

Choice and Providential Determinism in Middle-Earth

by Gene Hargrove

(published in *Beyond Bree*, October 2003, pp. 2-4)

In section four of the prologue to the Lord of the Rings, we find the following: ". . . the matter [Bilbo's adventures in *The Hobbit*] would scarcely have concerned later history, or earned more than a note in the long annals of the Third Age, but for an 'accident' by the way. The party was assailed by Orcs in a high pass of the Misty Mountains as they went towards Wilderland; and so it happened that Bilbo was lost for a while in the black ormines deep under the mountains, and there as he groped in vain in the dark, he put his hand on a ring, lying on the floor of a tunnel. He put it in his pocket. It seemed then like mere luck." Several words in this passages stress the contingency of Bilbo's finding of the Ring. It was an "accident" in scare quotes, "it happened," and "it seemed then like mere luck." However, the scare quotes around "accident" and the word "seemed" also suggest that the event might have been otherwise: foreordained or determined.

In "The Shadow of the Past," Gandalf tells Frodo that he thinks Bilbo's finding of the Ring was not an accident or luck: "Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it."

In a chapter of his book *Master of Middle-Earth* called "Cosmic Order," Paul Kocher deals with this issue at great length, citing the passages in which claims are made that events are determined, but loosely enough to accommodate individual choice. Kocher argues that "Human (or hobbitic or elvish or dwarfish or entish) free will coexists with a providential order and promotes this order, not frustrates it." In the context of Gandalf's remarks that Gollum is "bound up with the fate of the Ring" and that he "has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end," Kocher asks whether "every link in the chain is forever ordained?" and he answers: "It cannot be, because in his encounter with Gollum

Bilbo's choice to kill or not to kill is genuinely free, and only after it is made is it woven into the guiding scheme."

Kocher's general claim is that the major events in Middle-Earth are predetermined, but the path by which those events occur is indeterminate. This view is analogous to the idea in chaos theory that although an event can be predicted at a higher level, at a subatomic level it is not possible to predict which particular elements will be involved in the event. On the one hand, Frodo has been chosen (by someone), but on the other hand, what he does is his own choice. Gandalf says, ". . . you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have," adding a few paragraphs later that "the decision lies with you." This theme of being chosen and choosing to be chosen is reiterated in "The Council of Elrond" when Frodo chooses to take the Ring to Mordor and Elrond replies, "If I understand aright all that I have heard, . . . I think this task is appointed to you, Frodo, and that if you do not find a way, no one will."

The theme that what appears to be chance is not is repeated often in the story. In "Three is Company," Gildor says to Frodo, "Our paths cross seldom, by chance or purpose. In this meeting there may be more than chance; but the purpose is not clear to me, and I fear to say too much." In "The House of Tom Bombadil," Frodo asks Tom, "Did you hear me calling, Master, or was it just chance that brought you at that moment?" and Tom replies, "Just chance brought me then, if chance you call it. It was no plan of mine, though I was waiting for you." In "The Council of Elrond," after asking, "What shall we do with the Ring. . . ?" Elrond continues, "That is the purpose for which you are called hither. Called, I say, though I have not called you to me, strangers from distant lands. You have come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet, it is not so. Believe rather that it is so ordered that we, who sit here, and none others, must find counsel for the perils of the world."

"Chance or so it seems" is also a guiding element in the events of *The Hobbit* as described in Appendix A, III, "Durin's Folk." The account begins and ends with reference to chance. The account starts with "But at last there came about by chance a meeting between Gandalf and Thorin that changed all the fortunes of the House of Durin, and led to other and greater ends beside." It concludes with "We might now hope to return from victory here

only to ruin and ash. But that has been averted—because I met Thorin Oakenshield one evening on the edge of spring in Bree. A chance meeting, as we say in Middle-earth."

An interesting example of choice and providential determinism is the death of Gandalf in Moria. As Kocher notes in "Cosmic Order," both Aragorn and Gandalf know through foreknowledge of some kind that something terrible will likely happen to Gandalf if he goes into the Moria. It is for this reason that the Nine Walkers attempt the pass of Caradhras in the middle of winter. When Gandalf in "The Ring Goes South" mentions the alternate route, Moria, "the dark and secret way that we have spoken of," Aragorn responds, "But let us not speak of it again! No yet. Say nothing to the others, I beg, not until it is plain that there is no other way." When it becomes clear in "A Journey in the Dark" that there is no other way, and everyone agrees one by one to enter Moria, Aragorn makes his warning more specific: "I will follow your lead now— if this last warning does not move you. It is not the Ring, nor of us other than I am thinking now, but of you Gandalf. And I say to you: if you pass the doors of Moria, beware!" In "The Riders of Rohan," Gimili states that "Gandalf chose to come himself" and as a result, "His foresight failed him." In answer, Aragorn says, "The counsel of Gandalf was not founded on foreknowledge of safety for himself or for others. . . . There are things that it is better to begin than refuse, even though the end may be dark." Kocher concludes from these passages that Gandalf and Aragorn knew that Gandalf was likely to die if he went into Moria, but that he chose to do so anyway, thereby likely sealing his fate.

It seems clear that Gandalf could have avoided his death by choosing not to go into Moria, and that he and Aragorn knew it. Presumably it was not guaranteed that Gandalf would die, since others' choices or events might have altered the future, but he went into Moria with the expectation that something terrible was likely to happen to him, and him alone. Indeed, Gandalf does not have a clear understanding of the danger he is in until in "The Bridge of Khazad-dum" he sees the Balrog and says, "A Balrog. . . . Now I understand." Most likely, Gandalf's foreknowledge was similar to the visions in Galadriel's mirror when it was left free to work. In "The Mirror of Galadriel," Galadriel tells Sam after he has looked into the mirror, "Remember that the Mirror shows many things, and not all have yet come to pass. Some never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn

aside from the path to prevent them. The Mirror is dangerous as a guide to deeds." Although Gandalf did not choose death, by not turning aside from the most likely path to his death, he made his death more likely.

Kocher's discussion of free will and providence is especially interesting and impressive because he had such a limited range of writings available to him to work with. At the time that he wrote *Master of Middle-earth*, only *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* had been published. Thus, Kocher could only document the interplay of free will and providential determinism within the book without any resources for dealing with the issue further. Unfortunately, however, when an additional resource, *The Silmarillion*, became available, Kocher did not try to explore the matter further. His *A Reader's Guide to The Silmarillion* contains a chapter on "The Providence of Iluvatar," but the tension between free will and providence does not reemerge as a theme about choice in Elves, Humans, and Hobbits in the new book. Rather he discusses events in *The Silmarillion* and Iluvatar's response.

In my essay "Who is Tom Bombadil?" I proposed a solution to this problem of free will and determinism, but I apparently did so so briefly that it has gone unnoticed. My solution is that the providential determinism was generated by the Music of the Ainur in the first chapter of *The Silmarillion*. In that chapter Iluvatar taught the Holy Ones to sing in parts and after they had sung for a time and he had added to their music, he "showed" them what they had sung: ". . . he showed them a vision, giving to them sight where before was only hearing. . . . And as they looked and wondered this World began to unfold its history, and it seemed to them that it lived and grew." When the vision was over, Iluvatar spoke to the Ainur about the vision "and because of their memory of his words, and the knowledge that each has of the music that he himself made, the Ainur know much about what was, and what is, and is to come, and few things are unseen by them." These remarks make clear it that the music has predetermined the future history of Middle-earth. This history at the level that the Ainur saw it is unpredictable only to the degree that it is not remembered by one or more of the Valar or because something was introduced independently into the music by Iluvatar without their knowledge: ". . . for to none but himself has Iluvatar revealed all that he has in store, and in every age there come forth things that are new and have no foretelling,

for they do not proceed from the past."

Chief among the unrevealed elements of the future history of Middle-Earth are Elves and Humans (and Hobbits), "For the Children of Iluvatar were conceived by him [Iluvatar] alone; and they came with the third theme, and were not in the theme which Iluvatar propounded at the beginning, and none of the Ainur had part in their making. Therefore when they beheld them, the more did they love them, being things other than themselves, strange and free. . . ."

This passage accounts for the unpredictability of Humans, Hobbits, and Elves in two ways. First, they are part of a theme that the Ainur did not help make and which is therefore largely unknown to them. Second, they are "free," which means that their individual actions are not predetermined by the other themes of the music, in which the Ainur did participate and which they collectively remember. This freedom seems to be expressed within *The Lord of the Rings* as the ability to make choices through free will.

In "Of Aule and Yavanna" in *The Silmarillion*, in the story of the making of the Dwarves, free will is presented as a gift that Iluvatar alone can bestow. There Iluvatar said to Aule: "Why dost thou attempt a thing which thou knowest is beyond thy power and thy authority? For thou hast from me as a gift thy own being only, and no more; and therefore the creatures of thy hand and mind can live only by thy being, moving when thou thinkest to move them, and if thy thought be elsewhere, standing idle." However, when Aule asked forgiveness for overstepping his authority and offered to kill the Dwarves with his hammer, Iluvatar gifted the Dwarves with free will and they "shrank from the hammer and were afraid, and they bowed down their heads and begged for mercy." Iluvatar then explained "Dost thou not see that these things have now a life of their own, and speak their own voices? Else they would not have flinched from thy blow, nor from any command of thy will."

In terms of the events in *The Lord of the Rings*, viewed as part of the Music of the Ainur, the events related to the War of the Ring may perhaps be most appropriately characterized as work in progress in which improvisation is permitted. This improvisation is provided by the choices of Humans, Hobbits, and Elves. However, it does not affect the unfolding of the major events, which remain fixed by what the Ainur sang. Although the

outcome of the events cannot be changed, the manner in which the events occur, and especially who does what, is open to variation.

I developed this view in my essay "Who is Tom Bombadil?" to explain why Tom, if he was a Vala, could not simply take care of the problem of the One Ring himself. I argued that a Vala would not be able to change the major themes of the Music of the Ainur because each Vala would be bound by what they had sung. Thus, although the Ainur exercised individual choice in singing their individual parts, once they had sung their part, they were not permitted to make further changes. I was led to this view by a remark by Ulmo to Tuor in an expanded version of "Of Tuor and his Coming to Gondolin" in *Unfinished Tales*, in which Ulmo says, ". . . though in the days of this darkness I seem to oppose the will of my brethren, the Lords of the West, that is my part among them, to which I was appointed ere the making of the World." I interpret "ere the making of the World" to refer to the time of the Music of the Ainur and "to which I was appointed" to refer to the part that Iluvatar gave Ulmo as a member of the Ainur to sing. At the time of the singing of the music, Ulmo still had the choice available to act otherwise. As a Vala in Middle-earth, however, he was no longer free to act differently. (Similarly, Tom, if he was a Vala, could only help the Hobbits in ways that would not change his original part in the song, that is, that would not alter the themes that he established in the future history through his singing in the beginning.)

Strictly speaking, in this view, the Valar's behavior is not determined in the sense that they have lost their free will. They can still make choices, but they are prohibited from making important choices. For example, in "Of Aule and Yavanna," in the very hour when Aule made the Dwarves Iluvatar came to him as a voice to undo his work. Iluvatar's original intention was to destroy the Dwarves to maintain the integrity of the third theme of the music. Instead because of Aule's repentance, Iluvatar modified the third theme by arranging for the Dwarves to sleep until his Firstborn (Elves and Humans) would appear. Iluvatar then said: "But when the time comes I will awaken them, and they shall be to thee as children, and often strife shall arise between thine and mine, the children of my adoption and the children of my choice." As this episode illustrates, the choices of Iluvatar override the choices of Aule (and the other Valar) when they affect the major themes.

In the case of the choices of the Children of Iluvatar (and the Children of Aule), choice is not similarly restricted because these beings are not powerful enough for their choices to affect the major themes in the music (the future history of Middle-earth). Their choices affect how the themes will be carried out, but do not change the outcome. As in chaos theory, if one electron does not do what is necessary to bring an event about, others will.

A particularly problematic group of beings within this theory of choice and providential determinism is the Istari or Wizards. The Wizards were members of the Maiar, who presumably were present at the singing of the Music of the Ainur, but did not actually participate in the singing. According to the chapter "The Istari" in *Unfinished Tales*, "with the consent of Eru [Iluvatar] they [the Valar] sent members of their high order, but clad in bodies as of Men, real and not feigned, but subject of the fears and pain and weariness of earth, able to hunger and thirst and be slain. . . . And this the Valar did, desiring to amend the errors of old, especially that they had attempted to guard and seclude the Eldar by their own might and glory fully revealed; whereas now their emissaries were forbidden to reveal themselves in forms of majesty, or to seek to rule the wills of Men or Elves by open display of power, but coming in shapes weak and humble were bidden to advise and persuade Men and Elves to good. . . ." As this passage indicates, the sending of the Wizards was an attempt by the Valar to alter the history of Middle-earth, to make up for past interference, which apparently had gone badly, specifically, taking most Elves to the Uttermost West. This new interference, however, was undertaken with the permission of Iluvatar and the instruments of this interference, the Wizards, were weakened so that their powers were more limited than normal. In addition, they were prohibited from seeking power or dominating the Children of Iluvatar. The weakening of their powers and the prohibitions placed on them reduced their ability to affect the major themes in the Music of the Ainu at the macrolevel. Their role, rather, was to affect the choices of the Children at the microlevel though advise and persuasion. To be sure, the Wizards made choices of their own, including in the case of Saruman especially bad choices, but their effect were more similar to the effect of the choices of Humans and Elves than the Valar, because of their reduced powers.

In summary, if I am correct in my analysis, the major events are determined by the

Music of the Ainur. These events could be altered by the Valar, but they are prohibited from doing so by Iluvatar, who would correct any changes they made that he did not approve of. The choices of Iluvatar take precedence over the choices of the Valar. As a result, the Valar are largely reduced to spectators who are in many ways trapped by what they sang in the beginning (they had the power to alter their parts in the major themes then but could no longer do so after entering Middle-earth). Their choices in Middle-earth must be consistent with the major themes or irrelevant to them. In contrast the choices of Humans, Elves, Hobbits, and Dwarves are not restricted in any way. However, because of their more limited powers they cannot alter the major themes. Their choices determine how the major themes are carried out but do not alter the outcomes. In an attempt to assist in the way in which the themes are carried out, the Valar have introduced the Wizards to advise and persuade the Children of Iluvatar with regard to their choices. Because the major themes cannot be altered, without the agreement of Iluvatar, the history of Middle-earth is a reenactment of the Music of Ainur, determined in terms of the major themes, but rich with improvisation in the details. This improvisation is the expression of free will within a system that is ultimately predetermined. As Kocher put it, as noted above, ". . . free will coexists with a providential order and promotes this order, not frustrates it."