

Of Magic and Machines: When Saving Labor Isn't Worth It

BY JONATHAN SANDS WISE

At the heart of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is a conflict between two visions of good work: one worships efficiency and dominates the world; the other patiently draws out the inherent goodness within creation.

Though it is easy to miss, one of the central conflicts at the heart of J. R. R. Tolkien's epic fantasy *The Lord of the Rings* is between two visions of how and why we work. On the one hand, the evil and powerful villains Sauron and Saruman seek to dominate the world and more efficiently recreate it in their own image; opposing them stands the humble wizard Gandalf, who uses persuasion and encouragement to bring out the potential inherent in the world and in others, and so makes them what they ought to be.

In his own work as an author, Tolkien appears to be dedicated to this latter view of work as an art of gentle persuasion: after all, he chooses to write fantasy literature where God only shines through the occasional crack in the narrative rather than craft allegories that bluntly express his Christian faith. Yet there is no doubt that his writing is thoroughly Christian in its motivation, its understanding of reality as God's creation, and most to the point here, its perspective on the proper end and methods of work.

To the extent that there is an "argument" running through all of J. R. R. Tolkien's creative writings, we might reasonably say it is this: the vision of work exemplified by Gandalf, the good elves and dwarves, and most especially the hobbits is the correct view, and we must avoid the worship of efficiency and technology, of magic and machines, which dominates in Sauron and Saruman.

THE FALL, MORTALITY, AND THE MACHINE

Knowing as we do today the immense popularity and commercial success of *The Lord of the Rings* and its spinoffs, it is hard for us to imagine the great difficulty Tolkien faced in getting his masterpiece published. Even though his children's story *The Hobbit* (1936) had been surprisingly popular, prompting the firm of George Allen & Unwin to press him to write a sequel for adults, the publisher balked at the length of *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien's desire to publish it together with *The Silmarillion*. In an important letter written to encourage an editor at the rival firm William Collins, Sons, to publish the manuscripts together, Tolkien explains how all of his work ("all this stuff," he actually writes) is ultimately concerned with "Fall, Mortality, and the Machine." Mortality causes us to fear that our work will remain incomplete, while the Fall causes us to cling to our work as if it is our own and solely under our control. After the Fall and due to our attendant mortality comes the deceptive lure of magic and machines:

[T]he sub-creator wishes to be the Lord and God of his private creation.... Both [the Fall and Mortality] (alone or together) will lead to the desire for Power, for making the will more quickly effective, — and so to the Machine (or Magic). By the last I intend all use of external plans or devices (apparatus) instead of developments of the inherent powers or talents — or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating: bulldozing the real world, or coercing other wills. The Machine is our more obvious modern form though more closely related to Magic than is usually recognized.

Tolkien is not exaggerating: these are the central themes in all of his works. "The Enemy in successive forms," he says later, referring primarily to the Satan-like characters of Morgoth and Sauron, but also to all of Satan's other manifestations, including in the actual world, "is always 'naturally' concerned with sheer Domination, and so the Lord of magic and machines."¹

Since Tolkien's fictional works are far too expansive and complex to trace this theme through each part of them, I will point to only a few salient occurrences. As you become familiar with his narratives, you can identify many more episodes that explore his fundamental insight.

Let's begin with *The Silmarillion*, his backstory to the mythology of Middle Earth, in which the Valar (higher angel-like creatures) join in the song of God in a grand symphony. Unbeknownst to them, in this music they are by God's grace bringing the world into being: the world is the concrete manifestation of the music they have sung. This includes the dissonant chords sung by the Satanic figure of Morgoth, who tries to control and subvert the music by his will, dragging many of the other singers with him. This discordant singing is the original source of evil in the world, just as all later attempts by creatures to create in their own image, rather than sub-create in the image of God, are the root of subsequent evils. Tolkien beautifully notes

that God's music always reincorporates Morgoth's attempts at rebellion, and is made more beautiful (if sadder) by it.²

Tolkien develops this distinction between the activities of creating and sub-creating in "On Fairy Stories," an essay in which he defends writing fantasy. Fantasy, he says, is a particular form of Art, which he defines as "the operative link between Imagination and the final result, Sub-creation."³ Art, in other words, is the activity that turns what we see in our minds into what we can see and hold in the world, and fantasy is that form of art that results in fantastical sub-creations. These are not creations proper, but sub-creations: only God can create, making what is genuinely new out of nothing, but we in proper imitation can bring into being sub-creations out of the primary world that exists around us, because we are created in the image of God.⁴

Evil arises when we try to create (to make things on our own) or to control the things we have sub-created. Fantasy, in making a complete secondary world with its own internal logic, is the embodiment of our universal "desire for a living, realized sub-creative art, which (however much it may outwardly resemble it) is inwardly wholly different from the greed for self-centred power which is the mark of the mere Magician," for it seeks "shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves."⁵ To use more traditional theological language, the central source of evil in all creatures is disordered pride, or a desire to be like God, which led to the fall of Adam and Eve.

This same distorted pride appears in *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, which revolve around created objects whose creators try to control and possess what they have created, refusing to share their goodness to the benefit of others or even of themselves. For instance, while Fëanor's creation of the beautiful jewels called the Silmarils is good, his refusal to sacrifice the light of the jewels to give light for all the world (after

Morgoth has destroyed the trees of light) leads to the downfall of much of the Elven race.⁶ Likewise, the Arkenstone in *The Hobbit* and the rings of power in *The Lord of the Rings* are good (with the possible exception of the one ring, which exists solely to dominate), but too often their possessors try to dominate others rather than seeking the "shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves," as sub-creation should do.

Mortality causes us to fear that our work will remain incomplete, and the Fall causes us to cling to our work as if it is our own and solely under our control. After the Fall and due to our attendant mortality comes the lure to magic and machines.

The prime example of pride-distorted work comes in Saruman, the evil wizard of *The Lord of the Rings*. His chief ability as a wizard is to convince others with his voice, even against what they previously believed to be the case. With such power of persuasion, Saruman takes virtual control of Rohan's king and raises an army to dominate all around him in order to gain the Ring of Power for himself. In a central scene, Saruman tries to convince Gandalf to join with

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him by appealing to the good that they might accomplish if they rule the world together. "But we must have power," Saruman continues, "power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see." Saruman suggests that whether they work with Sauron or grab the Ring of Power for themselves, he and Gandalf will then be able to achieve "Knowledge, Rule, Order; all the things we have so far striven in

vain to accomplish, hindered rather than helped by our weak or idle friends. There need not be, there would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means." Gandalf replies by demonstrating the emptiness of his claims: his offer that they will work together for this good is empty, because the kind of power that Saruman seeks, dominating power, can only be held by one person. To work with Saruman would really just mean to submit to either Sauron or Saruman. There is a further problem, too: Gandalf sees that to achieve the good in this way is impossible. You cannot achieve true knowledge, rule, or order by dominating others, but only by winning over and working with those to be ruled.⁷

Once great and wise, Saruman has become petty and power mad, more a tycoon of industry than a wicked wizard. As Treebeard, the wise Ent (a race of beings who most resemble trees), says of Saruman, "He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment." Saruman has dammed the stream, burned the forests, and even engaged in bioengineering by somehow combining Orcs and evil men to make the Uruk-hai, a race of Orc-like creatures that are larger and stronger and can move about by day.⁸

After the Ents, with an assist from the good wizard Gandalf, defeat Saruman completely, he makes his way to the Shire, the home of the hobbits, and becomes Sharkey. Once again, Saruman is bent on destroying the native goodness of the Shire, if only out of spite, and here his methods more

obviously parallel the world of technology that Tolkien felt encroaching on the English countryside. Old houses, well-suited to hobbits, are left empty, and old fields and gardens turn to waste and weeds, while trees are torn down to make way for roads, factories, and new, ugly houses that all look alike, or sometimes for no apparent reason at all.⁹ At first these changes seem to be due to possessiveness and a desire to do things more efficiently or faster, but in the end they appear to be waste and pollution for no purpose at all.¹⁰ The wizard who began by trying to help people using magic and machines ends by destroying everything of value for no apparent purpose at all.

When we begin to believe that good work is always efficient, our work changes us in vicious ways. We embrace magic and machines in an effort to have everything we want quickly and with less effort, we believe the world is ours to shape to our will, and perhaps most dangerous of all, we begin to *enjoy* shaping the world simply for the expression of our own power. In the draft of a letter to his friend and fellow novelist Naomi Mitchison, Tolkien explains:

The Enemy, or those who have become like him, go in for 'machinery' – with destructive and evil effects – because 'magicians,' who have become chiefly concerned to use *magia* for their own power would do so (do do so). The basic motive for *magia*...is immediacy: speed, reduction of labour, and reduction also to a minimum (or vanishing point) of the gap between the idea or desire and the result or effect.... Of course another factor then comes in, a moral or pathological one: the tyrants lose sight of objects, become cruel, and like smashing, hurting, and defiling as such.¹¹

It is not always good for us, weak and embodied creatures that we are, to achieve our ends without hard work.

It is not difficult to see why Tolkien, living as he did through the first great, mechanized wars in history, would be worried about what machines might do to us as they take over all of our work, from fighting to communicating to making art.¹² This pattern continues today. There is a direct line between our over-reliance on technology of all sorts, from smart phones to cars, and our inability to see or care about the sorts of human and environmental destruction that we sponsor by purchasing these commodities. When we can get anything we want at the press of a button, how can we have the time or care required to try to change an entire system of exploitation?

Even when we do try to work for others, we want our work to be efficient and machine-driven. We want to give our charitable dollars using a credit card and a website, we demand good business assurances that our donation will then be used efficiently to do the most good, and we want to ship tons of foods and supplies to meet a need. We fly in our well-digging machines to fix water problems and fly in our troops or drop bombs to fix security

problems. All of this looks sensible if we worship efficiency, but the sense is merely an illusion. As Gandalf pointed out to Saruman, when we try to do the good using power and efficiency, we often fail to achieve it at all. Flown in security too often leaves chaos; flown in supplies too often destroy local food systems, leaving them completely dependent on foreign aid; and the demand for efficiency in charity too often means that we purchase sweatshop supplies for people forced to work in sweatshops because their products are cheapest.

Here we see two visions of good work directly in contrast: good work as that which achieves the chosen end in the most efficient way possible, or good work as that which works with the nature of the material at hand to achieve an end that is good in itself. Magic and machines both depend on efficiency, on finding the shortest and most powerful path between will and accomplishment, but this is not the way of good work. Good work must be humble, driven by a truthful vision and love for the soil or wood, student or neighborhood, upon which it works; and the good worker does not work to serve herself, but instead serves the good of her work. In short, good work makes something good *for us*, and also makes someone good *of us*.

GOOD WORK

When we think of hobbits, most people think immediately of their diminutive size, but this is not what Tolkien emphasized about them. In fact, in his description of hobbits in the introduction to *The Lord of the Rings*, their size does not come up until the second paragraph. Far more important is their approach to life:

[Hobbits] love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favourite haunt. They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skillful with tools.¹³

The most important thing to know about Hobbits, it would appear, is their agrarian love for good work and good earth, and their equal disinclination toward machines and magic.

The natural vices of hobbits are as small and parochial as their lives, largely taking the form of over-eating and of pettiness about difference or change. While there are clear exceptions, hobbits do not have a tendency toward pride, greed, or vainglory, which is key to why they can play the heroic roles they take on in both *The Hobbit*, where Bilbo is worried more about a good meal than about the Arkenstone, and in *The Lord of the Rings*, where Frodo resists the power of the Ring long beyond what anyone could have expected. It is because of their humility and earthiness that Gandalf loves the hobbits, while Sauron and Saruman are completely unaware of them at first, but disdainful of them later. This humility is key to their good

work as well: they know what they can do and they do not tend to aim too high, and so they do their work excellently and with great care.¹⁴

Gandalf shows the same humility. Each species in Middle Earth has its own particular temptation connected to Tolkien's primary themes of Mortality, Fall, and the Machine: Elves are tempted to resist all change, Dwarves are tempted to control and possess their own beautiful creations, and human beings are tempted to gain power over death. Wizards are tempted toward impatience, as Tolkien explains in a letter to an American reviewer, "leading to the desire to force others to their own good ends, and so inevitably at last to mere desire to make their own wills effective by any means. To this evil Saruman succumbed. Gandalf did not."¹⁵ By staying true to the hard, slow labor of persuasion rather than the efficiency of power through magic, Gandalf becomes a better person and achieves a great good. If, as we saw above, bad work makes us bad people and creates a bad product, so good work makes a good thing *for* us and makes good people *of* us.

Good work is done with humility, and so it is also done with a truthful vision. What separates Gandalf from Saruman is not simply his humility, but his love and appreciation for the people with whom he works. Saruman dismisses Aragorn and the elves as ancient relics and ignores the silly hobbits and slow Ents as having no power (for, after all, they have no magic or machines), but this is because he fails to see who and what they truly are. Good work must love the good of the work for its own sake, and so humbly serve it with patience and care. The true artist must be able to look at her work as a sub-creation, subordinate to God's work but still good in itself because we are created in God's image. Just as the effect of magic and machines is to teach us to dominate thoughtlessly, so the effect of good work done in service is to see and love the world around us better and so to love the creator more. We cannot make this world better on our own, but in service we can work with God to bring out its latent goodness, and only in this way can it truly be made better.

GRACE AND LOVING LEAVES

In his atypically allegorical "Leaf by Niggle," Tolkien adds one more point about the effect of good work: it can become part of God's work.¹⁶ Niggle is an artist in his own small way, though not a particularly good one, but he loves trees and spends his entire life trying to paint them. Unfortunately, he often gets so focused on his painting that he does not truly see his neighbors around him or their needs, though he sees those needs well enough that they prevent him from fully giving his time to his work either. In fact, he is constantly torn, working neither particularly well nor particularly to the benefit of his neighbors; he is, in British terminology, a niggler, one who wastes time on too many little projects.

One day, Niggle is sent off on a sudden journey with no warning (i.e., he dies) to a workhouse (i.e., purgatory) where he is slowly taught to simply

do the work at hand, whatever it may be, and to love that work for itself. After working himself sick, he is confined to bed and overhears a conversation among three voices (i.e., the Trinity), the second of which gives his life an incredibly gracious interpretation. Much emphasis is put by this second voice on the way that Niggle could love and paint a single leaf as it truly is. After this conversation, Niggle is allowed to go on toward the mountains, where he discovers the reality of the world that he was always trying to paint. Here is his tree, here his forest, and in the distance are his mountains, all as he imagined them and tried to capture them, and some that he never quite got around to imagining. Working with a former neighbor, Niggle finally finishes his work, making this land exactly what it should be in itself, as opposed to what he wants it to be, and then goes on into the mountains.

The delightful message of this parable is that whatever good work we do, however small and humble (in fact, being small and humble might be best), whatever work we do that sees and loves reality as it is and tries to bring it to completion through our hard labor and work, will be taken up in God's grace and made perfect. That work that we allow to flourish apart from our desire to dominate and control will indeed fully flourish, and that good that we have only imagined in our minds will at last become fully free and real in ways we cannot imagine and beyond what we can even desire. Work done with magic and machines, work that seeks to dominate and control, will die with us. But work done as humble and loving sub-creation, in patient labor, will be taken up by the true Creator and made part of eternity.

NOTES

1 J. R. R. Tolkien, Letter 131 (to Milton Waldman), in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), 145-146. William Collins, Sons, released *The Lord of the Rings* in three volumes in 1954-1955, but did not publish *The Silmarillion*. The latter was published posthumously by Tolkien's estate.

2 This story is recounted in "Of the Beginning of Days" in the Quenta Silmarillion in J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981).

3 J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 68.

4 Ibid. See especially the excerpt from his poem that Tolkien quotes on 74. The poem concludes with the claim that whatever fantastical inventions we might fill the world with, "—'twas our right / (used or misused). That right has not decayed: / we make still by the law in which we're made."

5 Ibid., 73-74.

6 This story is recounted over much of the Quenta Silmarillion, but primarily in "Of the Silmarils and the Unrest of the Noldor" and "Of the Flight of the Noldor," in *The Silmarillion*, 72-79, 86-102.

7 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991), 252-253.

8 Ibid., 462. Treebeard, the Ent, surmises that this is the origin of the Uruk-hai, though they might be ruined men instead. *The Lord of the Rings* film series directed by Peter

Jackson seems to have taken a hint from Treebeard.

9 Ibid., 981, 989.

10 Ibid., 990.

11 Tolkien, Letter 155 (to Naomi Mitchison [draft]), *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 200.

12 Tolkien, Letter 90 (to Christopher Tolkien), *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 111. In this letter to his son at the conclusion of World War II, Tolkien writes, "Well the first War of the Machines seems to be drawing to its final inconclusive chapter – leaving, alas, everyone the poorer, many bereaved or maimed and millions dead, and only one thing triumphant: the Machines."

13 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1.

14 Such provincial vices as the hobbits have may not tend to world domination, but Tolkien is well aware of their dangers nonetheless. Such vices as gluttony, gossip, and pettiness make us easy collaborators for those who would dominate the world, as we see in the Shire once Sharkey comes and finds help from some hobbits. Lotho and the other hobbits who cooperate with Sharkey are not themselves evil, but they are fools, and it is clear that Sharkey never could have taken over the Shire without their petty greed and the silly indecision of many other hobbits.

15 Tolkien, Letter 181 (to Michael Straight [drafts]), *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 237.

16 J. R. R. Tolkien, "Leaf by Niggle," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 100-120.



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