

St. Louis 2013 Summer Book Club
Tolkien's Imagination
June 20

The Two Towers: Origin of Evil; Foreknowledge and Freedom

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers

Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Books IV and V:

<http://san.beck.org/Boethius4.html>, <http://san.beck.org/Boethius5.html>

St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II q6 (a1), q13 (a6), q75 (a1-4), q76 (a1-2), q80 (a1), q85 (a1-6): <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2.htm>

The Two Towers

1. Is fate really against Aragorn, as he thinks? (519/527) Is he in fact an “ill chooser”?
2. Why do the three friends spend precious time on Boromir’s funeral when the orcs are meanwhile carrying Merry and Pippin further beyond their reach? Why is the East wind omitted from their lament?

Chapter 2

3. What is Aragorn’s view of the constancy of ethics (538)? (see also page 543)
4. Gandalf’s counsel “was not based on a foreknowledge of safety for himself or others.” Was it based on a different kind of foreknowledge? (546)

Chapter 3

5. What does the ‘light-heartedness’ of Merry and Pippin signify? 568

Chapter 4

6. By giving Saruman a mind of “metal and wheels”, without care for living things, is Tolkien implicitly criticizing technology or industrialization? Is this an incipient version of the green movement?
7. Who is older, Tom Bombadil, Treebeard, Galadriel or Gandalf? (619) How can we explain the apparent contradictory statements?

Chapter 5

8. How is the blindness of Sauron (his inability to anticipate the actions of the good) a fatal weakness? (616) Compare also the fact that Gandalf understands Saruman, and not vice versa (in Chapter 10, p. 723). Relate this to the Augustinian-Boethian theory of evil.
9. How do Sauron and Saruman unwittingly bring about Saruman’s ruin? Is this mere coincidence?
10. Who or what sent Gandalf back? (p. 623/139)

Chapter 6

11. Why does Hamas disobey the letter of the king’s law (635)? What are the consequences of this disobedience? Is there a point here about the permissibility of civil disobedience, or about jurisprudence?

Chapter 8

12. Why can’t the evil of Sauron be wholly cured? (p. 683/197)
13. Why is Saruman lacking in “grit”, or “plain courage in a tight spot”? (p. 704/219)
14. Is the genocidal slaughter of orcs (in this case, by the Ents and huorns) an ethically troubling aspect of the LOTR?

Chapter 11

15. Is Gandalf really “both kinder and more alarming, merrier and more solemn than before”? Can you cite any evidence one way or the other? (733)
16. What does Gandalf mean by saying that Pippin and his friends have been saved by “good fortune, as it is called”? (p. 737/254)
17. Why does “evil will oft evil mar”? (p. 739/255)

Book IV

18. How does the terrain of Middle-Earth figure as a character in the story? (Consider the Old Forest, Caradhras, and the Eryn Muil.) Why is it important that the Fellowship start out with no clear or definite plan – in some cases, with little knowledge of what lies ahead?
19. How is it that the sight of Gollum excites pity in Frodo? Why doesn't it do so for Sam?
20. The Fellowship by and large has abjured the use of oaths (remember Elrond's charge to them in Rivendell). Why does Frodo demand an oath from Gollum? (p. 764/285) Is this prudent, especially since he is swearing by the Ring? Frodo later warns Gollum that the Ring will attempt to twist the promise to Gollum's loss. (796/313) If so, why does Frodo subject Gollum to this danger?
21. How does the landscape of Mordor reflect Sauron's nature? Why is it significant that nothing can live in its ‘gasping pools, choked with ash’? (786/302)
22. Why does Frodo show no concern for surviving the quest? (776) Is this a character flaw, for which Sam compensates?
23. How is it significant that Gondor is ruled by a steward? Why is 10,000 years insufficient in Gondor to make a steward into a king (as Denethor puts it)? Is Denethor a good steward?
24. How is Faramir like and unlike Boromir? Aragorn?
25. How and why is Faramir able to resist the temptation of the Ring? (835/366-7) Does his initial, apparently idle boast (“I would not take this thing if it lay by the highway, not were Minas Tirith to fall and I alone could save her.” 823/354) play a critical role, or would his judgment have prevailed in any case? Compare Faramir's successful resistance to that of Gandalf, Bilbo and Galadriel.
26. The Numenorean ‘grace’ before meals (841) is one of very few instances of anything like a religious practice in the LOTR (or the Silmarillion, for that matter). Tolkien wrote that religion was “wholly sublimated into the Story itself.” What did he mean by that?
27. In what ways have the men of Gondor declined into Men of Twilight? (364)
28. The crown of flowers on the head of the king's statue introduces a note of hopefulness (“They cannot conquer forever.” 874/395) Is this consistent with Tolkien's embracing of Nordic courage without hope? Can't “they” conquer forever, for all that Frodo knows?
29. The light of Minas Morgul is described as a “corpse-light, a light that illuminated nothing.” (876/396) How is this possible?
30. Frodo again confronts a temptation to put on the Ring (pp. 879-80/400-1), as he did in the Shire (when first encountering the Dark Riders), possibly in the Inn of the Prancing Pony, on Weathertop, and on Amon Hen. Why was there now “no answer to that command in his own will”?
31. How does it make a difference to Frodo and Sam to realize that they are part of a “great tale”? Sam describes Beren as going “on past happiness and into grief and beyond it.” (p. 886/408) What does this mean?

32. Is Frodo right in saying that Gollum is not “altogether wicked”? How close does Gollum come to being reformed? (p. 860, 889-890/409-411) Is he fated to fall back into wickedness? If so, can he be held responsible? Is Sam responsible for Gollum’s relapse?
33. What “other voice” is speaking through Frodo and Sam in Cirith Ungol? (p. 896, 908/418, 430)
34. Why is Shelob cowed at last by the combination of light and Elvish words? (908/431) Why does Tolkien write that it was “as if his (Sam’s) spirit had set its potency into motion”? Did it do so? If so, how?
35. Did Sam err morally in leaving Frodo? 922 (Contrast Sam’s treatment of Frodo’s “corpse” with Aragorn’s treatment of Boromir.)
36. Note that even the orcs retain some notion of right/wrong – they hold the “Big Fellow” in contempt for abandoning his companion (“a regular elvish trick”). (921/443)

Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Books IV and V)

1. How does Boethius go about demonstrating that evil is a form of powerlessness? How is this connected with his claim that “evil is nothing”?
2. Why is it impossible to turn willingly and knowingly from goodness to vice? What does Boethius mean by saying that the wicked don’t “exist”? Compare Boethius’s position with Tolkien’s treatment of Morgoth/Melkor, Sauron, the Ringwraiths.
3. How are the wicked in LOTR victims of ignorance? How are they dominated by their own passions and desires? Conversely, how do desires, pleasures and knowledge function in the virtuous characters? Do the characters draw strength or wisdom from the right ordering of their desires?
4. “A thing exists when it keeps its proper place and preserves its own nature. Anything which departs from this ceases to exist, because its existence depends on the preservation of its nature.” How is this illustrated in Tolkien’s world? Discuss also the Boethian claim that the wicked cease to be fully human, sinking to an animal level.
5. Boethius describes evil as an “infection.” Is this consistent with his claim that evil is “nothing”? Relate this to the influence of the Ring on its bearers, and to the capacity of Morgoth & Sauron to corrupt others to their service.
6. Boethius suggests that just punishment is good for the wicked, tending to mitigate their unhappiness, even apart from its tendency to correct or to deter. Does this make any sense? How does just punishment affect characters in the Silmarillion or LOTR?
7. Philosophy says that it is “desolate to desire evil things, and even worse to have the power to attain them.” How is this illustrated in the LOTR? Why do so many evil characters have a love/hate relation to the objects of desire (the Silmarils, the Ring)?
8. Boethius also suggests that death is a mercy for the wicked, since the longer they live, the more unhappy they are. How is this illustrated in the LOTR? In what way does deathlessness function as a curse?
11. “Among wise men there is no place at all for hatred.” (109) Why? How is this principle embodied in the LOTR, Silmarillion?
12. Philosophy associates oneness and unity with the Good, and disintegration and disharmony with badness. Is this theme echoed in Tolkien’s works?
13. Philosophy claims that God uses evil people as His instruments, drawing good from their wicked deeds. (p. 119) Do we find cases of this in the Silmarillion or LOTR?

14. How significant is Boethius's claim that God is a "spectator" of our use of free will? Is this compatible with God's sovereign control of the details of history?
15. Could Boethius's theory be used to explain the many apparent cases of prevision of the future in Tolkien's world? Why or why not?