

THE MORALITY OF ORCS

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Because of the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* in all its mediums, the creatures known as “orcs” or, sometimes, “goblins” are commonly known at this point in time. Even those who have never read J.R.R. Tolkien’s books have some image associated with the name. “Orc.” It is Old English in origin, returned to the popular lexicon of both British and American English by a certain professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University.

What does one imagine when hearing that word? For those who know these creatures through Tolkien’s writings, one probably pictures a dank, stooped warrior, not fair in any sense of the word, with a taste for blood and greed for destruction: dark, coarse, stinky, and cruel. Between such a description and the activities of orcs as narrated in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*, these creatures are, in a word, evil. Not one of the passages in these books is sympathetic to the orcs; not once are they considered among the free peoples of Middle-earth; and, not once do their actions (as we see them) really justify it. We must remember that these creatures do not exist in the reality we here experience, and as such that Tolkien imagined these characters and thus made conscious choices in their written creation. It is entirely *intentional* that we never see an orc worthy of our sympathy or our pity as readers.

In so doing, Tolkien establishes the orcs as a race of evil motives, evil deeds, and evil natures. Even men, the men from the East and South so very different from the Gondorian heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*, receive forgiveness from their enemies and earn a chance at redemption. No such considerations for the orcs! Aligned first with Morgoth, and then with Sauron, the orcs, by their very nature, it seems, cannot be redeemed. They are evil, and thus irreversibly immoral – or so Tolkien’s presentation leads many to believe. And, of course, the orcs are evil according to Tolkien’s own morality, defined by him as “a guide to our human purposes, the conduct of our lives: (a) the ways in which our individual talents can be developed without waste or misuse; and (b) without injuring our kindred or interfering with their development” (*Letters* 399-400).

Tolkien’s own morals aside, has he truly made the orcs irreversibly evil? Is there no question, no possibility, that they can be redeemed – or even, that they are not evil in the first place? After all, the stories are written from a decidedly biased elvish/hobbitish viewpoint. Does Tolkien leave no room for the possibility that their race could be salvaged, made good (or at least sympathetic) in the eyes of the reader? Perhaps. The issue at hand here – essentially, are orcs moral? – dances precipitously close to the chasm of moral relativism, a philosophical debate that I have no intention of tackling here. Were I to try definitively settling that debate, it would bite off much more than my ring finger before taking me down with it. However, whether one takes a relativist stance or an absolutist position on the ethics of orcs, one can conclude that, contrary to what many of the Tolkienian characters would believe, Tolkien has constructed the orcs to be at least *potentially* moral beings.

The argument of the moral relativist would most effectively provide the case for saying that not only are orcs potentially moral, but they are indeed presented as completely moral within the constructs of their own society. This argument, most famously laid out by Ruth Benedict (although with regard to human morals, rather than orcish ones), describes the idea that there is no absolute moral standard by which all rational beings should be held. Rather, she explains, each societal group constructs its own ethics – its own norms – by which its members are expected to behave. Thus, what is considered unacceptable or immoral in one culture may be the entirely moral norm in another. The example frequently used in this argument is homosexuality, which is frowned upon or forbidden in some cultures, accepted as normal (or at least not abnormal) in others, and even

encouraged in certain ones. Homosexuality, while an interesting and entirely appropriate topic to discuss in relation to Middle-earth, isn't the issue here; but, one could insert any one of the known character traits or social behaviors of orcs in its place to form the relativistic argument for orcs.

Essentially, who can say that the orcs' ethics are immoral simply because, as Tolkien wrote them, they differ from those of his protagonists? Within their own social constructs, orcs behave entirely appropriately – and thus, according to Benedict, morally. No doubt, orcs see their enemies – typically elves, and certain dwarves and men – as entirely immoral creatures, simply because the appropriate behaviors for these creatures differ considerably from those of orcs! There are certain ethical traits that do carry on between the races, such as a considerable respect for their leaders (note the treatment of the Great Goblin in *The Hobbit*), but if the premises of moral relativity are to be applied, then not even this quality should be treated as absolutely ethical – other races seen in the texts, such as the trolls and the spiders, do not noticeably take a leader and their behaviors must be viewed as equally moral within their respective societies.

Orcs, then, as long as they follow the codes of normal behavior within their society (which must be assumed they do), are acting entirely morally from their own point of view. They and their morals are, in fact, defined by the orcish society in which they live, so should they be judged as ethically inferior to elves because of what their culture dictates? "The vast majority of the individuals in any group are shaped to the fashion of that culture," writes Benedict. "In other words, most individuals are plastic to the moulding force of the society into which they are born" (138-9). If an individual of any culture (or, here, any race) is born into a specific culture, the moral relativist would argue, that individual should not be held as immoral simply for following the standards of that culture!

In a slight deviation from moral relativity, some argue that perhaps there is an absolute good, but the manner in which one serves this good is in itself relative. If one acts in what one considers to be a moral fashion, then one is actually moral – whether or not the "good" served is truly the absolute good. This concept is best laid out using religious examples, although it need not necessarily be done so. C.S. Lewis, whose friendship with Tolkien obviously impacted both men, touches on this topic in *The Last Battle*, the final book of his Narnia series. Emeth, a Calormene soldier, worships the god Tash (rather than the lion Aslan) for the duration of his life. However, Aslan permits the soldier into the second Narnia because of the manner of his service to Tash. The lion says to him, "...if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted" (165). Lewis here brings forth the idea that while there is an absolute good, individuals should be judged not by the cultures from which they come (or even the religious beliefs they hold), but by their intentions. So, if an orc in Tolkien's written world believes that he is living his life by doing what he (either by his own conscious or societal norms) thinks to be right, then he is acting morally. It doesn't matter that perhaps he is on the wrong side, or that compared to some other standard his behavior is evil, because he acts with the belief that his actions are good.

The flip side to this argument, of course, rests with moral absolutism, which holds that there is only one valid moral code, one which applies equally to all people. No divides of culture or age alter this standard. According to this philosophy, no one culture has gotten "morality" completely right (for then there would be no more moral progress for mankind), and some peoples have completely muddled and mutilated it.

It would seem, then, that according to this argument Tolkien's orcs haven't a prayer of being considered moral. If there exists a universal standard of morality, even for created characters, most would agree that the behavior of orcs lies a long bowshot from the upper end of that spectrum. However, even assuming that, in keeping with the precepts of moral absolutism, orcs are naturally evil and their ways cannot be justified, there are here two related points to discuss.

In hoping to preserve the *possibility* of the orcs' morality, the first point to bring forth is the issue of choice. In one of his letters, Tolkien describes the orcs as "fundamentally a race of 'rational incarnate' creatures" (190). Whether one subscribes to the view of free will in Middle-earth or not, the term "rational" usually denotes some freedom of choice. The orcs, then, are not automated warriors, and their "evil" choices are not excusable in the way moral relativism allows. A glimmer of ethical hope survives for the orcs at several points in Tolkien's texts, however. Presumably, honoring and serving others in one's culture is a fairly strong moral standard. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gimli says, "Orcs will often pursue foes for many leagues into the plain, if they have a fallen captain to avenge" (328). The orcs have some morality, then, even if it has not yet evolved from a more primitive ethical code.

In putting these ideas together, if one can choose to follow a more moral path, and orcs are rational beings capable of choice, then it follows that orcs are capable of choosing their morality. Even if they act evilly, Tolkien keeps open the option, the *possibility*, that they could choose morality. And yet, it seems that another opportunity exists for the orcs. Without going into Tolkien's Catholicism, clearly he holds strongly the idea of redemption. In *The Lord of the Rings* and the other books, none of the main "good" characters – not even Gandalf, who so endorses its virtue – has pity for the orcs, and so obviously not one harbors any thoughts of forgiveness for these creatures. Because they are the makings of Morgoth, Tolkien writes, they are "creatures begotten of Sin, and naturally bad." He adds, parenthetically, that he "nearly wrote 'irredeemably bad'; but that would be going too far. Because by accepting or tolerating their making – necessary to their actual existence – even Orcs would become part of the World, which is God's and ultimately good" (*Letters* 195). This opportunity for claiming the potential morality of orcs may feel like threading a loophole, but it makes logical sense. Even Morgoth, even Sauron, were good at one point and still presumably contain some grain of goodness – and even if it has vanished from them fully, their evil is in some mysterious way contributing to the goodness of Ilúvatar's overall plan. Orcs, too, are part of this plan, and anything that contributes to an overall good, to an absolute morality, must in its own way be moral.

That statement sounds like a cop-out to the question, "Are orcs moral?" Unfortunately, that question cannot be answered definitively without answering the whole puzzling question of moral relativity. Whatever stance one takes on that controversial philosophical issue, though, orcs have the potential to be moral creatures. Born of sin, perhaps, and naturally evil, sure; Tolkien's books lead to that conclusion, and since we cannot interview orcs in our own contemporary mountains we must be satisfied with the textual evidence we have. But there is no evidence that Tolkien has intentionally created orcs as irreversibly immoral and absolutely irredeemable, either. So, are orcs moral? Perhaps. But does Tolkien expect them to have the potential for morality? Absolutely.

Works Cited

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