

Kolnai Analysis of Tolkien

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Ontological Privilege and Participation in The Lord of the Rings

In *The Lord of The Rings*, Tolkien builds a world of privileged races and individuals who protect society's continuation from the corrupting privilege of the One Ring, reflecting Aurel Kolnai's argument that privilege isn't simply beneficial for purposes of heightened culture, but necessary for survival. Examining Kolnai's definitions of Privilege, Identity, and Participation and their connection to a hierarchical order is the first step of better understanding Tolkien's fictional society. For Tolkien, Privilege is ontological. There are two main categories of beings who have higher status and power than others: Wizards and Elves. The institutions centered around them offer a distance of protection and dignity between themselves and those without ontological privilege, in this case the Hobbits. This "natural" ontological privilege is threatened by the probing power of the One Ring that imbues an unnatural privilege upon those in contact with it. The One Ring and the power behind it can corrupt even the ontologically privileged, thus dismantling Participation.

There are three main points within Kolnai's work that must be understood: Privilege, Identity, and Participation. Kolnai's definition of "Privilege" is the following: "the social projection, the institutional recognition, the traditional embodiment of the essentially insurmountable, imperfection and subjectivity of Man." In other words, privilege is what sets people apart from each other. No one is truly the same nor should aspire to that goal, lest they lose themselves in the collective. "Identity" can be defined as the opposite of Privilege. It is the "principle of the negation of whatever is 'non-identical' or irreducible to identity." Identity is used to unite individuals into a conglomerate of consciousness that distances itself from anything that is dissimilar. By forcing inclusion, Identity ultimately becomes exclusive. It is this exclusivity that cancels the ability for Participation – the Participation that allows growth through Privilege. Participation is the act of an individual "reach[ing] out beyond their own immediate possession or proper nature, and enrich[ing] themselves by a contact with higher values primarily alien from them and not properly theirs." Through Participation of different groups and individuals, society benefits as a whole. Specifically when there is a hierarchy in place, one that "is primarily ordained to actualize and to cultivate a certain set of higher values; to attend to, and serve, certain aspects of the common good – or again, *the* common good of a given 'perfect society'." The creation of a social order that regulates society isn't necessarily prohibitive; if it is upheld and not abused it can encourage growth of the entire society as a whole.

Within Tolkien's trilogy, those with the greatest ontological privilege are wizards, Gandalf being the main example. His privileged abilities are underrated in the beginning, for he is described in the context of Hobbits who only see him as a fireworks supplier. However the Hobbits treat him, a clear sense of reverence towards him is upheld by the Elves, seen in their deference to Gandalf's sparing of information regarding the Black Riders for Frodo's sake, telling the hobbits to "go at once without delay" and follow Gandalf's plan. A clearer example of his higher privilege is his ability to call upon Shadowfax, "I bent my thought upon him, bidding him to make haste." Gandalf holds power over other animals and is able to communicate with them (including birds), a skill other beings don't possess. Gandalf could deny those he travels with any benefits of his privilege, but instead he uses his abilities to protect and guide them on their journey. This participation is supported by the natural hierarchy within Middle Earth, evident in Gandalf's own actions to preserve the order. When confronted by the Balrog, Gandalf states he is "the servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor," and says three times "You cannot pass," asserting his power over Sauron's evil creature. A less extreme example of enforcing the social hierarchy is Gandalf's reprimanding of Frodo's brassy questions regarding the lore of the Ring, "I knew much and I have learned much. But I am not going to give an account of all my doings to *you*. The history of Elendil and Isildur and the One Ring is known to

all the Wise.” Gandalf is willing to extend his privilege to the hobbits, but requires a certain distance of dignity to be kept that preserves the social order.

The other race that has greater ontological privilege is the Elves. Not only do they lead a life everlasting, they also have physical privileges that surpass anything within the mortal realm. Legolas, for example, demonstrates his sharpened hearing and eyesight on many occasions, the most notable of which is during the search for the captured Merry and Pippin when he describes the approach of the Riders of Rohan in great detail, down to the height of Eomer and the glinting of their spears. Elrond demonstrates his privileged ability to control the environment when he commands the flood of the Bruinen, as told by Gandalf. Again, these privileges could very easily be used to hinder the Fellowship or any sort of progress against the Enemy. Instead, the Elves use their privilege to further participation between themselves and others. Glorfindel’s presence and touch soothes Frodo after his wounding on Weathertop, “The dusk of the evening seemed to grow lighter about him, as if a cloud had been withdrawn. He saw his friends’ faces more clearly again, and a measure of new hope and strength returned.” Upon leaving Lothlorien, the Fellowship is provided with boats, *lembas* bread, cloaks, rope, and individual gifts, all luxuries the Elves were not required to give but did so willingly. By sharing their privilege, the Elves literally lift up company’s spirits, shown in Aragorn’s response to Galadriel’s gift, “it seemed to them that many years of toil had fallen from his shoulders.” While there aren’t many direct moments that the Elves assert their authority over those who are unprivileged, there is a sense throughout all interactions with them that they automatically receive deference, and a certain amount distance is always present. Celeborn, Galadriel and Elrond all hold their audiences captivated and take the leading role in guiding discussion or questioning. When others speak “out of turn,” they receive a cold or reprimanding stare, once prompting Frodo to “stammer” during the council meeting. Through their ontological privilege, the Elves encourage participation within the hierarchical order that ultimately contributes to the benefit of all.

As great and powerful as these two races are, they are not infallible. The Wise know they could succumb to the tempting of the Ring. They would fall into the snare of the unnatural privilege it bestows. Gandalf warns Frodo of what the ring’s power can do to man, “A mortal... does not die, but he does not grow or obtain more life, he merely continues, until at last every minute is weariness... he *fades*: he becomes in the end invisible permanently, and walks in the twilight under the eye of the dark power that rules the Rings.” There are four primary examples to whom this applies: the Ringwraiths, Gollum, Bilbo, and Frodo. Frodo has the unique chance to see the transformation in person when Bilbo requests to see the Ring in Rivendell: “He found that he was no longer looking at Bilbo; a shadow seemed to have fallen between them, and through it he found himself eyeing a little wrinkled creature with a hungry face and bony groping hands.” When offered the ring later by Frodo, Gandalf immediately refuses, saying “With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly.... Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself.” While this is before Sauruman’s treachery is revealed, Gandalf instinctively knows how the power behind the Ring could ruin him and the rest of Middle Earth. Galadriel has a similar reaction to Gandalf, though hers tends to the extreme: “And now at last it comes! You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night!... All shall love me and despair!” Gandalf and Galadriel already have great power, an ontologically natural power that they use for the good of everyone, untainted by the evil of Sauron and the Ring.

Without the guiding hand of Gandalf and the Elves, the hobbits, and even men, would remain at risk from the threat of Sauron and the misuse of the Ring. The social hierarchy that defines how the different races interact and respect each other is required to win the war against the Enemy. Gandalf and the Elves are definitive examples of Kolnai’s political theory that Privilege, in this case ontological, and Participation further society’s growth and success. When threatened or tempted, the boundaries that uphold the Privileged must remain intact and not succumb to unnatural, destructive privilege exemplified by the Ring.

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