



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 Of Magic and Machines:
When Saving Labor Isn't
Worth It
(*Work*, pp. 33-41)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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

At the heart of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is the conflict between two visions of the true purpose and methods of work: one vision worships efficiency and dominates the world, while the other patiently draws out the inherent goodness within creation.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 90:1-2, 16-17

Meditation†

If human delight finds its model and goal in God's delighting in creation, so too human work finds its inspiration and fulfillment in God's own work of healing, restoring, strengthening, and maintaining the life of creation. Our work, if it is to be good, must line up sympathetically and harmoniously with God's.... Good work attempts, through various creative means and with the help of others, to honor and give thanks for the gifts we use and (too often wastefully) consume.

Norman Wirzba

Reflection

The psalmist humbly positions the achievements of human labor within the sphere of God's creative work (Psalm 90:1-2, 16-17). The relationship is not mechanical or magical, but prayerfully relational: "O prosper the work of our hands." Consonant with this perspective, J. R. R. Tolkien labels us – and the creatures in his imagined worlds – "sub-creators."

Running through Tolkien's fantasy novels is a conflict between two visions of what this means. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings* "the evil and powerful villains Sauron and Saruman seek to dominate the world and more efficiently recreate it in their own image," Jonathan Sands Wise notes, while "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 it what it ought to be."

"Evil arises when we try to create (to make things on our own) or control the things we have sub-created," Sands Wise explains. "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."

Such "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," Sands Wise writes. Thus, "Fëanor's creation of the beautiful jewels called the Silmarils is good, [but] 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. 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



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others rather than seeking the 'shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves,' as sub-creation should do."

The prideful characters in these narratives are lured to *magic* and *machines*. 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...."

While Tolkien's suspicion of speed and technology was shaped during "the first great, mechanized wars in history," Sands Wise fears the 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?"

Sands Wise concludes, "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*."

Study Questions

1. We tend to think *magic* and science-based *machines* are poles apart. What links between them does J. R. R. Tolkien see?
2. What does Tolkien mean by "sub-creation"? When is this proper and when is it sinfully prideful?
3. Distinguish the two visions of work that are in competition in Tolkien's fantasy novels. Which major characters act from each vision? What are some examples of people acting from each vision today?
4. Is there a proper role for work-saving technology in our homes and workplaces? For what spiritual dangers of using "machines" that we should remain alert?
5. How does Jeanie Miley's hymn "I Offer All I Am to You" reflect the psalmist's perspective on human labor?

Departing Hymn: "I Offer All I Am to You"

† Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 95.

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

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To identify the competition between two visions of work that is a central theme in J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy novels.
2. To understand Tolkien's concept of "sub-creation."
3. To consider how the lures of magic and machines are similar in their worship of efficiency.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Work (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. The departing hymn "I Offer All I Am to You" is located on p. 50 of *Work*.

Begin with a Story

"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," Jonathan Sands Wise writes. *The Hobbit* had sold very well, but now Tolkien was pressing to publish his long sequel trilogy together with *The Silmarillion*. His publisher balked. In a letter to a rival editor, Tolkien explains how all of his work revolves around "Fall, Mortality, and the Machine." Sands Wise explains, "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."

Following Tolkien's lead, Sands Wise explores how we are tempted to pursue efficiency at any cost, and why saving labor isn't always worthwhile.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide members to care for the creation in their daily work.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 90:1-2, 16-17 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study explores the meaning of good work through the fantasy novels of J. R. R. Tolkien. Group members who are familiar with Tolkien's writings or the spinoff movies will enjoy reviewing the example characters and events mentioned in Jonathan Sands Wise's article, and will be able to supply many more. Other group members will see this study as an invitation to explore Tolkien's fiction and its deeply Christian worldview. Together they should focus on Tolkien's understanding of good work and his warning about the temptation to idolize efficiency.

Study Questions

1. We distinguish the lures of magic and machines as inhabiting prescientific and modern worldviews respectively. Tolkien sees them as similarly prideful temptations to idolize efficiency, and allows them to relate in his fantasy world. Tolkien clarifies this connection in the letter quoted above in "Begin with a Story."
2. Jonathan Sands Wise explains that the various products of our work—our ideas, objects, organizations, and so on—"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." As sub-creators, we should honor and develop the good inherent in creation, and not control our products as though we are totally responsible for them, can do anything we please with them, and so on.
3. One vision is consonant with our status as sub-creators: instanced in characters like Gandalf and the noble hobbits, it "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." The other vision is infected with overweening pride: instanced in villains like Sauron and Saruman and the fallen/former hobbit Gollum, it seeks "to dominate the world and more efficiently recreate it in [our] own image." Members may discuss specific instances of these two visions of work motivating characters and shaping events in Tolkien's writings.

In our experience we can recognize work of the first sort because it is not selfishly motivated or blindly executed, but is sensitive to the true needs of others; it is not wasteful of resources or exploitive of others, but is sustainable and supportive of the community; and, as Tolkien emphasizes, it does not sacrifice the other goods of work on the altar of efficiency.

4. Saving labor is often a good thing, and employing technology to do this is appropriate when no other, greater goods must be sacrificed. However, there is often a tradeoff of goods when we use technology, and the goods we sacrifice may be hidden from our immediate view. We should consider the costs of the technology: the collateral damage to the environment of using it, the changes in relationships (with other people, creatures, and God) it may cause, the other things we must forgo in order to purchase and maintain the technology, the effects it will have on our craftsmanship, the sorts of desires it will engender, and on and on. Tolkien is worried that we will be so fascinated with saving labor that we neglect to consider the overall cost to ourselves, other people, and the environment.

This overweening concern for efficiency can be traced to a distorted desire to rework the world in our image at the snap of our fingers. That is, we want our machines to work magic.

5. Jeanie Miley's hymn "I Offer All I Am to You" is a prayer to God, gratefully offering ourselves and our work as gifts to the "Creator God," who is the Giver. Thus, our lives and labor acknowledge and imitate God's creative act. Verses 3-5 seek God's guidance to coordinate our work with God's work, God's assistance in doing the work we should do, and God's blessing/crowning of that work with good fruit.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.