. This view, though in this instance held by a man, is very representative of the Elvish conception of Man's death. Throughout Tolkien's tales, the Elves commonly describe death as an escape from the confines of the World. This understanding is partially a statement of knowledge, for the

[127] Ibid., 8.32-8.33.

Elves know that whereas they remain on earth in the Halls of Mandos eventually to be reincarnated, men do not. This means that men either cease to exist upon dying or else are removed from the world. The former alternative can be dismissed, for the Elves maintain the indestructibility of the soul for all Children of Iluvatar. They conclude, then, that in dying man must leave the world.

To consider this departure an escape, however, one must judge the destination preferable to the starting point. Finrod offers three reasons for why they believe this to be the case. The first reason concerns the starting place—earth—and its burdensomeness. The Elves' own fate here informs their perception of Man's fate. Their immortality leads them to view mortality as an escape, because in their deathlessness they become weary of the world.[128] It is said regarding Man's mortality that "as Time wears even the Powers shall envy" Men for their ability to escape the world.[129] This reason for viewing death as an escape corresponds with Ambrose's claim that, if nothing else, death is an escape insofar as it offers freedom from the evils of the world. Of course, Ambrose's position is much more extreme in that he considers essentially all of life, save virtue, evil. Nevertheless, the argument is nearly the same: endless life on earth is a burden from which death is a deliverance.

The second reason Finrod gives for calling death an escape is that the Elves have recognized, in observing Man, his peculiar relationship with the world. Whereas Elves love the world for itself and treasure the beauty in each thing, the same is not true for Men. On the contrary, when Men love the things of the world, it "is only (so it seems)

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[128] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 320.

[129] Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 42.

because it reminds them of some other dearer thing."[130] In other words, joy brings with it longing, and the two are inseparable such that lasting contentment is elusive. The lot of man on earth is to be forever in "unrest."[131] Finrod therefore concludes that Man is not at home upon earth, and this "other dearer thing" is to be found in his rightful home where he will go after death. Therefore, he says, Death ought to be regarded "as a release, or return, nay! as going home!"[132] Neither is he alone in reaching this conclusion. In *The Silmarillion*, Manwë, chief of the gods, says on behalf of the Valar and Elves that "this we hold to be true, that your home is not here. . . nor anywhere within the Circles of the World."[133]

In Christian theology this idea has been called man's *status viatoris*: the state of being a pilgrim on earth, and one finds it in Ambrose's theology when he says we should long to "return to that country and our natural home."[134] While this is indeed a similarity between the Elvish and Ambrosian accounts of death, it is not unique to either. In light of 1 Peter 2:11, which calls us "strangers and pilgrims," nearly all Christian theologians in history have recognized man's pilgrim status—his "quality of being on-the-way to somewhere else," as Josef Pieper puts it.[135]

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[130] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 317.

[131] Ibid., 316.

[132] Ibid., 317.

[133] Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 265.

[134] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 33.

[135] Josef Pieper, *Death and Immortality*, (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2000), 75.

In Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories," he defends the fantasy genre against accusations of its being escapist. His defense is simply that escape is, in this instance at least, a good thing: "Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home?"[136] Although Tolkien is talking about fantasy, not death, he is drawing attention to man's discontent on earth and his need for escape. So while man's *status viatoris* is a very widespread Christian idea, it is still worth comparing Ambrose and Finrod on this point considering that they both hold life to not only be a passage, but one of unremitting discontent and unrest, such that death alone can offer rest and joy.

The third and final reason Finrod offers for understanding death as an escape involves the concept of *Estel*, which is an Elvish word Tolkien uses to distinguish a certain type of hope. The term "*Estel"* signifies a belief that all will end well for Men and Elves, for Eru's "designs. . . must be for His Children's joy."[137] In Christian terms, this means trusting in God's providence. Given the Elves' commitment to *Estel*, it is no wonder they assume the outcome of death to be a positive one. In such a providential outlook the ultimate end of everything must be good; and far from being an exception to this, death must be the very good that makes right of all other evils, since it is an ultimate end. Of course, it is not man's ultimate end in the sense of his ceasing to exist, but rather insofar as it delivers him to his ultimate destination and brings an end to his earthly course.

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[136] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, (London: Harper Collins, 2006), 148.

[137] Ibid., 320.

While this belief, or hope, clearly gives reason to regard death as an escape, one must wonder why the Elves come to affirm *Estel*? The answer, perhaps, can be found in "The Music of the Ainur," a tale in *The Silmarillion* in which Eru's design for the world is foretold before its making. In the story, the Ainur (analogous to angels) are present as the story of the world unfolds in the form of music, a music which the Ainur themselves get to participate in making. During this music, Melkor (later Morgoth) rebels and attempts to create his own music. In the end, however, Eru's music cannot be foiled, and he says to the Melkor in front of all the Ainur: "Thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful."[138] In other words, all evil will turn to good. Having been instructed by the Valar and Maiar, who themselves are Ainur, the Elves are aware of this ultimate consolation. In light of this assurance, the Elves justifiably maintain *Estel*.

Although Ambrose lacks Tolkien's useful but invented terminology, he does not lack his concept of *Estel*, nor does he differ from Tolkien in using the concept to affirm the goodness of death. In arguing that the universality of an occurrence ensures its being God's design, which in turn establishes its goodness, Ambrose implicitly demonstrates his belief that God's design cannot be in any respect foiled. Aquinas, on the other hand, despite sharing the belief in providence, does not use it to argue for death's goodness. Even though God in his providence will make all things right, Aquinas would argue that much happens in the fallen world which cannot be considered good in itself nor of God—such is the case with death (although in the sense that it is a just punishment it is from

[138] Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 17.

God). His more nuanced conception of nature, as well as his view that death is punitive, allows Aquinas to distinguish between God's will and exceptionless occurrences. Meanwhile, Ambrose and Finrod share not only the concept of providence but the application of it as well.

These three reasons—the burden of immortality, the *status viatoris* of Men, and the inerrancy of providence—constitute the basis for the Elvish understanding of death as an escape. Moreover, each of these reasons correspond to a belief held by Ambrose which he similarly uses to argue for death's classification as an escape.

In Accordance with the Nature of the Soul

Just as both Ambrose and Aquinas look at the nature of soul and its relationship to the body to determine whether death is natural, so too do Finrod and Andreth in their debate. Rather than using the terms "body" and "soul," however, they use "hröa" and "fëa," respectively (although "fëa" may be translated as either "soul" or "mind"). This section will consider whether, according to Finrod, nature favors the unity or separation of these two.

It turns out, unsurprisingly, that he agrees with Ambrose, although his argument differs slightly. He begins by pointing out that man's body, or hröa, is inherently of the earth and tied to it. Whereas Ambrose focuses on the wretchedness of the body, Finrod makes a softer claim that man's body "is built of the matter of Arda and must therefore (one would suppose) here remain."[139] Meanwhile, we saw in Finrod's discussion of man's *status viatoris* that he believes the soul of man not to be of this world. There is,

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[139] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 317.

therefore, a "disharmony" between hröa and fëa so long as they are united.[140] This is problematic, since "harmony of *hröa* and *fëa* is, we [Elves] believe, essential to the true nature unmarred of all the Incarnate."[141] Finrod thus considers the relationship between the body and soul as that of "the House and the Indweller."[142] The dwelling of the soul in the body is not in itself unnatural, and yet its perpetuation beyond a normal span would be. This means that even were man made immune from bodily corruption, his nature would still be mortal; hence Finrod says that the soul "of its own nature would at some time of its own will have abandoned the house of its sojourn here, even though the sojourn may have been longer than is now permitted."[143] In other words, the nature of the body and soul prohibits their perpetual unity, making man inherently mortal.

This argument brings to light both a similarity and a difference between the accounts of Ambrose and of the Elves. The similarity is of course that in both accounts the soul longs to be freed from the body, making death natural. The difference is that whereas in Ambrose's account this longing on the part of the soul is a result of the Fall, in Finrod's account the soul of the prelapsarian man (if he were to exist) would still long to be rid of the body. This difference lends plausibility to both accounts. For Ambrose's part, the view that the longing of the soul to escape the body is a result of the Fall allows him to maintain original deathlessness in accordance with nature (a necessary belief given his interpretation of Scripture). For Finrod's part, the view that unfallen man would

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[140] Ibid., 316.

[141] Ibid., 315.

[142] Ibid., 316.

[143] Ibid., 317.

be mortal allows him to offer a more consistent account of nature in which God was not required to change the nature of his Creation. Both, however, differ drastically from Aquinas' understanding of the relationship between body and soul, which we have already seen and will return to in the next chapter.

The Gift of the One to Men

Finally, the dominant view about death expressed by the Elves is that it is "the Gift of God" to Men.[144] This view, however, is closely tied to several of the other views already expressed, so much so that one might aptly consider the designation of death as Gift to encapsulate the entire Elvish conception of mortality. In this section we will look at what exactly it means for Death to be a gift, speculate concerning the sources of this belief, and then draw a comparison with Ambrose's conception of death as a remedy.

Death is said to be a Gift in a couple different ways. First of all, we saw that two aspects of the Elvish conception of death are that it is natural and that it grants freedom from the circles of the World: putting an end to discontent and bringing man into his proper home. It is therefore good and, because it comes from God, may be called a Gift. However, there is another, more important sense in which death is a Gift (or, rather, part of a Gift). The Elves maintain that in dying Men leave Arda; they also maintain that Eru's design as preordained in the Music applies only to Arda; accordingly, they hold that the Gift of Men is to be able to go beyond the Music and, moreover, to share "in [Eru's] authorship."[145]

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[144] Tolkien, *Letters,* no. 208.

[145] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 319.

What exactly this Gift entails is ambiguous and seems to be a matter of perplexity even among the Elves. Finrod speculates that the Gift has implications even prior to death. For instance, when Andreth laments the silence of the Valar and their unwillingness to interact with Men, Finrod replies: "Ye, the Children of Men, were not a matter they could govern," being rather "sole masters of yourselves within Arda, under the hand of the One."[146] This self-mastery, or co-authorship, which is a result of Man's power to go beyond the Music, makes him an intractable and ungovernable subject for the Valar. So, then, Men possess a freedom not only to leave Arda in death but also to go beyond the power and designs of the Valar, including Morgoth, while still alive in a way that even the Elves cannot.

One might compare this Gift of freedom to free will, although they are not synonymous (Elves have free will too). In his book *Creation and Beauty in Tolkien's Catholic Vision*, John Halsall describes the gift of Men as "a freedom of the will which originates in its source, and in its most mysterious expression demonstrates a freedom from material form. . . but is never independent of the providence of God."[147] The similarities between the Gift of freedom in Tolkien's works and free will are numerous: both are considered God's Gift to man, making him at his core indomitable and capable of rejecting evil. Furthermore, just as the Gift of Men remains "under the hand of the One," so too does free will operate under the direction of providence. Yet another similarity between the Gift of Men and free will is that it is considered one with death;

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[146] Ibid., 314.

[147] Michael John Halsall, *Creation and Beauty in Tolkien's Catholic Vision: A Study in the Influence of Neoplatonism in J. R. R. Tolkien's Philosophy of Life as "Being and Gift"*, (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020), 20.

however, the nature of this connection is not the same for both. Many Christians hold that free will entails death insofar as it allowed for the Fall, thereby introducing death. The Gift of freedom from the Music, on the other hand, is not merely that which causes death. Rather, this gift is fully realized in death insofar as dying confers an ultimate and inexpungible liberation from Arda. Death, then, may properly be called a Gift, both because as it is a good of nature given from God and, more importantly, because it is part of the Gift of freedom.

Although Ambrose never calls death a Gift, he frequently refers to it as a "remedy" (*remedio*).[148] The reason for using a different label is that "remedy" suggests a Fall before which death was not necessary (an essential belief in Ambrose's conception), whereas "gift" lacks any implication that it had ever been otherwise. Apart from this difference, however, the two use the label for some of the same reasons; namely, because death is a redress for the evils of the world and the means by which we are finally redeemed. Ambrose says that "it is the cause of salvation for all. . . for the Son of God did not think it unworthy of Him."[149] Likewise, Finrod says that by the Gift of Men Arda will become "Arda Remade" and there will be "Bliss beyond bliss."[150] While pondering the way in which this hope will come to pass, Finrod suggests a belief in the coming Incarnation, saying that if the evil of Melkor is to be undone, "Eru must come in to conquer him."[151] These two hopes—that the Gift of Man will enable the redemption of

[148] Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 9.38.

[149] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 46.

[150] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 319.

[151] Ibid., 322.

the world, and that Eru will become incarnate—are not distinct but are rather one in the same. The Incarnation is the means by which Mankind completes the Music and makes it perfect. Put simply, Finrod, like Ambrose, understands death to be not only a Gift, but one with the power to redeem the world.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death According to Men in Tolkien's Works

Introduction

This chapter will look at the conception of death common to the Men of Tolkien's stories. However, because Men are depicted as a less homogenous group than the Elves, more care must be taken to glean a unified account. The claims made by Andreth in the Debate, for instance, are not representative of Man in general, but only of the "Wise." Furthermore, the account of the Wise is itself multifarious, for they "do not speak with assurance or with one voice, having no sure knowledge."[152] With this in mind, we will draw primarily from Andreth's account in the Debate, because it is the most thorough account given and it stands in direct contrast with the Elvish account. Additionally, her account seems to be consistent with the views expressed by learned Men elsewhere in Tolkien's stories, such as the Númenoreans.

The Insight of the Perspective of Men

The account of death given by men deserves special consideration given their unique relationship to death. In fact, one might even expect Men alone to have an accurate understanding of Death because they alone experience it. There is some truth in this, but it neither correctly nor adequately conveys the unique situation of Men with regards to mortality. Firstly, the men whose perspectives we consider have not yet

[152] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 308.

experienced Death themselves, so their experience comes in large part from witnessing the deaths of others and awaiting their own, which they feel to be imminent. The difference between Men and Elves, therefore, lies not so much in relative knowledge about death (which the Elves actually have more of) but in the relation to that knowledge. What may seem like a reasonable expectation to an immortal will seem no more than blind trust to a man; for men dread the loss that comes with Death and lament its uncertainty far more, it would seem, than the Elves possibly could. This is why Arwen the Elf, upon confronting mortality firsthand, says "not till now have I understood the tale of your people and their fall. As wicked fools I scorned them, but I pity them at last."[153] For better or worse, then, a personal encounter with (or expectation of) Death shapes one's perception of it, giving men unique and valuable insight on death.

Death according to Men: A Thomistic Account

Death is Unnatural and a Punishment

One of the primary contentions of Men in Tolkien's works regarding Death is that it is unnatural. This claim is based not in philosophy (although a philosophical explanation is given as well) but in revelation, for the Men "who have preserved in memory a name for Him that ye call Eru. . . say plainly that Men are *not* by nature short-lived."[154] They hold, moreover, that "Death was imposed upon" them "through the malice of the Lord of Darkness." In other words, Men believe that Morgoth inflicted Death upon them, so that they are forever doomed to die contrary to their nature.

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[153] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of The Rings*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 1063.

[154] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 309.

Although Aquinas similarly holds that death is unnatural, also citing revelation as a reason for believing this to be the case, he differs from the Wise Men of Tolkien's stories regarding how death came to be. This difference, however, is subtle but significant. According to Aquinas, Death came by the doing of Satan insofar as it was he who deceived man into sinning. It was God, however, who ultimately instituted death as the just punishment. Neither would Aquinas say that death was "imposed upon" man, given man's culpability in original sin. In other words, Aquinas holds that death was instituted by God and could not have been otherwise, but that the blame for it belongs solely to Satan and to Man himself. He would agree with Andreth that death is "a wrong" and that it is "done to us," but not that it is "a wrong that is done to us."[155] Insofar as it is done to us, it is good because it is justice.

Andreth's assertion that death was inflicted on Man by Morgoth may not be a representative view of the Men of Tolkien's works. In "The Fall of Númenor," for instance, Men consider death a punishment "for the rebellion of Men."[156] This suggests that they have a conception of the Fall not unlike that found in Genesis, and presumably understand death to be instituted by Eru himself as a punishment. And yet, even these Men are indignant regarding their own deaths, and particularly toward the Elves, who they say are "unpunished, and even those who rebelled do not die."[157] Death, then, may be regarded as a punishment, but it is not one which Men find easy to accept, nor one that they think is justly distributed.

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[155] Ibid., 311.

[156] Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 264.

[157] Ibid., 264.

There is another sense in which Aquinas' conception of prelapsarian immortality seems to differ slightly from that of Andreth. Whereas the latter maintains simply that death is unnatural, Aquinas argues that death is in one sense natural and in another sense unnatural. His ability to hold this position relies on his understanding of prelapsarian immortality as itself being a gift which completed human nature. Tolkien's Men, however, lack such a nuanced conception of nature, in which case the difference between the two accounts may be superficial, a mere result of Man's philosophical limitations in Tolkien's tales. Apparently aware of this deficiency in her own account, Andreth avoids making any definitive claim on Man's prelapsarian nature, saying only that Man was "*born to life everlasting, without any shadow of any end.*"[158] She is therefore reticent to make any specific claims about Man's original nature, holding instead the more general belief that Man was born "never to die."[159]

Andreth's account is not, however, altogether without philosophy. Like Ambrose, Aquinas, and Finrod, Andreth analyzes the nature of the union of body and soul to assess death's naturalness. In this analysis, she reaches the same conclusion as Aquinas; namely, that the union of the two is in accordance with their nature, rendering death unnatural. In response to Finrod's description of the body and soul as House and Indweller, Andreth says "that would be contempt of the body. . . but the body is not an inn to keep a traveler warm for a night, ere he goes on his way."[160] On the contrary, the two ought to be in "a union of mutual love." In other words, like Finrod, Andreth holds that there should be

[158] Ibid., 314.

[159] Ibid., 314.

[160] Ibid., 317.

harmony between the body and soul; but unlike Finrod, Andreth says this harmony must consist in the union of the two, "for were it 'natural' for the body to be abandoned and die, but 'natural' for the [soul] to live on, there would indeed be a disharmony in Man. . . . His body would be a hindrance at best, or a chain." Such a conclusion the Wise refuse to accept, for they maintain that Eru at least designed their nature for their own good, even if he later allowed them to be given into the hands of Melkor. This, then, is the position of Andreth: "we do not live in our right being and its fullness save in a union of love and peace between the House and the Dweller. Wherefore death. . . is a disaster to both."[161]

This argument is nearly a replication of one of Aquinas' arguments for the unnaturalness of death, which we looked at in Chapter Two. Additionally, Andreth here addresses the heresy in the accounts of both Finrod and (even more so) Ambrose: "contempt of the body." One should note that the Catholic Church very explicitly sides with Andreth and Aquinas in this matter, and that Tolkien would have undoubtedly been aware of this teaching. One can therefore conclude (if one has not already done so) that Tolkien is not merely speaking through the Elvish conception, but rather writing a genuine dialogue in which both sides present a mixture of truths and errors.

A final point to be made regarding death's unnaturalness concerns Man's perpetual discontent upon earth, which both Finrod and Ambrose regard as an indicator of death's naturalness. Andreth, however, considers the discontent to be a result of death's unnaturalness. Specifically, she says that "No heart of Man is content. All passing and dying is a grief to it."[162] In her view, it is not life that fails to satisfy but life's

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[161] Ibid., 317.

[162] Ibid., 307.

shortness. How can one be content when all goodness will perish? If this is true, and contentment cannot be given to those doomed to lose everything, must they not conclude that it was not always the case? In this way, Andreth uses the same phenomenon to argue for the unnaturalness of death that others, such as Finrod, have used to establish man's *status viatoris* and thereby argue for the naturalness of death. While Aquinas would agree that man's discontent is a result of the Fall, he would certainly disagree that death alone causes this discontent. Were God to grant Fallen Man immortality, Aquinas would hold that Men would nevertheless remain unsatisfied with the world. This, then, is one difference between the accounts of Andreth and Aquinas, though they are in unison regarding death's overall unnaturalness as well as the reasons for believing this to be the case.

Death is Ultimate and Absolute

The Men of Tolkien's tales regard death as an absolute: it ends all, it takes all, and it happens to all. Hence Andreth says "Dying we die, and we go out to no return. Death is an uttermost end, a loss irremediable."[163] This claim seems to contain a contradiction: death cannot, it would seem, be both a "go[ing] out" and an "uttermost end." Andreth does not clarify this apparent contradiction, though an explanation can be guessed at. To begin with, Andreth never denies the indestructibility of the soul. On the contrary, her discussion of death's unnaturalness implies a belief in this indestructibility. One can conclude, then, that the "go[ing] out" she speaks of is in reference to the soul.

[163] Ibid., 311.

In what sense, then, is death an uttermost end? The answer cannot simply be that it is an end to earthly life, for if this were the case one would call it an end of some sort, but not a final end. Returning once again to Andreth's discussion of death's unnaturalness, we see that she says of the body: "it is a house made for one dweller only, indeed not only house but raiment also; and it is not clear to me that we should in this case speak only of the raiment being fitted to the wearer rather than of the wearer being fitted to the raiment."[164] We see, then, that Andreth regards Man as a unity of body and soul, not merely as a soul inhabiting a body. In this respect, death is indeed an uttermost end.

The conception of Man given here is redolent of Aquinas' understanding: it is the unity of body and soul which comprises man, for the soul is "the form of the body" and "the two together compose a substance—the human being."[165] Furthermore, one finds this understanding in the Catechism as well, where it is said that "the unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the 'form' of the body."[166] From the profundity of this union, moreover, the Catechism concludes that "spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature." So, Andreth is in agreement with both Aquinas and the Church in saying that death puts an end to man, at least in one sense. However, unlike Andreth, both Aquinas and the Church maintain a belief in the final resurrection, in which case death is itself temporal, not an "uttermost end." This difference proves significant, for it removes the finality, the

[164] Ibid., 311.

[165] Eberl, "Aquinas on the Nature of Human Beings," 337; Aquinas, *ST*, I. Q75. A6.

[166] CCC, 365.

absoluteness, of death, offering hope that whatever good death robs us of will be restored. For Andreth, however, death remains not only a loss of all that is good, but a "loss irremediable."[167]

The final sense in which death is absolute is that it happens to all. "Death ineluctable," Andreth calls it, saying: "Be a man strong, or swift, or bold. . . let him love the world or loathe it, he must die and must leave it."[168] In the face of this inescapability, along with the other aforementioned negative qualities of death, Andreth says that one cannot help but "fall into a despair."[169] All valor, she concludes, "is a folly; or at least it is fruitless."[170] Victory is short-lived, defeat is final—this is what death means for Man.

We saw in Chapter Two that Aquinas acknowledges death to be a truly hopeless affair for those without faith. In this respect, he agrees with Andreth. On the other hand, we also saw that he affirmed the possibility of faith even among pre-Christian pagans. Those who believed explicitly both in God's existence and in the goodness of His providence possessed the requisite faith for salvation, and therefore had legitimate grounds for hope beyond death. For these people, then, death was hopeful; but is there a similar hope for the Men of Tolkien's stories? Although Andreth concludes that there is no hope in death, the next section will look at two possible responses to this conclusion.

Doomed Resistance and the Old Hope

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[167] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 311.

[168] Ibid., 311.

[169] Ibid., 311.

[170] Ibid., 311.

One of the responses to this dismal philosophical outlook is not found in Tolkien's stories, at least not explicitly, though he discusses it elsewhere. In his commentary on his translation of *Beowulf*, Tolkien explains the concept of "Doomed Resistance," which is the idea that the valor of pre-Christian Man was in a sense more heroic for the very reason that he had no concrete hope but was instead doomed to "live briefly in a world where all withers and is forgotten."[171] Put another way, Tolkien thinks that there is a sort of hope that is perfect precisely because it is unfounded, and the actions born out of this hope are similarly perfect because they represent a resistance to evil without expectation for either victory or reward. This Doomed Resistance, then, is Tolkien's vision of how pre-Christian Men (such as those in his stories) should respond to the seeming hopelessness of death.

Tolkien offers another response to the apparent hopelessness of death, one which Andreth herself presents but then dismisses. She refers to it as "the Old Hope."[172] This hope is that "the One will himself enter into Arda, and heal Men and all the Marring from the beginning to the end."[173] Of course, this is a prophecy of the Incarnation. However, Andreth says that the number of people who hold to this Hope is small, and she is not among them; for, she says, "all wisdom is against them. . . . How could Eru enter into the thing that He has made, and than which He is beyond measure greater?"[174] Nevertheless,

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[171] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf.* Edited by Christopher Tolkien (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: New York, 2003), 275.

[172] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 321.

[173] Ibid., 321.

[174] Ibid., 321.

this prophecy has been passed down and some accept it, finding therein a hope which could redeem an otherwise hopeless death.

Aquinas, like Andreth, contends that this "Old Hope" (the Incarnation) is in some sense contrary to reason. Specifically, that the infinite should enter into the finite is beyond human reason, and for this reason he calls it "the mystery of the Incarnation."[175] However, he also recognizes that, in another sense, "it was fitting that God should become incarnate." Even so, to accept this mystery would require faith. Aquinas would therefore not accuse Andreth of faulty reason but of faithlessness. Her philosophical outlook on death, then, largely fits into what Aquinas would consider a rational understanding for a pre-Christian pagan.

[175] Aquinas, *ST*, III. Q1. A1.

CHAPTER SIX

Aragorn and Arwen: A Synthesized Conception of Death

Introduction

This chapter will analyze the story of Aragorn and Arwen's deaths as found in "Appendix A" of *The Lord of the Rings*, attempting to demonstrate how the views expressed by these characters effectively synthesize the two accounts of death offered by Men and Elves (or Aquinas and Ambrose). We already discussed the value of multiple perspectives in Tolkien's stories; in this tale, we are given insight not only through the presentation of two perspectives, but also through the characters' adoption of certain views typically associated with the other race. Moreover, each of the characters is in a unique position regarding death. Aragorn's character is unique insofar as he belongs to the race of men—and particularly to the Men of Númenor—and yet was raised largely among Elves. His view of death is therefore shaped both by the accounts of Men and of Elves. Similarly, the character of Arwen demonstrates a rare instance—and the only one given significant attention—of an Elf being forced to personally confront the mortality of Men. This confrontation, we will see, leads her to question the Elvish conception. The synthesis of the two accounts of death therefore consists not only in combining the views of Aragorn and Arwen, but in looking at where each character departs from the views of their kindred. The result is a balanced and complete conception of death that borrows from both Men and Elves, Aquinas and Ambrose, remaining meanwhile in accordance with official Church teaching.

Aragorn's Treatment of Death

The character of Aragorn displays the role of hope in facing death. More specifically, he demonstrates the role of Estel, a certain type of hope which we have seen is grounded in a belief that all of Eru's "designs. . . must be for His Children's joy." For the Elves, this belief is based in knowledge, and as such it is common to all. For Men, however, it is a matter of faith. This is why Andreth, despite being a Wise-woman "learned in the lore of Men," can lack Estel.[176]

We may assume, however, that Aragorn possesses this hope because he is given the name "Estel" after his father dies.[177] Of course, the name might also be in reference to the fact that Aragorn serves as a hope for others, although if this were the case a more accurate name would be "Amdir": that is, "an expectation of good, which though uncertain has some foundation in what is known."[178] Estel, on the other hand, "does not come from experience, but from our nature and our first being."[179] Hence, a person cannot be the object of Estel, but only of Amdir. It would seem, then, that in giving Aragorn the name Estel Tolkien intended to demonstrate that he possesses this hope and not merely that he gives it to others. In fact, in the end Aragorn cannot himself offer hope; upon his deathbed he says to his wife Arwen: "I speak no comfort to you, for there is no comfort for such pain within the circles of the world."[180] This statement implies that

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[176] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 304.

[177] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1057.

[178] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 320.

[179] Ibid., 320.

[180] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1062.

Aragorn's hope in facing death comes not from a worldly understanding of the goods in death, but from a faith that beyond the world good will be made of evil.

Additionally, this statement draws out a distinction, or perhaps an incompatibility, between the two types of hope, Amdir and Estel. In his book *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind The Lord of the Rings*, Peter Kreeft describes this incompatibility between the two types of hope, which he calls "surface hope" and "deeper hope," saying that the former "often has to be killed in order for the deeper hope to emerge."[181] Examples of this worldly hopelessness giving rise to a deeper hope in *The Lord of the Rings* include the Fellowship's perseverance after Gandalf's death, Sam's resolve after Frodo is stung by Shelob, and, ultimately, Aragorn's steadfastness in accepting death.

So, Estel plays a central role in transforming death from an absolute evil and an irremediable loss into a Gift. This makes sense, because Estel is not only unconquered by death, but is in fact fulfilled in it, for only in dying can one can realize God's ultimate design for Man: a design which transforms all evil into good. Thus, Aragorn says to Arwen "in sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!"[182]

This hope, then, allows Aragorn to face death, but it also allows him to choose it. Hence, he says "to me has been given. . . the grace to go at my will, and give back the gift. Now, therefore, I will sleep."[183] Aragorn therefore genuinely chooses death,

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[181] Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind The Lord of the Rings*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 199.

[182] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1057.

[183] Ibid., 1062.

accepting it as a gift before it comes upon him as a doom; and it is hope, or Estel, that allows him to make this decision. Tolkien would seem to affirm this willing acceptance of death, this treatment of it as a gift even if it is, worldly speaking, an evil. He expresses this view in the following quote from a letter he drafted to a reader:

> A divine 'punishment' is also a divine 'gift', if accepted, since its object is ultimate blessing, and the supreme inventiveness of the Creator will make 'punishments' (that is changes of design) produce a good not otherwise to be obtained: a 'mortal' Man has probably (an Elf would say) a higher if unrevealed destiny than a longeval one."[184]

Therefore, according to Tolkien, regarding death as a good requires Estel, for it requires a belief, or faith, that God will make good out of evil.

Interestingly, one can reconcile this view with both Aquinas and Ambrose. Regarding the former, we saw that Aquinas allows hope in death for pre-Christian pagans provided that they believe through faith either in "the patriarchs and prophets" or in "divine providence."[185] The latter requirement is satisfied by Estel, which depends on a belief in providence attainable only through faith. So, then, Tolkien's view that faith in "the supreme inventiveness of the Creator" transforms death into a Gift corresponds with Aquinas' view that death is hopeful for those who trust in God's providence.[186] In this view, it is the faith which actually causes death to become a Gift, not merely to be perceived as one. As for Ambrose, his conception of death as a positive good, or remedy, is clearly demonstrated in this view of Tolkien's. Not only so, but the manner in which death acts as a Gift or Remedy is the same for both Tolkien and Ambrose; namely, it

[184] Tolkien, *Letters,* no. 212.

[185] Aquinas, *De Veritate*, Q.14 Article XI.

[186] Tolkien, *Letters,* no. 212.

offers escape and "liberation from the circles of the world."[187] In this way, Aragorn's hope in (and acceptance of) death combines what Tolkien would consider valuable aspects of each theologian's account of death: Aquinas' contention that death is a punishment which is hopeful only for the faithful, and Ambrose's view that death is a positive good insofar as it allows escape from the world.

Arwen's Response to Death

Arwen Undómiel similarly demonstrates aspects of both accounts of death: most notably, that it is bitter, and yet not to be shunned as the greatest of evils. In choosing to marry Aragorn, she forsakes her own immortality. One might take this to mean that Arwen does not regard death as an evil, for she chooses it willingly. And yet, at the time of this decision she does not yet fully realize the difficulty of death: "the loss and the silence."[188] After Aragorn tells her that he must die, she exclaims "not till now have I understood the tale of your people and their fall. As wicked fools I scorned them, but I pity them at last. For if this is indeed, as the Eldar say, the gift of the One to Men, it is bitter to receive."[189] Thus, the taste of death allows Arwen to finally understand man's contention that it is an evil and a punishment.

This is an important point, marking an attempt by Tolkien not to dismiss the Elvish conception that death ought to be regarded aa a gift, but to place it in light of the reality that death is difficult to bear, and that it is, indeed, a punishment. In other words, it is Tolkien's way of communicating that the idea of death as a Gift "does not necessarily

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[187] Ibid., no. 245.

[188] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1063.
[189] Ibid., 1063.

have anything to say for or against such beliefs as the Christian that 'death' is not part of human nature, but a punishment for sin (rebellion).[190] While Aragorn demonstrates that it is indeed possible and good for Men to accept the Elvish conception of death, Arwen demonstrates that it is difficult to do so.

This difficulty in facing death aligns with Aquinas' view that death is properly considered an evil, even if it is transformed into a good for those awaiting salvation. Moreover, Arwen's description of death as "the loss and the silence" corresponds with Aquinas' reasoning for regarding death as an evil. Specifically, he maintains that death is a loss not only of all worldly goods but of the body which belongs in unity with the soul. Moreover, Aquinas asserts that the separated soul (without the aid of Divine grace) would be senseless and confused.[191] Even when granted the beatific vision, Aquinas maintains that the separated soul must operate without the use of senses—a mode of operation that stands contrary to the proper functioning of the soul. Arwen is right, then, to call death a "the loss and the silence."

One might argue that one's view of death when confronting it is not necessarily the best indication of one's genuine beliefs. If this is the case, one must consider Arwen fully Ambrosian in her beliefs about death. Both in her willingness to marry Aragorn, (thereby surrendering her Elvish immortality) and in her declaration that, prior to Aragorn's death, she had not even been able to sympathize with Man's own account of death, Arwen reveals an acceptance of the Ambrosian view of death. Specifically, she reveals her view that death is neither to be shunned nor regarded as a punishment. On the

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[190] Tolkien, *Letters*, no. 212.

[191] Aquinas, *ST.* 89.1.

contrary, she chooses death. In his analysis of this choice made by Arwen, Stratford Caldecott calls it "an act of faith in the Maker of all things, and in the love he has placed within the human heart."[192] In other words, her acceptance of the Doom of Men in marrying Aragorn was grounded in faith and love, not in despair.

Nevertheless, if one looks at her response to Aragorn's death, one finds an almost entirely Thomistic response (or rather a response which Aquinas would consider reasonable, but deficient in hope). She comes to regard death as an evil: as something to be dreaded and mourned over. In fact, so far from agreeing with Ambrose, he would probably say that she exemplifies his charge of "madness" against those grieve excessively. This madness, we have seen, consists "in not enduring death, and yet seeking it."[193] Unable to endure the death of Aragorn, Arwen "laid herself to rest. . . and there is her green grave, until the world is changed, and all the days of her life are utterly forgotten by men that come after."[194] Her desire for death is born not out of a recognition of its good but out of an inability to endure its loss, and is therefore, according to Ambrose, evil. Aquinas, on the other hand, would be far more sympathetic to Arwen. After all, she does not forcefully take her own life and the loss she experiences is truly a loss to be grieved over.

Conclusion

[192] Caldecott, *Secret Fire*, 94.

[193] Ambrose, *Death of Satyrus*, 11.

[194] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1063.

In looking at these two character's responses to death, we are presented with a complete and balanced conception of not only the nature of death, but also the proper response to it. Arwen conveys the nature of death as an evil which robs one of every earthly good. In this she demonstrates a Thomistic conception of death, demonstrating that even while one may theoretically align with an Ambrosian view of death, the reality of it is often difficult to bear. Meanwhile, Aragorn shows the possibility of viewing death as a gift, and the role of hope and faith in thus regarding it. He therefore illustrates the Ambrosian view that death ought to be regarded as a good, while also demonstrating Aquinas' idea that death is only hopeful for those who possess faith in God's providence (i.e., Estel).

Combining the viewpoints of these two characters, we are left with an account that does not deny the nature of death as a punishment or as an evil difficult to bear, but nevertheless maintains that death can and ought to be regarded as a gift in light of God's providence by which He will turn evil into "a good not otherwise to be obtained."[195] In his essay entitled "Providence and the Dramatic Unity," Thomas Hibbs points out Tolkien's view that because of providence "the appropriate response to evil is courageous endurance and hopeful patience."[196] Therefore, although death is indeed an evil, Tolkien shows that it ought to be met with hope. This alone, however, does not distinguish Tolkien's view from Aquinas. After all, Aquinas would similarly argue that for those who trust in providence death is, or becomes, an object of hope. Yet Tolkien takes it a

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[195] Tolkien, *Letters,* no. 212.

[196] Bassham, Gregory, and Eric Bronson. *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy : One Boot to Rule Them All* Chicago: Open Court, 2003. 176.

step further, saying not only that good *can* come of death, but that because of this good, death itself is good and desirable. In other words, although the institution of death was in one sense punitive, a providential outlook entails that even this punishment results in "a higher if unrevealed destiny than a longeval one."[197] Death, then, truly is a Gift.

[197] Ibid., no. 212.

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