

10-1-2015

The Role of Realism and Idealism in Decision-Making: A Case Study of Tolkien's and Jackson's Ents and Elves

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A poster and paper completed for English 4610.

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Introduction

Attempting to fight Sauron without the Ring of Power is, of course, fruitless. Nearly all the characters in *the Lord of the Rings* understand this. While many readers debate the reasoning and logic behind sending Frodo and Sam alone into Mordor, few debate the reasoning for each specific race of Middle Earth to become involved in the fight against Sauron. Given Sauron's impeccability and resilience, any non-destruction-of-the-Ring attempt at defeating Sauron must categorically be deemed infeasible. It fails logic then that, with a few exceptions, each race that the reader encounters in *the Lord of the Rings* finds it necessary to commit themselves to the War of the Ring. Yet, each race does band together. Each race conceivably moves beyond its own self-interest to fight Sauron and the forces of evil and, ultimately, each race succeeds. For what reason however should the reader or viewer understand such decisions to be logical or wise? How can any casual observer be convinced that leaders would choose such an action again? J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books and Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films both imply different reasons with which we can evaluate these groups' decisions. This paper will evaluate the responses from both the books and the films. To evaluate the different responses and the reasons for such differences, this paper will look at case studies of both races that do choose to fight Sauron. Each case comparison will be analyzed in light of both books and movies. Further, the collective action problem that is fighting Sauron will be defined. Ultimately, the different case responses come as a result of the different contexts and reasons in which each medium was made.

Context

In order to understand why choosing to join together constitutes the logic of a simple collective-action problem, one must evaluate what the relative benefits would be for any nation to intervene in the War of the Ring. In doing so, a few simple assumptions must be made. The first assumption being that each independent nation-state or race perceives themselves to be in danger of Sauron's conquest and understands that even the combined forces of every race would not be able to stop Sauron without the Ring. In Jackson's *Return of the King (ROTK)* Denethor appears to believe this explaining to Gandalf and Pippin that "against the power arisen in the East, there is no victory!", Elrond admits at the Council of Elrond that neither him, nor Lórien or anyone really could stand up to Sauron in the end, and Gandalf, a Maiar demi-god, admits that only the Ring would give "surety of victory" and that Sauron the Black is greater still than Gandalf the White (3.5.489). The second assumption is that all parties involved do not have the Ring of Power and do not know the current status of the Ring of Power. After Frodo and Sam's departure from the Fellowship at Amon Hen their journey to Mount Doom occurs independently of actions taken by any nation-state or race. This can reasonably be conceived seeing as no communication exists between Frodo and Sam and even Gandalf, evidenced by Sam's surprise at seeing Gandalf the White alive in chapter IV of book VI (6.4.930). The last assumption is that for each case comparison involvement in the War of the Ring is likely to lead to their demise (or would lead more quickly to their demise). This assumption will be evaluated in each case comparison but by-and-large holds true.

Political scientists would find that absent any other causal mechanism the internal decision by each case comparison to participate in the War of the Ring violates the central concept of realism. If the central premise of realism is to pursue one's own security at the cost of

everything, then it seemingly fails logic for the Men of Rohan, the wildmen, the Noldor Elves and the Ents to risk their own lives or troops on behalf of others. For example, if Gondor had to divert troops to fight Sauron, then theoretically Rohan could invade parts of Gondor with fewer troops, gaining wealth or land and overall gaining power. Realists believe that power translates to greater security in most cases. It would be logical for nations like Rohan to believe that it would be in their own national security interests to support Gondor, however then that would imply that collectively Rohan and Gondor could fend off forces from Mordor *and* that the benefit of doing so would be *at least slightly better* than not supporting Gondor. Herein lies the burden of proof for a realist. Does the act of involving in each case comparison lead to a more desirable outcome? Are the costs of non-intervention greater than the costs of intervention?

Argument

The concept of realism cannot explain the entire picture. Tolkien is writing Manichean fiction after all in which the forces of good and the forces of evil must collide. Realists do not buy into the concept of good and evil as prognosticators of action, rather they solely focus on force and power. Clearly conceptual theories of good and evil dominate the legendarium. Orcs are twisted elves. Sauron is black; Gandalf is white. The good guys win; the bad guys lose.

Such easy categorization attracts viewers more efficiently than readers. By dulling down complexities into obvious ethical decisions viewers can find themselves morally invested in characters in a shorter period of time. One needs only to look at the success and range of superhero movies over the past few years to see the obvious profit Manichean movies brings. Jackson and Tolkien both evaluate the obligational duty of groups to band together and put off their own short-term self-interest. In Tolkien's legendarium the ents and elves evaluate this question by explaining further the long-term self-interest of each group. Because Tolkien's

legendarium ties the elves' to their consequences, the ents are more likely to be altruistic and take risks for the common good without a need to regard overall consequences. Jackson flips this recognizing that the Noldor Elves are perhaps the better empathizers for humans endowing them with altruism while giving the ents indifference until it affects them. This paper will evaluate this question through a case comparison of the Ents, and the Noldor Elves. To evaluate either case, this paper will look at what were the other options available *as they were available in the respective book or film* for each group and how the books and films portray this decision. For example, no commentary on the elves being expelled from Valinor will be made when discussing the reasoning for involvement in the films.

Case Studies

Noldor Elves:

In theory, the Noldor elves could remain content for a very long time. As discussed in the *Silmarillion*, the reader understands that Galadriel and Elrond's rings Nenyia and Vilya can "postpone the weariness of the world" (p. 288). It is feasible that the Noldor elves could in fact stave off the forces of Mordor for some time. If Sauron ever did take control of the Ring of Power, one can infer that in fact Lothlórien /Rivendell may fall overnight given that the Ring of Power has dominion over Nenyia and Vilya. Herein lies a problem however, for the only way for the Noldor elves to defeat Sauron is by destroying the Ring of Power and as the reader learns in the *Silmarillion*, the destruction of the Ring of Power would render Nenyia and Vilya useless, opening them up to the same weariness of the world which at the start of the *Lord of the Rings* gives the Noldor elves such sanctuary. The only way to maintain the present conditions then would be for Galadriel or Elrond to hide or hold on to the Ring of Power, thereby opening themselves up to corruption. In lieu of this, no other long-term survival solution seems available.

Adding to the complexity is elves' incomplete immortality. Being immortal though capable of death raises the costs of going to battle with Sauron for the elves. In order to raise the costs of non-intervention to a similar level, the Noldor elves would have to believe death or destruction imminent without intervention. Given elves' long lives, this point cannot be overstated. Without further knowledge of the path to Valinor from Arda, the reader and viewer may find no reason for the Noldor elves to risk their lives engaging in a War that ultimately forces them to wither and lose their land.

In the *Silmarillion* however the reader learns that the Valar god Mandos curses the Noldor elves with their own version of Man's Original Sin. Though not explicitly stated, Galadriel implies that the Noldor face a test before getting into Valinor. Galadriel puts her own short-term interest, obtaining the Ring of Power, behind her long-term self-interest, making her way back to Valinor. In essence, this priority shift faces all the Noldor. Though Galadriel turns down short-term consolidation of power, she still acts out of the long-term self-interest of the Noldor. While Galadriel's refusal of the Ring and the strategic planning of Elrond and other Noldor represent working together with other groups for the greater good, these actions alone do not constitute acting without self-interest. One complicating matter however is that, short of Fingolfin and Legolas, few elves actually fight in hand-to-hand combat in the novels. In both cases this paper observes the Noldor do exhibit self-interested behavior comparable to realism.

In the films, Peter Jackson portrays the elves' decision as much more altruistic, uniting for the good of the world so that Sauron and the forces of evil do not win. Jackson differs from the text in two ways to depict this different theme, with one omission and one addition, to depict this different theme. Omitting the Noldor's forbiddance to go to Valinor purposefully frames their advice as seemingly beyond solely a realist or self-interested perspective and instead as if

their plans for the War of the Ring are seemingly influenced by the divine for the betterment of Middle Earth. The second point of difference from the text comes at the scene of Helm's Deep. Differing from the novel *The Two Towers*, Jackson sends an army of Noldor elves from Lothlórien and Rivendell. When asked why the elves have come, Haldir, an elf the fellowship met earlier at Lothlórien, answers with idealist noble language, "Men and elves had an alliance long ago... we come to honor that alliance" (*Two Towers*). In the extended edition of the film, Jackson acknowledges in an interview that he included the elf army in this scene so that the film could see a visual depiction of the lengths at which the elves would sacrifice for Middle Earth (*The Two Towers Extended DVD*). The elves help to boost the morale of the battle though they otherwise do little to turn the tide of the fight. In an otherwise crumbling scene, the elves' procession onto the battlements is both beautiful and selfless. It should be noted that Jackson also likely uses the elves for a more practical purpose: to extend the battle scenes and lengthen a climactic event in the film, the Battle of Helm's Deep, (which in the books represents only a few pages). Jackson's use of cinematography creates light around all the elves giving an almost tangible representation of nobility. Such cinematography emphasizes Manichaeism as the glowing elves help the men fight against the dark and ugly orcs and Urak-Hai.

Tolkien and Jackson's Noldor elves accomplish the same purpose. Both depictions of the Noldor pursue the path to Valinor, both recognize Sauron as a threat, and both offer their skillsets as advisors to the Fellowship setting off. In the *LOTR* novels and the greater legendarium the Noldor have a larger telos than simply defeating Sauron. The Noldor need to beat back against the "decay of time" and, in order to do so, sail to Valinor after providing counsel for the War of the Ring. Jackson's Noldor elves do not provide the viewer with the same

reasoning. Instead the viewer feels uplifted, seeing the alliance of Haldir and Theodin's forces as reflecting the unity found between Legolas and Aragorn (and Gimli).

The differences between Tolkien's and Jackson's Noldor elves in each's depiction of *LOTR* exhibit differing levels of self-interest. During the legendarium, clearly the primary goal is to get back to a safe and secure Valinor; if the Noldor can save men from Sauron in the process, it is only a perk. Alternatively, Jackson's Noldor elves infer that their primary goal is to maintain a higher level of moral idealism and good faith towards men. Such attitudes feel dated yet welcomed by the men of Rohan. The audience then sees not the role of self-interest but rather sees the elf and elf society as that of a benevolent older brother full of grace, wisdom and, when necessary, loyalty.

Ents:

As the oldest living thing to have walked "beneath the Sun upon... Middle Earth" (3.5.488), Treebeard's prospects for the future seem increasingly dire at worst, and dull at best. The ents seem to represent a forgotten culture, unseen by many outside of Gandalf, and unable to reproduce after the loss of their entwives. Treebeard himself admits to being uninterested in the affairs of Sauron and the Ring of Power though he appears interested in every other part of the world and part of the Fellowship's journey thus far (3.4.460,461). Once convinced to take action Treebeard describes the march to Isengard as their "Last March" which is "likely enough that we are going to our doom" (3.4.475). Treebeard explains that he expects the ents would likely have faced doom "sooner or later". Given this notion of doom coming "sooner or later," why do Treebeard and the ents not elect for the "later" option and instead pursue their own goals of finding the entwives. Treebeard acknowledges that he would simply like to "see the entwives... [and] Fimbrelthil," his old love, before he meets his doom. The ents beg the question: why

involve themselves? In a war which Treebeard claims the ents are not on “anybody’s side” and with other definitive goals in front of them, the ents have great reason to defect from entering into a stag hunt¹ collective action problem in order to pursue their own objectives.

In Tolkien’s *Two Towers* the ents respond with deliberation and purposeful dialogue, such deliberation ultimately results in the ents taking a rationalist approach to their use of violence. For one, Treebeard gives off a pervading sense of mistrust towards Saruman. Treebeard practically rehearses realist theory when claiming that Saruman is a threat because “he is plotting to become a Power” (3.4.462). This understanding only comes after Treebeard first walks himself through his own logic, moving from Saruman “is a neighbor” to how orcs ended up in his woods to his final conclusion that he has been “idle” and that such violence against trees “must stop!” (3.4.461, 462, 463). As if not to move too quickly with such logic however, Treebeard admits he has been “hasty” and must now consult with the other ents. The ents seem to regard the democratic process so much so that they engage in a pseudo-parliament, called the Entmoot, to come to a decision. Tolkien does not provide insight into exactly what is said at the Entmoot but Tolkien scholar Matthew Dickerson provides a suggestion: “The recognition that inaction results in further harm... In the short term, it might seem safer for him [Treebeard] and the ents to hide in Fanghorn, as they have been doing for eons. By following that easy path, however, doom – the withering of all forests – is certain to find them” (Dickerson 2006). Dickerson’s suggestion seems to resonate with other Tolkien races on the fringe of joining the War of the Ring. The cost of nonintervention is almost always higher than the cost of intervening. Why choose to fight Saruman rather than pursue the entwines? Perhaps many reasons due to many factors, the takeaway point however is that the ents take a slow and

¹ For a brief description of Rousseau’s Stag Hunt Theory, check out the first section of Brian Skrim’s article “Stag Hunt”.

deliberative process to inevitably make a rational and quite realist conclusion about their best survival strategy.

Peter Jackson writes the ents' decision to go to war scene in the exact opposite way. Rather than show deliberation or rational thinking, Jackson instead writes the character of Pippin to trick Treebeard into feeling enraged towards Saruman. Such a decision has many facets. First, it enables one of our main characters, Pippin, to go from a ditsy airhead into a strategizing and empathetic figure. Such character development springs Pippin's development over the rest of the *LOTR* films. Next, the ents' hastiness, a dramatic role change, emphasizes to the viewer the sheer power of the ents' anger and sadness. The viewer then can translate this perceived anger into a belief that the ents do represent categorically "good" characters as opposed to the already categorically "bad" character, Saruman. Lastly, and perhaps most cynically, with a greater haste, Jackson can easily transition into the siege of Isengard scene. This scene can then boast its Computer Generated Imagery and violence to dazzle viewers. In all circumstances for this moment, Jackson uses the differences in reaction to craft a dramatically and visually appealing scene.

The differences in these two scenes inevitably come down to a difference between showing and telling. Tolkien can use page length to thoroughly investigate ent culture, values, and political structure. Jackson does not have the same luxury. Instead Jackson can best capitalize on long shots of Treebeards face, an original number for the scene, and shiny new CGI technology² to craft a completely stimulating scene.

Tolkien's ents reflect a different position than the Noldor elves. Treebeard's own suggestion of walking towards their "doom" implies the inevitability of the ents' disappearance

² For more on Peter Jackson's appreciation of the flexibility CGI gave him check out his interview with the Daily Beast titled " 'No Regrets': Peter Jackson says Goodbye to Middle Earth".

from the world. Is Treebeard correct? Perhaps the ents did die off after the Third Age, the reader does not know. Tolkien's ents are willing to operate outside of their own short and long-term interest. Operating outside of one's long-term self-interest may be easier when the consequences are the same for either option. Jackson's ents acknowledge this same fate, yet do not operate upon it until joining the war becomes emotionally appealing to them. With the ents Tolkien and Jackson's uses of altruism and self-interest flip.

Conclusion

Without as much reference to the greater history of the elves, Jackson's films can paint the elves as operating against Sauron simply because of his evil. The viewer easily relates to the human-looking elves, trusting them to be inherently good. Though they operate out of emotion, Jackson's ents largely fulfil the same role, recognizing Saruman as inherently bad and feeling compelled to move because of this. Such a Manichean view works for films and audiences. It worked for the *Lord of the Rings* soaring the movies to over \$5 billion in ticket sales and 17 awards. Yet, this Manichean view cannot totally explain operating out of one's own self-interest in the legendarium. In the legendarium, Tolkien's elves have a longer, more complicated backstory inherent with their races' own endogenous needs for survival. Tolkien's ents provide a complexing counterexample. Tolkien's ents are free to operate in the best interest of the world, unlike any other example, because they act with both deliberation and with an honest and frank understanding of their own imminent extinction. In doing so, the ents operate as an example for the rest of the characters in the text much the way grandparents act for children, without regard to rash emotion or long-term consequence proving true that moral idealism can in fact contend with realism for a place in decision-making.

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