
FANTASTICAL IDEALS

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All people are philosophers. What we believe, think, and feel about the substance and experience of life forms our comprehensive philosophy. The degree of thought we put into the differing subjects of “traditional” philosophy (metaphysics, epistemology and axiology) will determine whether we classify ourselves as professional philosophers, laypersons, or the uninitiated. Our beliefs are reflected in everything we do; nothing is untouched by them. How we choose a profession, read a book, eat a meal, or create a piece of art all follow a thread that leads back to what we believe, think, and feel that the world and life *really* is, an undergirding metaphysic.

It should not be surprising, then, that the books we read also contain assumptions, theories, and viewpoints about the essence of life. Writing, as with all art, is a breathing out, bit by bit, of one’s own life (intellect, beliefs, presuppositions, skill, and personality) and put on display. An author who accomplishes this task well is esteemed a master and lauded.

Besides mere conveyance of ideas, another important matter to address is how one communicates those ideas. In literature, the basic form of communication is obviously the written word. But words can be collected, molded into prose or poetry, and evaluated as formal, conversational, or aesthetically pleasing. Another way in which writing is categorized is genre. Genre in some measure defines what is and is not done in a narrative piece of writing. As a concept, genre is fairly simple, it can be defined as a comprehensive story structure, which can be repeatedly utilized with a degree of individuality. For example, in romance, generally, two persons fall in love and begin a

relationship. While in fantasy, often an adventure (of the quest variety) occurs in places and realities which we would deem fantastical (i.e., not found in reality as we empirically understand it).

The fantasy genre is where I would like now to turn our attention. Fantasy literature has many enthusiastic readers and in recent decades has achieved a lasting place in cultural appreciation. Today, we owe recognition to two authors who cultivated a widespread interest in fantasy: C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. Both authors were professors of Medieval literature and found inspiration in mythology and fairy-tales. Also, both Lewis and Tolkien operated from a Christian understanding of the world. The unique background of enthusiastic Medieval scholars and Christian imagination led to the production of two series, which have delighted millions of readers: *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

As I stated earlier, we are all philosophers and our philosophy makes its way into our art. In the case of Lewis and Tolkien, both writers created stories saturated with a Christian understanding of reality, steeped in Platonic tradition and utilizing the unique qualities of “the fantastic” to communicate what they believed to be essential to our world. Their works bring to life many aspects of their philosophy, giving personality, charm, and embodiment to the ideas by which they lived.

Before we move on to an examination of the ontological thought present in the work of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, there are two topics which deserve examination: the idea of Platonic Forms and Christian teaching. Both form an intellectual backdrop to the output of Lewis and Tolkien. As we shall see Platonic Forms and Christian doctrine are fundamental to what the reader receives in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

THE FORMS EXAMINED

Plato figures prominently in the history of Western metaphysical thought. He lived several hundred years before Christ and has influenced the entirety of Western culture, thought, and practice. Among his many important theories, the Forms are one of his most enduring legacies. Peter Kreeft, describing the theory of the Forms, writes,

. . . Ideas [of Forms] are not subjects of thought, not minds; they are objects of thought. But they are not material, spatial, or even temporal objects. For instance, in addition to tigers (material objects) and our subjective minds with their ideas of tigers, there is also Tigerness, the essence of tigers. In addition to rocks there is Rockiness. In addition to good swords and good lawyers and good arguments, there is Goodness itself—not just our ideas of goodness, but the true, objective, eternal, universal, unchangeable essence of goodness itself, which is dimly reflected or shared (“participated in”) in different ways by good swords and good lawyers and good arguments, and by our ideas of them.¹

At their core, the Forms are the root essences of all things. As Kreeft writes there is not only the creature that is the Tiger, but also the “Tigerness” of the tiger. The Forms are the summations and perfection of qualities, almost it seems, the personalities of things or their “spirit.” These immaterial forms are contained in the world, but are represented in all material things.

Important to Plato’s idea of the Forms is the understanding that Plato did not see them as flowing from the mind of God, but rather existing separate from and outside of God, yet informing the work of his creation (although Plato’s conception of God was different than the orthodox Christian understanding of God). Frederick Copleston, commenting on the separation of the Forms from the mind of God, writes,

In the *Timaeus* Plato clearly teaches that God or the “Demiurge” forms the things of this world according to the model of the Forms. This implies that the Forms or Ideas exist apart, not only from the sensible things that are modelled on them, but also from God, Who takes them as His model. They are there hanging in the air, as it were.²

The location of where the Forms are found is important. Orthodox Christian doctrine has many things which can agree with Plato’s idea of the Forms, but on the origin and location of the Forms it differs.

1 Peter J. Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind The Lord of the Rings* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 40-41.

2 Frederick Copleston, *Greece and Rome*, vol. 1 of *A History of Philosophy*. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1956), 167.

CHRISTIAN TEACHING EXAMINED

As we saw in Plato's ideas, the Forms are above all, removed from all and inform all. Although Christianity agrees with much of the concept of the Forms, the first area where it diverges is that Forms are not "out there" in the invisibles, but rather contained in the mind of God. Peter Kreeft says,

Plato never took the next step; he never said these perfect unchangeable ideas must exist in a perfect, unchangeable Mind. But when Christianity entered Greek culture, it supplied the metaphysical house for Plato's Ideas: the Mind of God, the Word of God, the Logos. . . . Platonic Ideas vastly expand our vision of what is real by adding the world outside the cave, the Mind of God, the realm of Ideas, and also by transforming this material world into a world of *signs*, not just things. If Plato is right, everything we see is a shadow, copy, image, imitation, or sign of something unseen.³

The concept of Forms being found in the mind of God makes sense in view of the biblical doctrine of creation. If God was the sole One before anything else was made, then all things as were conceptualized in his mind. A right understanding of Christian doctrine informs us that the original intention for God's creation forms the basis of all future judgments regarding what we see about us today.

Christian teaching also agrees with Plato on the separation of the Forms. For Plato there is distance between the Forms and us on earth. In order to obtain the Forms in a personal way, according to Plato, earthly affairs must be shunned and undistracted attention given to seeking after the exalted world of the invisible.⁴

Plato realized that things are not wholly good on earth; there is genuine evil to be found. A separation occurred at some point between the perfect Ideals and where we are today. Many systems of thought agree with this belief in the imperfection of things as we know them presently. People seem to have an innate knowledge that things could be better. Where we

3 Kreeft, 41-42.

4 Plato, *Republic* in *Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997. 1133-1137.

believe this knowledge comes from and how we respond to it is informed by the system of beliefs we hold. For Plato, the answer to recapturing the Forms was to leave behind the material things of life and grasp after eternal realities.

Conservative Christianity also understands our current state as one of separation, of failing to attain what originally was meant to be. The Bible teaches about the Fall, when man sinned, became subject to death and was exposed to suffering. Because of this foundation of thought, we are not surprised by the evil we see in the world. We also are not surprised when we see good. Those who stand in the Augustinian tradition are comfortable in saying that evil was never created, but only “the privation of good.”⁵ Our world is fallen, but much goodness is left. Indeed, happily for us, a lot of goodness remains.

Christian writers have been aware of the reality of lingering goodness. Because we are creatures made in God’s image, and because we have an innate sense of goodness and evil, we still retain hopes and dreams about what we would like the world to be. In *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, Cornelius Plantinga says,

Every one of us does possess the *notion* of a world in which things are as they ought to be. Moreover, though we would stock this world and arrange its workings differently according to our varying ideas of what the Bible calls “good” . . . we would nonetheless agree on many of the broad outlines and main ingredients of a transformed world.⁶

We live with a sense of calamity, but we also live with hope, each day rising to do things we think will make our lives happier, better. This hope—that the world can be better—drives us to do what we do. We operate in the second of a three-stage process: things were better, now things are worse, and we hope and believe that one day everything thing will be better.

In *Echoes of Eden* Jerram Barrs explains the three phases of this condition,

5 Augustine, excerpt from *The City of God*, in *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*, ed. Mark Larrimore (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2001), 56.

6 Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 11.

All over the world there is a sense that our present life in this world is one of having lost our way from our original dwelling place, a place that was better and more beautiful than the place in which people now live.

All over the world there is the knowledge that our present condition is one of alienation and rebellion, that we are not all we should be, that there is brokenness and tragedy in all of human life.

All over the world there is a longing for this brokenness to be set right, and there is the hope for a redeemer. Some of these elements of the biblical story are present in almost every nation's story about the past.⁷

Barrs understands the three phases as an understanding springing from biblical teaching. How we think about the ideals, reality, and the ultimate issues all people face is communicated in what we create. For professors C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, their thoughts found substance in the faraway lands of the fantastical.

FANTASY WRITING EXAMINED

J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis made worlds that were permeated with a Christian understanding of reality and used the unique genre of fantasy to communicate Platonic ideas. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, thought carefully about the realities of our world. In a letter written to his son, Christopher, in 1945, Tolkien speaks of the vestigial realities of a post-Edenic world:

Certainly there was an Eden on this very unhappy earth. We all long for it, and we are constantly glimpsing it: our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most humane, is still soaked with the sense of 'exile'. . . . As far as we can go back the nobler part of the human mind is filled with the thoughts of *sibb*, peace and goodwill, and with the thought of its *loss*. We shall never recover it, for that is not the way of repentance, which works spirally and not in a closed circle; we may recover something like it, but on a higher plane.⁸

7 Jerram Barrs, *Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and the Arts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 75.

8 J. R. R. Tolkien to Christopher Tolkien, Oxford, 30 January 1945, in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 110.

Understanding Tolkien's personal worldview is important to grasping what his art was about. Tolkien not only believed in the "three phase plan," but also sought to communicate it through his writings.

Tolkien and Lewis recognized a potential hidden in an apparently innocuous form of communication: the fairy-story or myth. A unique quality of the imagined world of fairy is that it may act as a magnifying glass to the existing but not easily examined realities of our world. When a "sub-creator" (to borrow a term from Tolkien) makes his own world, he may highlight the hidden aspects of reality and the Forms. In a lecture Tolkien gave at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland titled "On Fairy-stories," he says,

Fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting. For the story-maker who allows himself to be 'free with' Nature can be her lover not her slave. It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.⁹

Tolkien acknowledges something crucial to our study: it was in the imaginary that he began to understand the root realities of things. In the realms of the impossible, we can look with "unveiled-eye" upon things which we may but struggle to see in the usual world. We begin to behold the Forms. For Lewis and Tolkien, when a Form is given substance in a story, it can show the object possessing all the qualities we feel a thing should have. It is a literary nod toward the standards by which we judge.

Peter Kreeft, analyzing the Platonic tradition evident in Tolkien's work, (as well as Lewis') says,

In *The Lord of the Rings* everything seems to be more itself, more Platonic. The earth is more earthy, nature is more natural, the history is more historical, the genealogies more genealogical, the tragedy more tragic, the joy more joyful, the caverns more cavernous, the forest more foresty, and the heroes more heroic.¹⁰

9 J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. C. S. Lewis (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 75.

10 Kreeft, 45.

The ability to communicate the Forms in literature comes from taking the commonplace in our world and endowing it with as much personality and essence as we might a human character. The strength of the fantasy author is to actualize Ideals. This brings us closer to the world of the Forms than we might ever know. In the present world, the veil occasionally parts and we see for a moment something very much like Tolkien's world: perhaps a particularly gnarled tree or a bird which is not afraid to sit near us. In that moment we get a sense of things at their root essence. For much of the time however, realms like Middle-Earth must serve as our lights to the view the hidden Ideals.

Tolkien's work incarnated the invisible, making it almost touchable. Writing of the power to visualize the unseen, Tolkien said, "I might say that in my myth I have used 'subcreation' in a special way . . . to make visible and physical the effects of Sin or misused Free Will by men."¹¹ Although here speaking of personifying evil, Tolkien also brought to life many good things like Hobbits or Elves. Writing about the essence of the Elves, Tolkien explained, "Elves are certain aspects of Men and their talents and desires, incarnated in my little world. They have certain freedoms and powers we should like to have, and the beauty and peril and sorrow of the possession of these things is exhibited in them. . . ."¹²

Lewis approached the writing of fantasy differently than Tolkien. Tolkien, in contrast, was indirect in his worldview; disdaining overt allegory.¹³ He was extremely detailed, making notes upon notes, creating stories and back-history. Middle-Earth was his *magnum opus*. Lewis, however, operated on a simpler scale. Yet he, like Tolkien, communicated the same kernels of reality through what he wrote.

Lewis thought that the story could be used as a means of sharing the essential elements of reality. In an essay called "On Stories," Lewis says, "The story does what no theorem can quite do. It may not be 'like real life' in the superficial sense: but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region."¹⁴ Here we see once more the Ideals contained in so much of Lewis' and Tolkien's thought and writing.

11 Tolkien to Peter Hastings, September 1945, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 195.

12 Tolkien to Hastings, 189.

13 One such reference to Tolkien's dislike of allegory appears in a letter he wrote to Milton Waldman, though other comments appear in his writing about his dislike of the literary form. Tolkien to Milton Waldman, 1951, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 145.

14 C. S. Lewis, "On Stories," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, 101.

In a letter to a young girl, Lewis described the effects the Forms had upon him through the writing of Tolkien:

[A Platonic myth] reminds you of something you can't quite place. I think the something is "the whole *quality* of life as we actually experience it." . . . I've never met Orcs or Ents or Elves—but [I have met] the feel of it, the sense of a huge past, of lowering danger, of heroic feats achieved by the most apparently unheroic people.¹⁵

We can say with Lewis, that we have felt "the feel of" many things, but it is in stories, music, or other art that we actually see them.

Lewis' concept of Ideals appeared at the heart of many of his non-fiction and fictional works. One of the best known examples of Platonic myth in Lewis's work comes in *The Last Battle*. At the end of the story characters are united and experience the new Narnia. Lewis's description shows the central role of the Ideals in his thinking:

"Those hills," said Lucy, "the nice woody ones and the blue ones behind – aren't they very like the southern border of Narnia?"

"Like!" cried Edmund after a moment's silence. "Why they're exactly like. Look, there's Mount Pire with his forked head, and there's the pass into Archenland and everything!"

"And yet they're not like," said Lucy. "They're different. They have more colours on them and they look further away than I remembered and they're more... more... oh, I don't know..."

"More like the real thing," said the Lord Digory softly.¹⁶

And again just a little further down,

"Listen, Peter [said Lord Digory]. When Aslan said you could never go back to Narnia, he meant the Narnia you were thinking of. But that was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of

15 C. S. Lewis to Lucy Barfield, 11 September 1958, in *Letters to Children*, Lyle W. Dorset and Marjorie Lamp Mead (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 81-82, quoted in Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien*, 47.

16 C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle, The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1956), 758-759.

the real Narnia which has always been here and always will be here: just as our own world, England and all, is only a shadow or copy of something in Aslan's real world. You need not mourn over Narnia, Lucy. All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia through the Door. And of course it is different; as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream."

"... It's all in Plato, all in Plato, bless me, what *do* they teach them at these schools?"¹⁷

In both these sections Lewis is communicating two things he longed for: the triumph of goodness—the world being set right again—and things in their Ideal forms. Everything is more itself in the new Narnia. At last, it has the chance to be so, for evil was done away with. Like Tolkien's Middle-Earth, Lewis' Narnia paints the world we want to join. By sharing a simple picture with words, Lewis communicates what is for many their core desires.

CONCLUSION

Stories afford an author a unique opportunity to share their passions. What is assumed about the world and what is believed make their way into writing. In the case of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, both authors took to the form of fantasy and crafted worlds of their own. Each author shared his values about life and in turn sought to bring alive those things which he loved. Through their works, and others like them, we can look behind the curtain of the visible world and get a glimpse of the realms beyond.

¹⁷ Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 759.

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