# Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind The Lord of the Rings*, Review by Dimitri Phillips. The C.S. Lewis Chronicle Vol. 7, No. 2, Trinity 2010

*The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind The Lord of the Rings*. By Peter Kreeft. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005. 237 pp. ISBN 978-1586170257.

The three papers posted on Peter Kreeft's office door in the philosophy department of Boston College embody the character of his pedagogical book, *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind The Lord of the Rings*: first, from smallest and lowest on the door, the anecdotal attention to detail reflected in the comment on the importance of a minor point of grammar differentiating 'Let's eat, grandma!' vs. 'Let's eat grandma!'; second, the openly personal perspective captured in the sticker with a red bar striking out 'Relativism', partiality bordering on pure prejudice, if not for, third, the abandonment of the self and total immersion in his subject that Kreeft achieves in accepting and adhering to Gandalf's command, written on a modern-day road sign on a path leading up a mountain, 'You cannot pass!' Having grown out of the eponymous course taught repeatedly over many years, *The Philosophy of Tolkien*, published by Ignatius Press in 2005, effectively distills the essential ideas underlying Tolkien's opus, including the great mythological backdrop of *The Silmarillion*. Although it not only extends beyond philosophy proper but sometimes seems to stray into 'outer rim' areas, engaging questions such as 'Why do human's have identity crises?' and 'Is there real magic?', it more or less meets its four objectives (pp. 10–11): 'a voyage of discovery into the philosophical heart of Middle-earth', 'a research tool, a concordance' to the philosophical themes in the *LOTR*, 'an engaging introduction to philosophy', and finally an exploration of 'the very close parallel between Tolkien and [C.S.] Lewis', as it quotes from this other Inkling, on whom Kreeft is an international expert, almost as often as from Tolkien.

Kreeft's book is a personal one through and through, from the first chapter, 'Metaphysics', which opens with a remark on the loss of *philosophy's* proper meaning of 'the love of wisdom' in modern 'philosophy departments', drawing an analogy with how the dwindling of martyrs and saints in North America does not diminish the meaning of Christianity, before even mentioning metaphysics, and ending with a concluding chapter that, at least at first, appears not to engage Tolkien's philosophy, but Christianity again. In between, it is riddled with humorous, insightful, even emotionally engaging, but nevertheless often gratuitous or only loosely appropriate asides. For example, when explaining the difference

between learning philosophy and reading literature, Kreeft adds in parentheses, ‘Angels, who begin with general principles and know everything else by deduction from them, do not write stories’ (p. 26) – something which, besides being only tangentially relevant, Kreeft really cannot claim to know about. (I hasten to add, though, that just below, in explaining that the purpose of his book is ‘to teach, not [like Tolkien] to fascinate, engage, amaze, or move the reader’, because Kreeft presupposes that the reader ‘has already been swept away by ‘the great grey ineluctable wave’ of *The Lord of the Rings*’, his addition, ‘This book is not like surfing but like oceanography’ (p. 26), surprisingly turns out to be based on a long-time love of surfing.) Some asides are more harmless, as when, in considering Elves in the section on Platonic Ideas, he concedes, ‘There are no physical Elves in this world’ (44), but adds in parentheses ‘although most of the citizens of Iceland would disagree with that’. (Icelanders, of course, might find this less than harmless.) Others are less apparently so; for example, in the chapter on ‘Angeology’, under the question ‘Could there be creatures between men and angels, such as Elves?’, Kreeft rightly relates how Tolkien’s Elves envy man his mortality, and (still rightly) interprets the naïveté in their conservatism in light of this; but he then unnecessarily interjects in parentheses, ‘Envy is one of the stupidest of sins, the only one that never caused a single moment of even false joy’ (80). A final, exemplary aside characterizes quite well the entire experience of reading this book, which in this respect resembles reading the *Pensées*, only slightly more orderly (and Kreeft is heavily indebted, both in general and specifically in this example, to Pascal): in discussing modes of knowing, Kreeft writes, ‘Heliocentrism, evolution, and relativity are true ideas only if they conform the scientist’s mind to the objective physical world; but this world is truly heliocentric, evolutionary, and relative only if it conforms to the divine Idea and design for it. (And everything does that except man. Only in man is there a gap between God’s eternal design and temporal fact. The word for that gap is ‘sin’.)’ (43).

However, the study’s structure is also strictly impersonal and pragmatic. As one might expect—or at least hope for—from a Thomist, it adheres to a simple structure: arranging and listing more or less philosophical questions under major philosophical fields that make up each chapter. Thus, under ‘Epistemology’ we find ‘What is truth?’ and ‘Is knowledge always good?’, among others; under ‘Political Philosophy’ ‘Is small beautiful?’ and ‘Can war be noble?’. Kreeft offers an explanation of the meaning and importance of the question, and then quotes from *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR), from Tolkien’s other writings (usually a letter), from C.S. Lewis, and often from others as well, more or less directly answering or (in the case of sources besides LOTR) commenting on the question. Not all questions are as

philosophical as some might wish—'Is romance more thrilling than sex?'—, nor does Tolkien's answer always appear, but Kreeft invariably engages an apposite authority to demonstrate the philosophical and literary dimensions of the issue: Dostoyevsky for the death of the self versus the death of the soul; Kierkegaard for the contrast between a 'knight of infinite resignation' and Frodo the 'knight of faith'; Wilder's *The Bridges of San Luis Rey* for Tolkien's own illumination of the tapestry of providence; Marx to shed—or swallow—light on whether 'the past (tradition) [is] a prison or a lighthouse'; Nietzsche's nihilism pitted against Machiavelli's pragmatism with Plato's self-loving altruism appearing on top. However, as his consideration of these latter authors shows, Kreeft may be accused of simplistic analyses and plain, unsupported opinions: the *Republic's* central drama, here, is between two forms of magic, the might from the right and the right from the might, and culminates in Plato's answer to the question why we 'should...be good if we can get whatever we want by being evil': 'wanting what you should is better than getting what you want' (p. 183). Likewise, though widely read across literary genres and periods, Kreeft's perspective is radically romantic—with a lowercase r, the Romantics being probably too modern for his liking—so that not only does he dismiss Hardy's *The Dynasts* and Camus' *The Stranger* for falling short of 'great literature' on account of their opposite extremes on the philosophico-theological scale of fate and freedom, or prefer Shakespeare's Macbeth to Faulkner's Compsons and Marlow's *Faust* to Goethe's, but one imagines he might discount Flaubert, Faulkner, even Proust and others for a deficiency of purposeful (providential?) meaning. Fortunately, Kreeft ingenuously offers his take on what constitutes a 'great story' in the Introduction, and his illustrative example of the first of five components, plot, also reflects his own overall style and approach: 'You cannot write a great story about saving a button on a sweater and nothing more. You can, however, write a great story about saving the world, which is what Tolkien did' (p. 18). In considering his relative disuse of secondary sources on Tolkien—only a handful, but of the best—and only anecdotal, but always appropriate, use of philosophers and writers, it is well to remember that Kreeft is first and foremost a philosopher in his own right, and an unabashedly though absent-mindedly assertive and opinionated one.

The particular strength of this book, though, lies in the innumerable links Kreeft draws between Tolkien and Lewis, tapping a knowledge base of the latter which likely exceeds that of the former in order to enlighten it. Although neither was a professional philosopher, Lewis has more claim to it, and even in Tolkien's letters, from which Kreeft quotes profusely, his philosophical ideas retain much of the poetic quality that characterizes his creative work: most effective in fiction and

fantasy, they enrich each letter with an enchanting aura, but can therewith also obfuscate the issues. In even the one instance in which Tolkien appears to be explicitly ‘philosophizing’ the myth (90;  : 291), the incomprehensibility of the account is only overcome with further quotations, fortuitously from Tolkien making the same point about power and magic in ‘On Fairy-Stories’ and from Lewis’ *The Abolition of Man*. Through a combination of literary and philosophical allusions and anecdotes as well as his own philosophical analysis, but especially with the aid of Lewis’ brilliantly clear explications, Peter Kreeft is able to connect the paradoxical claims of Tolkien’s philosophical web, more intricate than Shelob’s, into a beautiful panorama as big as Middle-Earth and as rich and consistent in every point: to show, in short, how *The Lord of the Rings*, by the reckoning of its own author, can be primarily about power, centrally about creation and sub-creation, deep down about death and deathlessness, and above all about the honour of God.

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