

## 9 Virtue and Vice in The Lord of the Rings

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In an epic tale of good and evil such as *The Lord of the Rings*, it is a virtual necessity that the characters representing good and evil can be identified as such by the reader. One way for them to be identified is through their actions. Another is through the character traits from which those actions proceed. There may be different literary reasons for preferring one approach to the other, but when the characters are given personalities that exhibit virtues or vices, the moral lesson is clearer. The lesson is clearer because right actions may be performed for wrong reasons, or, alternatively, wrongful acts may be performed for the right reasons. So just looking at what people *do* may be less morally instructive than considering who they *are*.

The school of ethical theory that treats character as primary, and as the proper focus of inquiry over actions, is known as "virtue ethics." Its chief intellectual source is the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle,<sup>1</sup> whose theory stands in stark contrast to those of later figures such as Kant or Mill, who stress other factors such as duty or consequence. By way of analyzing the virtues and vices of several characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, I intend to argue for virtue ethics over its competitors and explore some possible problems with the theory. In particular,

<sup>1</sup> Chiefly in *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985).

the process of moral corruption, which of course figures prominently in the novel, will be especially instructive in our account of the virtues and vices and what produces them.

Aristotle's account of virtues and vices is developmental. The primary focus of his account is on what we need to do in order to *become* virtuous. But the concept of "becoming virtuous" seems to imply the corresponding idea of "becoming vicious." That is, just as certain habits of thought and action tend to move our characters in one direction, towards states Aristotle calls virtues, other habits of thought and action may move our characters in the other direction (two other directions, to be precise), towards states he calls vices. Let us begin, then, with an examination of precisely how he thinks this works. I shall illustrate with examples from *The Lord of the Rings*.

### Developing Good Character

For Aristotle, moral virtues are states of character one develops which, as they become more integral to one's being, help one to lead a happier, more fulfilled life. This means that we should not make lists of good or bad actions, or try to formulate general principles that allow of no exceptions. The point is that actions proceed from one's character, so it's most useful to develop good character. For example, a simple rule like "don't kill anyone" seems to admit of too many exceptions to be a genuine moral rule. If nothing else, killing in self-defense seems morally permissible. Other possible exceptions might include killing those who would kill or enslave millions. (It would seem morally permissible, if it were possible, to kill Sauron, just as many have argued that it would have been a moral good if the assassination plot against Hitler had succeeded.) Of course, it may be the case that we should generally refrain from killing, or that we should take killing as something that requires strong justification. But how would one tell the difference between these? The point of the virtue-ethics approach is that the person who has cultivated good character is able to figure out when killing would be justifiable and when it would not. What Aristotle calls "practical reason" is a key component of moral wisdom.

Practical reason is not the same thing as experience, but one's ability to learn from experience is part of how practical reason contributes to the development of virtues. In Aristotle's

theory, reason operates at two levels. First, reason tells me how to achieve a value or accomplish a goal efficiently, given any goal I might have. But reason can also tell me whether I should have the goals I have in the first place. For example, if I desire to destroy a certain Ring that can't be destroyed by other means, reason can tell me that I ought to toss it into Mount Doom. But reason can also judge whether the desire to destroy the Ring is one that helps me live a better life overall, which seems to be the case for Tolkien's protagonists. Reason can judge the worthiness of a goal only with reference to a predominant goal. In other words, this or that value is good for me to have only if its pursuit is conducive to my overall primary value. On the Aristotelian view, there is such an overall predominant value: life, or more specifically, a flourishing or good life. One *naturally* desires to live a good life, and other desires must be shown to aid, not hinder, that larger goal.

That is why, for instance, there is disagreement at the Council of Elrond. It's a factual matter that the Ring can only be destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom. Simple calculative reasoning thus yields the conclusion, "If we want to destroy it, we must toss it into Mount Doom." The debate is over whether they *ought* to want to destroy it, as opposed to using its power for good. It's true that the Ring would give great power to its user, but as Gandalf and Elrond point out, this power is corrupting, so in a struggle of good versus evil, it's actually counter-productive to use the Ring.

The other use of reason is in deducing the proper course of action in a given situation. Aristotle recommends striving for the mean between extremes. Courage, for example, is said to be not only different from cowardice, but also from a rash *faux*-bravery. In other words, while cowardice is a vice, so is total fearlessness. The person who claims to be unafraid of *anything* is surely mistaken about the way the world works. (Hence Strider's claim, in Peter Jackson's film version, that the hobbits are "not frightened enough.") One has ample reason to fear, say, angry grizzly bears, or the Nazgûl. Also, one must temper one's bravery with a prudent consideration of the circumstances—taking a foolish risk may look brave, but if it makes the situation worse, it's hardly virtuous. Aristotle says that one must learn how to be virtuous by performing virtuous acts. Hence virtuous character is something that is developed rather than simply given or chosen.

A crucial factor in this model of self-development is the discovery and emulation of proper role models. The *phronemos*, or person of practical wisdom, is someone to be observed and learned from. Such a person is not the same as a teacher, for one cannot teach virtues the way one teaches the alphabet. To learn swordplay, one must study the fundamentals, observe good swordplay technique, and of course practice. To learn virtue, one must study the fundamentals (for instance, the need for moderation between extremes), observe those who live well, and practice. The difficulty here, of course, is that distinguishing which of the candidates for role models are genuinely good seems to presuppose that one is sophisticated enough to do so. In other words, if I were smart enough to know who is a good role model, I wouldn't need a role model. But this is less a flaw in the theory than it is a reminder about the developmental nature of virtue and the importance of practical reason. Could one come to the conclusion that Saruman would be a good role model? It is said that everyone listens to him in councils. But it turns out that this is due more to tricks of persuasion than to the soundness of his arguments. He certainly *seems* successful, being a powerful wizard (indeed, the chief of wizards, according to Gandalf) with a mighty fortress. But being powerful is not the same thing as living well. As Galadriel, Gandalf, and several others point out, attaining power in certain ways is actually destructive to the soul.<sup>2</sup>

It's possible that only someone already predisposed to vice would identify a vicious character as a role model, because there is a natural affinity of the virtuous for other virtuous people. While there may be such an affinity, that would not explain deception. The fact of the matter is that a vicious person can sometimes deceive others into thinking that he or she is virtuous. An obvious example might be Wormtongue's corruption of Théoden. Théoden did not heed the counsel of Wormtongue out of vice, but because he had been deceived. (Why anyone would listen to the counsel of someone named "Wormtongue" remains a mystery.) But in other cases it seems as though one

<sup>2</sup> Complicating matters is the fact that Saruman is not a human but a wizard. The conditions for living a good life may be different for humans and other species. But on the other hand, even other wizards seem to think that Saruman has misjudged the nature of his own good.

must be at least partially complicit in one's own deception, as suggested by clichés such as “I only saw what I wanted to see” or “I was weak.” People sometimes say they “let themselves be deceived,” thus implying partial responsibility for the error. In any event, the *phronemos* or role model is someone that Aristotle claims is helpful in coming to understand virtue, not a necessary condition. So these sorts of psychological puzzles are not by themselves hindrances to accepting this model. The key thing is the use of practical reason for the purpose of developing good character.

### The Characters of Middle-earth

Tolkien seems to think that the hobbits are successful in part because they have good characters.<sup>3</sup> Although there are vicious hobbits, for the most part hobbit culture is portrayed as remarkably healthy and decent. The fundamental good nature of the hobbits is partly why Frodo is able to resist, for the most part, the temptation of corruption offered by the Ring. But can hobbits be described as virtuous? Given the central role of moderation in virtue theory, that's not implausible. They eat more meals than humans do, but relative to their eating habits, they still have a concept of “overdoing it.” They seem not to go in for overly ostentatious displays. They recognize the concepts of honesty and laziness, politeness and selfishness, courage and injustice. Thus, they do think in terms of virtues and vices, even if their conception of them may differ from those of humans.

Having the right idea for the wrong reason is only minimally praiseworthy. So if someone is loyal only because he has always been told that loyalty is good, and he never questions it, it's not clear that that person is virtuous, even though we often describe loyalty as a virtue. Indeed, if the object of the person's loyalty is itself evil, we might criticize rather than praise this trait. Wormtongue's loyalty to Saruman is not morally praiseworthy. But if loyalty is only virtuous when the object of one's loyalty is

<sup>3</sup> While hobbits are not humans, they are sufficiently like humans that a lot of the same theories of the good life would apply. Elves, by contrast, are strikingly dissimilar to both humans and hobbits. But Aristotle's ethics, like almost everything else in philosophy, is meant for humans, so I will not speculate on what Aristotle might say is the good life for an elf.

itself good, this means that, to be virtuous, one must have the ability to make critical judgments about moral value and steer one's loyalties in the right direction.

Is Sam's deep loyalty to Frodo therefore an example of virtue? I think it is. Some have argued that Sam is a country bumpkin figure, the simple-but-decent sort. But that criticism misses the fundamental nature of their friendship. Sam is a friend to Frodo *because* he recognizes that Frodo is himself good, and thus worthy of Sam's loyalty. So, too, with the friendship and loyalty shown by Merry and Pippin. The hobbits' unshakable loyalty to each other is based on their shared conception of what is good and right.

Sméagol is an interesting case. It turns out that the creature called “Gollum” was once a hobbit, now sadly transformed by the power of the Ring. But the first step in his corruption was the murder of his friend, Déagol (FR, p. 58). Even if we stipulate that the Ring's power was at work, it could not literally compel him to commit murder. The Ring had been in his presence for mere moments, so we cannot account for this in terms of his having been transformed. He must have already been somewhat greedy and malicious for the Ring to have had this effect on him. The Ring has the power to corrupt, but some individuals are harder to corrupt than others. Sméagol is the most obvious case, since he murdered his friend so soon after being exposed to the Ring. We may contrast that with Bilbo's brief flashes of corruption. After possessing the Ring for sixty years, Bilbo has only one or two passing moments of darkness, and can be quickly brought back to his senses. After merely seeing the Ring, Sméagol murders his friend. So the Ring's power seems partly to be contingent upon people's character. Bilbo and Frodo are more virtuous even after coming into contact with the Ring than Sméagol was before finding it. This lends support to the view that as one practices habits of thought and action that produce virtues, one becomes more virtuous; one finds virtuous action easier. That is another sense in which reason is “practical”: for the virtuous person, reflection on past experience produces changes in character, but the changed character responds differently to new experiences.

We may also usefully contrast Aragorn and Boromir. Whereas Aragorn recognizes the corrupting power of the Ring, and hopes to defeat Sauron without it, Boromir covets the Ring. Unlike the

case of Sméagol, this is not due to a malicious nature. Boromir simply thinks that a powerful tool in the hands of a good man would be used only for good, and would not lead to moral corruption. He realizes too late that this is a misjudgment. This indicates that while Boromir is less practically wise than Aragorn, he may still be fundamentally of a decent nature.<sup>4</sup> But isn't it the case that Boromir has other traits that may have contributed to his downfall? For example, he is resentful of Aragorn's reappearance, angered that the Council of Elrond did not heed his recommendations, and perhaps embittered by the suffering inflicted on Gondor by Sauron. Resentfulness, bitterness, and pride are vices that can make one fall prey to a corrupting force, even if one is basically a good person. By contrast, if anyone has cause to be resentful, it is Aragorn, who ought to be king but has had to live in exile. But he isn't resentful or embittered. He remains temperate and just and magnanimous. Also, importantly, he heeds the counsel of those he recognizes as being wiser, unlike Boromir, who refuses to acknowledge that he could be mistaken. Aristotle specifically singles out for criticism this variety of stubbornness, quoting Hesiod: "He who grasps everything himself is best of all; he is noble also who listens to one who has spoken well; but he who neither grasps it himself nor takes to heart what he hears from another is a useless man."<sup>5</sup> Hence Boromir is a tragic figure, but not an evil one.

If Boromir is flawed but not malicious, then presumably characters in the novel that are clearly presented as evil, chiefly Sauron and Saruman, must bear a greater responsibility for their vices than Boromir does for his. This raises a larger question about how responsible we are for the characters we develop. It's not clear, on this analysis, why we would regard Boromir as a fundamentally good character *despite* his vices, while regarding Saruman or Sméagol as evil characters *because* of their vices. One answer might be that the total lack of virtue exhibited by

Saruman and Sméagol is evidence of a fundamentally malicious nature, which is not in evidence in the case of Boromir, who is striving for justice even if he fails to see how best to achieve it. Saruman is seeking domination, not justice. Sméagol, on a lesser scale, is sufficiently greedy that he murders his friend to possess the Ring. He is to some extent victimized by the Ring's corrupting influence, but he bears some responsibility for his predicament because it seems he had a vicious character prior to possessing the Ring.

### Virtue Ethics in Perspective

The contrast between virtue ethics and other ethical theories is clear here. Simply following a list of rules, such as Kant recommends, cannot account for the role of practical wisdom in developing virtue, in learning how to be good. To the Kantian, morality consists in acting on rules or duties that are said to be universally binding and without exception. Lying, for instance, is forbidden regardless of the consequences. That would mean, first of all, that one would have a moral obligation to speak truthfully to Saruman, or to inquiring Black Riders. But it would also mean that one's ability to use reason would be of no special value—Sam's or to Aragorn's loyalty to Frodo would be no more or less praiseworthy than the Ringwraiths' loyalty to Sauron. Kant says that acts are morally right only if they are performed from a good will.<sup>6</sup> There is little emphasis on developing good character, because on this view, one must already possess good character in order to act morally. That seems like a moral theory suited for the High-elves, who, though corruptible, seem to be *naturally* good, but for hobbits and humans (our ultimate concern), the idea of moral self-development demands that we take seriously our flawed nature. We are capable of becoming better or worse through our dispositions and choices, and while our dispositions color our choices, our choices can alter our dispositions.

Utilitarianism, too, fails to take seriously the role of character in moral choice. Indeed, to elevate "the greatest good for the

<sup>4</sup> It doesn't help to note that Boromir is less wise than Gandalf or Galadriel, whose refusals to accept the Ring are informed by magical foresight. Aragorn is capable of discerning this with lesser powers, and is thus a more relevant comparison.

<sup>5</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 336–340, quoted in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 6–7, 1095b10.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, third edition, translated by James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 7–8.

greatest number" to the level of ultimate moral principle is to obviate any discussion of good character, for my motivations would play no role in an assessment of my actions. According to utilitarianism, motivations are unimportant: only consequences have moral weight, and an act is morally right only if it brings about the greatest good for the greatest number.<sup>7</sup> Hence, consideration of a person's character is irrelevant, and we need only determine whether the outcome is desirable in order to discern whether the act was morally good. While there is some intuitive appeal to considering the end results, this can also lead one to conclude that "the ends justify the means," allowing an overall good outcome to stem from even murder or theft. Helping the Fellowship so I can get a cash reward is morally equivalent to helping them because it's the right thing to do. Utilitarianism also suffers from a structural flaw: in order to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number, I must be able to know the future consequences of my actions. This would seem to imply that those with magical foresight, like Galadriel, can behave morally, but Frodo and Aragorn cannot, because their deliberations about good consequences would generally be mere guesses. Since no one in the real world has Galadriel's powers of foresight, this cannot be a useful morality. Aristotle's virtue ethics, on the other hand, can operate in the presence of incomplete knowledge, partly because it focuses moral evaluation on actors, not acts. A person is, or becomes, virtuous *despite* having an incomplete understanding of the future, as a result of moral self-training.

Living a life, then, in which one is actively seeking justice and self-improvement, seems to be a necessary part of the way practical reason is supposed to work, as opposed to living a life devoted to power and domination. On this view, no list of rules will be sufficient. Recognizing that ethics is too complicated to be reduced to any short list of moral rules, virtue ethics offers no simple procedure for making moral choices. Instead, it offers a broad framework for thinking about ethical issues and responsibilities. It urges us to focus, first, on the ultimate goal of human striving: to flourish as happy, fulfilled human beings. It then asks

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York: Hafner, 1948), pp. 1–4; and John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979), pp. 6–26.

what virtues or admirable traits of character we need to achieve that flourishing or fulfillment. The endeavor to form good character through practical reason is not a certain path to the well-lived life, but it seems to be the most likely strategy. If one can orient oneself towards these virtues, one can seek to act in ways that promote them. As Tolkien reminds us, this is the best insurance against corruption and destruction.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Eric Bronson and Gregory Bassham for suggesting several useful clarifications and emendations to this essay.