

Freedom and Providence as Anti-Modern Elements?¹

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Abstract

The question of freedom and determination is a very actual and important question in our modern societies. From a theological viewpoint, it is combined with the question about divine providence and Gods acting in history. This seems to contradict modern concepts of freedom.

In this article, I consider whether the depiction of freedom and providence in Tolkien's fictional works (especially Middle-earth) can be understood in the context of Catholic theology as well as Tolkien's time as an anti-modern element in his work or rather as a contribution to combine Christian theology and modern concepts. Therefore, I am dealing with free will, freedom of choice and freedom of action in Middle-earth as characteristic features of the created beings in Middle-earth as well as the acting of Ilúvatar throughout history. Subsequently I analyse the patterns of determination and providence in Middle-earth and the way this is combined with the individual freedom.

INTRODUCTION

The question of freedom and determination is a very real and important question in our modern societies. Some neurophysiologists like Wolf Singer or Gerhard Roth state on the basis of their experiments that freedom of will is an illusion as human actions are determined by neural processes (cf. Singer 2004, Geyer 2004).² If this were true, it would have enormous consequences for the possibility of moral responsibility and

¹ Many thanks to Layra Varnam for carefully correcting this article.

² Dickerson (2003:14ff) quotes Bertrand Russell with his absolute denial of the existence of human free will and states a sharp contrast to Tolkien's view. Dickerson's book is not wholly unproblematic since he presupposes an understanding of Tolkien's "Christian beliefs as tremendously important to understanding his works" (219f.) which limits the applicability of the text.

for the theory of criminal law, undermine the most important convictions of most religions, and contradict the main aspects of human societies and their experience of free will. While it is not the aim of this article to enter into this discussion, these debates do highlight the significance of human freedom for modern societies. Combined with the emphasis on individuality and the weakening of institutions and collectives, freedom is one of the most important features of modern everyman's anthropology (cf. Nida-Rümelin 2005:26-43).

It is small wonder that the theological concept of divine providence and God's acting in history does not harmonize simply with this modern understanding, as it is understood as a limitation of human freedom. Furthermore, natural disasters and social catastrophes undermine the belief in a divine government and conservation of the world. Link (2005:414, my translation) explains this problem:

The belief in providence offers an interpretation of our life and furthermore, history as a whole; it offers an overlapping connection of sense, embracing past and future, which we can combine without difficulty neither with our experience (e.g. of freedom to resistance against violence) nor with biblical evidence of God.

The relationship between human freedom, divine omnipotence, and providence is a widely discussed subject in the three monotheistic religions Christianity, Judaism and Islam. While they differ in their emphasis on human freedom and God's omnipotence, they all – disregarding extreme positions – stress the existence of both. Since diverse modern concepts of freedom are opposed to or even contradict the monotheistic concept of providence and freedom held by these religions, and the denial of God as subject of/in history is part of modern claims at the beginning of the last century, a further question arises. Is a reconciliation between these poles necessary and possible or does the theological

concept of providence fundamentally contradict the modern view of freedom?

Since J.R.R. Tolkien is regarded e.g. by Shippey (2001:viif), Flieger (1997:2) and Curry as an author of the 20th century whose work was influenced by his time, which they suggest provides an explanation for his continuing attraction for today's reader, a closer look at the concept(s) of freedom present in *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien's *Legendarium* may be interesting. After all, the existence of Ilúvatar and of the *Ainulindalë* as influencing or determining the progress of history are facts in Middle-earth. Dickerson (2003:14) describes the difference between Tolkien's views and the view of his time as follows:

Tolkien's basic philosophical beliefs were also in contradiction to the prevailing materialist presuppositions of modernism as well as the relativism of postmodernism, especially with respect to his views on human free will and objective morality.

Purtill (2003:165) refers to the question of the proper use of free will as a point of disagreement between Tolkien and modern critics. Combined with the theological question about the relationship between human freedom and divine providence it is worth considering whether Tolkien's depiction of freedom and providence should be understood in the context of Catholic theology as well as Tolkien's time as an antimodern element in his work. If Tolkien's views were so at odds with the view of his readers, one cannot easily explain his success.

FREE WILL, FREEDOM OF CHOICE AND FREEDOM OF ACTION IN
MIDDLE-EARTH AS CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF THE CREATED
BEINGS IN MIDDLE-EARTH

The first text in *The Silmarillion*, the *Ainulindalë*, is concerned with the creation of Eä and is of the uttermost importance for addressing the question of freedom and determination.³ Since I analyzed this text in detail elsewhere (Fornet-Ponse 2005:158-166), it is not necessary to repeat my whole argument. In brief, I argued that although the Ainur's remembrance of their part in the music may lead to a far-reaching, if not complete determination of events with a limitation of freedom of choice and freedom of action, it is by no means necessary to assume a complete determination. Firstly, the knowledge of the Ainur is limited by Ilúvatar's freedom, for he has not revealed everything to them:

Yet some things there are that they cannot see [...];
for to none but himself has Ilúvatar 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. And so it was that as
this vision of the World was played before them, the
Ainur saw that it contained things which they had not
thought. (Sil:18)

Secondly, the Vision of the Ainur did not show the complete history: “for the history was incomplete and the circles of time not full-wrought when the vision was taken away.” (Sil:20)⁴

Furthermore, it is important to refer to the difference between prescience and determination, for a knowledge which is outside of time

³ In this article, I use the version in *The Silmarillion* and not the various different versions in *History of Middle-earth* since they do not differ significantly in the relevant passages.

⁴ Cf. Finrod's argument against Andreth in *The Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth* with his emphasis on Ilúvatar's freedom and the 'open end' of the Music (*Morgoth's Ring* [MR]:318f).

does not determine events in time; it does not constitute a causal connection.

For the Great Music had been but the growth and flowering of thought in the Timeless Halls, and the Vision only a foreshowing; but now they had entered in at the beginning of Time, and the Valar perceived that the World had been but foreshadowed and fore-sung, and they must achieve it. (Sil:20)

The authorship of Eru instead of the Valar is emphasized by Tolkien in his letter to Waldman: “Their power and wisdom is derived from their Knowledge of the cosmogonical drama, which they perceived first as a drama (that is as in a fashion we perceive a story composed by some-one else), and later as a ‘reality’.” (Letters:146) Moreover, Ilúvatar expresses his absolute sovereignty over the *Ainulindalë*:

And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined. (Sil:17)

This seems to diminish Melkor’s freedom and responsibility, but since his freedom is emphasized throughout the work (and is the basis of evil in Tolkien’s *Legendarium*), this sentence reflects rather the opinion of, for example, Thomas Aquinas, who argues that God can bring good out of evil. If Melkor, the Valar and the Eruhíni are not responsible for their deeds, then the whole *Quenta Silmarillion* (and *The Lord of the Rings*) is rather pointless. Eru’s sovereignty and his *creatio continua* is expressed in the renewing of the Vision to Manwë after Yavanna’s request for help for the *kelvar* and *olvar* where “he saw that all was upheld by the hand of Ilúvatar; and the hand entered in, and from it came forth many wonders

that had until then been hidden from him in the hearts of the Ainur.” (Sil:41)

Thus, combining both Eru’s freedom and sovereignty and the freedom of the Ainur (and the Children of Eru) as expressing God’s plan and the fulfilment of this plan by individuals, it becomes clear that in *The Silmarillion* there is a providential pattern which reflects main points of a sound Christian account of providence (cf. Deuser 2003). Providence can be understood within the context of soteriology or questions of God and creation, and means that God’s effective will leads free creatures to participation in his inner-trinitarian life. A Christian understanding of providence emphasizes on the one hand God’s sovereignty and acting in history and on the other hand human freedom. In some theological opinions God binds himself to human freedom, he does not force Man to salvation, but attempts everything within his power to enable Man to freely agree to salvation. Even though Christians cannot be sure that all Men will be redeemed, they have (!) to hope that it will occur. This hope expresses both the belief in God’s providential power and human freedom.

Additionally, the prescience of the Ainur is limited by other wills (cf. Letters:203 and 285) and it is important to mention Tolkien’s reflection on prophecy in *Ósanwe-Kenta* [OK] that a mind placed in time cannot see the future but “can learn of the future only from another mind which has seen it. But that means only from Eru ultimately, or mediately from some mind that has seen in Eru some part of His purpose.” (OK:31) In this text, Tolkien stresses the freedom of Eru and the importance of individual will in a communication of thought.

Concerning human and Elvish freedom, it is important to emphasize that Elves and Men are conceived by Eru alone. “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.” (Sil:18) The making of the dwarves by Aulë and their adoption by

Ilúvatar, who gave them life of their own, is another evidence of the freedom of the Children of Ilúvatar.

The first chapter of the *Quenta Silmarillion* mentions a fundamental difference between Elves and Men as a result of the Gift of Ilúvatar. Men “should have a virtue to shape their life, amid the powers and chances of the world, beyond the Music of the Ainur, which is as fate to all things else” (Sil:41). This is combined with death as leaving of the circles of the world. This passage can be understood as expressing human freedom and an Elvish determination by the Music of the Ainur. But in my opinion, this is not a valid interpretation since it contradicts the whole structure of *The Silmarillion* with its emphasis on free choices and deeds.

Besides the limitation of the knowledge of the Ainur by other wills, another argument against a determination of Elves and Men by the *Ainulindalë* as result of the Ainur is the incomplete understanding of the

theme by which the Children entered into the Music [...]. For which reason the Valar are to these kindreds rather their elders and their chieftains than their masters; and if ever in their dealings with Elves and Men the Ainur have endeavoured to force them when they would not be guided, seldom has this turned to good, howsoever good the intent. (Sil:41)

Regarding the emphasized freedom of Men beyond the Music of the Ainur, Flieger (2002:128) distinguishes strictly between Elves and Men: “While Elves are bound by the pattern of the Music – not necessarily within themselves but in the external events of their lives – Men are not.” The Elvish freedom is limited to “internal choices”, Elves “may have power over their own natures, though not over external happenings” (52f). This assumption leads to problems not only in the

interpretation of Elvish (free) decisions which have great significance in the course of history, such as many of Fëanor's decisions⁵ (the Kinslaying, the siege of Angband, etc., of Ulmo's warnings to Turgon and Orodreth and their (free) response to it), but also in the interpretation of contacts between Men and Elves. If Men are not determined by the Music of the Ainur and play a relevant part in the history of Arda, how can Elves be determined? What about the marriage of Beren and Lúthien, and Lúthien's help in fulfilling the Quest? What about Túrin's influence in Nargothrond and the statement that the tale of his fate "is woven with the fate of the Silmarils and of the Elves" (Sil:199)? What about the explicit statement that Morgoth's army won the Nirnaeth Arnoediad only because of Men's treachery (cf. Sil:192)? Since Flieger's view does not sufficiently explain this questions, Dickerson's view (2003:109f) seems more appropriate, "the Elves do indeed have free will, even though all their choices will ultimately lead to the fulfillment of what has already been seen."

The free will of the Elves is mentioned explicitly in *Laws and Customs among the Eldar*. At first concerning the marriage between Elves: "The Eldar wedded once only in life, and for love or at the least by free will upon either part." (MR:210) The freedom of each *fëa* is mentioned by some Valar as cause for a non-returned love, other Valar mention the marring of Arda. Concerning the relationship between *hröa* and *fëa*, an Elvish *fëa* 'consumes' his body, but "its fate was to inhabit Arda to its end." (MR:219) A houseless *fëa* is open to direct instruction

⁵ I disagree with her view that if Fëanor could have freely given up the Silmarils "[s]ubsequent events or deeds would not be externally different, but the motives behind them could be different, as could his attitudes toward himself, the Silmarils, and the peoples whose lives are intertwined with his" (Flieger 2002:114). In my opinion, the statement that "yet had he said yea at the first, before the tidings came from Formenos, it may be that his after deeds would have been other than they were" (Sil:79) is not an 'odd' one but is based on Fëanor's free will and his possibility to act freely in given circumstances and therefore influence these circumstances.

of the Valar, it is summoned to Mandos, “and the summons proceeds from just authority, and is imperative; yet it may be refused.” (MR:223) Another aspect of Elvish Freedom is the possibility to die by their will, “as for example because of great grief or bereavement, or because of the frustration of their dominant desires and purposes.” (MR:341)

In my opinion, the causal nexus between mortality and freedom of the circles of the world is the central clue to understanding the difference between Elves and Man. It does not mean that Elves are determined while Men are not, but that Elves are bound to the world and its end while Men are not. The *Ainulindalë* does not determine all events in Arda but only the pattern in which freedom of will and freedom of action is possible. I agree with Weinreich (2004:81f) that Ilúvatar can allow discordances and unforeseeable interludes without endangering the final result. But this is in accordance with the theological conviction that providence does not determine Man but challenges his freedom (cf. Ratzinger 2000:44). The Music of the Ainur does not determine all (or most) events in Arda but only the main lines of history – as the concluding sentences of the *Quenta Silmarillion* hint at:

Here ends the SILMARILLION. If it has passed from the high and the beautiful to darkness and ruin, that was of old the fate of Arda Marred; and if any change shall come and the Marring be amended, Manwë and Varda may know; but they have not revealed it, and it is not declared in the dooms of Mandos.” (Sil:255)

Thus, I agree with Dickerson, Weinreich et. al. in arguing for the freedom of will and freedom of action of Ainur, Elves, Dwarves and Men. This freedom is not wholly identical in all ‘races’, since it is connected to mortality, but there is a fundamental freedom of Ainur and Elves in regard to Eru and (some) external events. Even Orcs can to some extent be regarded as free, but concerning their emergence Tolkien himself was undecided (cf. MR:409-423). It is certain that “Melkor could not

‘create’ living ‘creatures’ of independent wills” (MR:413) and Orcs are therefore a corruption either of Men or of Elves. But their independent will is suppressed nearly completely by Melkor (and later Sauron).

The protagonist’s moral responsibility and free will is important throughout the whole of *The Lord of the Rings*. Since this has been recognised by many critics, and since Dickerson (2003) has dealt with this extensively, it is sufficient to refer to the different important choices of Aragorn after the breaking of the Fellowship, the choices of Frodo to take the Ring, of Samwise, of Faramir, etc. The Elvish freedom is expressed in Elrond’s and Galadriel’s refusal of the Ring.

THE ACTING OF ILÚVATAR THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Having dealt with the freedom of the created beings in Eä, we can now turn to a further aspect of our problem, the acting of Ilúvatar throughout history. Firstly, it is important to mention a difference between Ilúvatar’s relationship to Eä and the God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam: for Ilúvatar is much more remote. While the conviction of *creatio continua* is the consensus amongst the three aforementioned monotheistic religions and expresses the lasting preoccupation of God with the world created by him – without it, the world would cease to be –, Ilúvatar entrusts Arda to the Ainur and acts only in a few events. This is in accordance with the *Ainulindalë*, in which Ilúvatar only declared first one theme, then a second and a third, but not the whole music. The theme declared by Ilúvatar leaves room for the free interpretation of this theme by the Ainur. By declaring the second and third theme, Ilúvatar can integrate the patterns introduced by Melkor and this shows that the final result of the music cannot be altered. Tolkien wrote in drafts to Straight (1956):

There is no embodiment of the One, of God, who indeed remains remote, outside the World, and only di-

rectly accessible to the Valar or Rulers. These take the place of the ‘gods’, but are created spirits, or those of the primary creation who by their own will have entered into the world. But the One retains an ultimate authority, and (or so it seems as viewed in serial time) reserves the right to intrude the finger of God into the story: that is to produce realities which could not be deduced even from a complete knowledge of the previous past, but which being real become part of the effective past for all subsequent time (a possible definition of a ‘miracle’). (Letters:235)

According to Tolkien, Elves and Men are the first of these intrusions, while the story was not yet realized but still only a story. Furthermore, this quotation shows that Tolkien was aware of the problems of time in regard to God (“seems as viewed in serial time”).

In this context, I have to mention the Secret Fire since this signifies a divine element in the world: because “it is with Ilúvatar” (Sil:16), he has sent it “to burn at the heart of the World” (Sil:25) and said to the Ainur: “And since I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will.” (Sil:15) The Secret Fire seems to be identical with the ‘Flame Imperishable’, which means “the Creative activity of Eru (in some sense distinct from or within Him), by which things could be given a ‘real’ and independent (though derivative and created) existence.” (MR:345, cf. Caldecott 2003:107f) This is a reference to Eru’s ‘authorship’, by which an author is present in his work, while remaining independent and outside of his work. Since it means Eru’s creative activity, it seems appropriate to regard the subcreative capacity of his creatures as combined with it. Kilby (1976:59) reports a personal conversation with Tolkien, who told him “that the ‘Secret Fire sent to burn at the heart of the World’ in the beginning was the Holy Spirit.” This identification of the Secret Fire as creative activity of

Ilúvatar with the Holy Spirit is theologically possible since according to Christian creation doctrine God's spirit is live-giving and live-preserving. By the means of his Spirit (and Man's response to it), God can act through his creatures in his world without diminishing their freedom. According to Link (2005:424ff), an understanding of Providence within the context of the acting of the Spirit is theologically necessary.

But God's actions are not restricted to his creatures; other forms of divine intervention are also possible and indeed are a fact of Tolkien's cosmos. But Eru's interventions are deeply connected with his remoteness and the errand of the Ainur to prepare the dwelling and the coming of the Children of Ilúvatar and to guide them. He only acts in cases in which the Valar are not authorized.

The first intervention of Ilúvatar in the affairs of Eä concerns Aulë's making of the Dwarves (Sil:43f) and leads to their existence as the adopted Children of Eru. This example shows the limitation of the power of the Valar, because they cannot create independent beings of their own; their acceptance by Eru is indispensable. Furthermore, Ilúvatar integrates the Dwarves into his world, but will not suffer a fundamental change to his design, "that these should come before the Firstborn of my design, nor that thy impatience should be rewarded." (Sil:44)

An interesting example of the relationship between the Valar and Eru occurs with regards to Finwë and Míriel. While in some versions (MR:205ff, 225ff, 254ff), after a long debate of the Valar, Mandos declares the law of Ilúvatar and refers to "the right of lawgiving that Ilúvatar committed to Manwë" (MR:206, 259), the matter is different in the appendix 'The Converse of Manwë and Eru' to *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth* (MR:361-366). In the latter, Manwë explains the problem to Eru and asks him what he has designed. Manwë expresses their doubts to use their "power upon the flesh that Thou hast designed, to house the spirit of Thy Children, this seems a matter beyond our authority, even were it not beyond our skill." (MR:362) Eru gives the Valar the

authority to re-make the former houses of the spirits of his children.⁶ Concerning the sons of Eärendil and Elwing, it is explicitly stated: “The Valar indeed may not withdraw the gift of death, which comes to Men from Ilúvatar, but in the matter of the Half-elven Ilúvatar gave to them the judgement” (Sil:261).

The most remarkable event in *The Silmarillion* and the second intervention, in which Ilúvatar’s responsibility is explicitly stated, is the *Akallabêth*, as the host of the Númenóreans broke the Ban of the Valar:

Then Manwë upon the Mountain called upon Ilúvatar, and for that time the Valar laid down their government of Arda. But Ilúvatar showed forth his power, and he changed the fashion of the world; and a great chasm opened in the sea between Númenor and the Deathless Lands, and the waters flowed down into it, and the noise and smoke of the cataracts went up to heaven, and the world was shaken. [...]

But the land of Aman and Eressëa of the Eldar were taken away and removed beyond the reach of Men for ever. And Andor, the Land of Gift, Númenor of the Kings, Elenya of the Star of Eärendil, was utterly destroyed. (Sil:278f)

The text does not explicitly mention the reasons why the Valar laid down their government, but it is probable that they did not wish to fight against the host of the Númenóreans for they doubted their authority to destroy the host and Númenor. Furthermore, it is possible that the Valar feared that a battle could be as disastrous as the War of Wrath. Be that as it may, the destruction of Númenor and the death of most Númenóre-

⁶ The concept of an Elvish rebirth present in this converse was rejected by Tolkien in his later writings (cf. MR:363, and *Peoples of Middle-earth* [PM]:390).

ans is a result of an intervention of Ilúvatar, though he does not act without the consent of the Valar but because of their request.

Not mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings*, but in a draft to Robert Murray from 4th November 1954, is the third direct intervention of Eru, namely Gandalf's return. Gandalf states that he "was sent back – for a brief time, until my task is done" (LotR:491) and Tolkien explains that this was not "by the 'gods' whose business is only with this embodied world and its time; for he passed 'out of thought and time'." (Letters:203) 'The Authority' mentioned in this draft obviously is Ilúvatar.

Tolkien's (supernatural) belief in a personal God, who is the creator of the world and the master of history, is present in these explicit interventions of Eru in the affairs of Eä. This can be held only by believers in a personal God and is in contrast to a naturalistic view which excludes 'miracles' and denies God's presence as acting subject in history. But since it is present explicitly only in the mythological texts of *The Silmarillion* and only implicitly in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is not necessary to share this belief for enjoying the works.

Distinguished from these explicit interventions in the affairs of Eä is a further way of the acting of God in history, namely providence. A part of this takes place with the influence of the Valar and Maiar in Middle-earth, be it Ulmo's warnings or his design with Tuor or the Istaris in the Third Age.

PATTERNS OF DETERMINATION AND PROVIDENCE IN MIDDLE-EARTH

The term 'providence' does not occur in Tolkien's (fictional) works (it can be seen in Letter # 246), but the concept is present in his mythology, although due to narrative linguistic usage it is mainly expressed by the terms 'doom', 'fate', etc.⁷ In my discussion of the *Narn i Hîn Húrin*

⁷ In this case, a reference to the 'Elvish' origin of the texts in *The Silmarillion* might be helpful since an understanding of the Elvish usage of words like 'doom', 'fate'

(Fornet-Ponse 2005:166-178), I stressed the freedom of Túrin and explained his fate mainly as a consequence of his character and his own free deeds. I indicated a possibility of combining this with providence, for the situations in which Túrin can decide freely emerge from events which are not caused by him. He is free to decide in these situations, but not free to determine the situations in which he has to decide. Tolkien's comment about the heroes in the world of *Beowulf* seems applicable to Túrin: "men caught in the chains of circumstance or of their own character, torn between duties equally sacred, dying with their backs to the wall" (*Beowulf*:17). While the *Narn* emphasizes Túrin's character, the aspect of a preordained 'fate' is more strongly present in the story of Beren and Lúthien than in the story of Túrin. Shippey (1992:226) mentions two meanings of 'fate' in 'Of Beren and Lúthien': on the one hand fate as an external force, and on the other hand, "rather the personal possession of someone or something", which suggests "that fate is not something external and organising, like Providence, but something individual, like 'life' – something however, unlike 'life', which *has been organised*. The very use of the word thus brings up a question of free will." The word 'doom' is more complicated, it can appear as an overmastering Power, with the sense of 'future disaster', but also in its original sense as decision or judgement. Both words "indicate the presence of controlling powers" (Shippey 1992:227). I propose an interpretation within the context of a theological understanding of providence which means both something individual like God's plan for every individual human and something organised like God's plan for his

as meaning an impersonal and external power which determines events would lead to conflicts with the Eldarin knowledge of the Ainur and their knowledge of Eru as creator communicated by the Ainur.

Differences in tone between 'Of Túrin Turambar' and the other stories of the *Quenta Silmarillion* can be explained by the human authorship of this tale, for "the *Narn i Hîn Húrin* was the work of a Mannish poet, Dírhaven, who lived at the Havens of Sirion in the days of Eärendil" (*Unfinished Tales* [UT]:187).

world. Such an interpretation can avoid the denial of logic mentioned by Shippey (1992:227) concerning the indication of controlling powers as well as the freedom of persons to determine their own fate. A theological understanding thus combines the experience of an external organization with the experience of free will.

Since a detailed analysis of *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* is not possible, I restrict myself to ‘Of Beren and Lúthien’ and the main lines of *The Lord of the Rings*.

FREEDOM AND PROVIDENCE IN ‘OF BEREN AND LÚTHIEN’

The word ‘fate’ occurs firstly in the story ‘Of Beren and Lúthien’ in the account of Beren pursuing the orcs who had slain his father: “Then Beren sprang from behind a rock, and slew the captain, and taking the hand and the ring he escaped, being defended by fate; for the Orcs were dismayed, and their arrows wild.” (Sil:164) The defense by fate is explained by the incapability of the Orcs and should therefore be understood as a subsequent explanation, but it may – like in ‘Of Túrin Turambar’ – “mean nothing, be just what people say when they cannot find a better one.” (Shippey 1992:233f) No one knows how Beren found a way to Doriath, but he passed through the Girdle of Melian, “even as she had foretold; for a great doom lay upon him.” (Sil:165) Her foretelling was to Galadriel: “And one of Men, even of Bëor’s house, shall indeed come, and the Girdle of Melian shall not restrain him, for doom greater than my power shall send him” (Sil:144). Similarly, the coming of Carcharoth is explained by fate but also combined with the power of the Silmaril (Sil:184). Since no other Valar or Maiar with a greater power than Melian’s is mentioned as leading Beren to Doriath, this indicates that this doom is in the design of Ilúvatar.

During the first meeting of Beren and Lúthien in which Beren calls Lúthien ‘Tinúviel’ it says: “But as she looked on him, doom fell upon her, and she loved him” (Sil:165), although she flees. This conceptualises

‘doom’ as an external force, but it can also mean the providential pattern by which Ilúvatar designed a union of Elves and Men. Tolkien expresses this view in his draft letter to Peter Hastings (Letter # 153, Letters:194): “The entering into Men of the Elven-strain is indeed represented as part of a Divine Plan for the ennoblement of the Human Race, from the beginning destined to replace the Elves.”⁸ Thus, he wrote (Sil:165f):

And wandering in mind he groped as one that is stricken with sudden blindness, and seeks with hands to grasp the vanished light. Thus he began the payment of anguish for the fate that was laid on him; and in his fate Lúthien was caught, and being immortal she shared in his mortality, and being free received his chain [...].⁹

What is meant by Lúthien’s freedom and Beren’s chain? It could mean mortality, but since this is mentioned separately and not understood as ‘chain’ but as freedom, based on the respective lines of the *Lay of Leithian*, I think it refers above all to their love and with this perhaps to Beren’s part in the divine plan. This passage expresses the power of love, but also the freedom of both protagonists, for Lúthien returns to

⁸ Cf. Gwindor’s words to Finduilas concerning her love to Túrin: “It is not fitting that the Elder Children of Ilúvatar should be wed with the Younger; nor is it wise, for they are brief, and soon pass, to leave us in widowhood while the world lasts. Neither will fate suffer it, unless it be once or twice only, for some high cause of doom that we do not perceive.” (Sil:210) Similarly Finrod tells Andreth: “Nay, *adaneth*, if any marriage can be between our kindred and thine, then it shall be for some high purpose of Doom. Brief it will be and hard at the end. Yea, the least cruel fate that could befall would be that death should soon end it.” (MR:324)

⁹ Cf. Lines 786-793 of *The Lay of Leithian* (Release from Bondage) (*Lays of Beleriand* [LB]:184): “And thus in anguish Beren paid / for that great doom upon him laid. / the deathless love of Lúthien, / too fair for love of mortal Men; / and in his doom was Lúthien snared, / the deathless in his dying shared; / and Fate them forged a binding chain / of living love and mortal pain.” The main points of ‘doom’ or ‘Fate’ as individual and organised, but not effective without consent of the individuals are present yet in this 1931 abandoned lay.

Beren. As she leads him before the throne of Thingol, and Thingol questions him, it seemed to Beren “that words were put into his mouth” (Sil:166) and he says: “My fate, O King, led me hither” and expresses his desire for Lúthien. Therefore, Thingol wants to kill him, but Melian counsels him to “forgo his wrath”. “‘For not by you,’ she said, ‘shall Beren be slain; and far and free does his fate lead him to the end, yet it is wound with yours. Take heed!’” (Sil:167) Here both aspects, the individual freedom and the external organization, are expressed. She does not force Thingol but counsels him – an expression of his freedom. Thingol’s part in the divine plan to overcome Melkor/Morgoth consists in the request to bring him a Silmaril, which he thinks is deadly. “Thus he wrought the doom of Doriath, and was ensnared within the curse of Mandos” (Sil:167). This is in accordance with a passage much later when grief and silence have come upon Doriath, and Thingol turns to Melian. She says “that the doom that he had devised must work to its appointed end, and that he must wait now upon time” (Sil:183), which indicates clearly the working of a providential pattern through the actions of individuals who are not wholly aware of the consequences of their decisions. But these decisions are necessary for the appointed end. “Words overpower intentions. In any case intentions are not always known to the intenders. This is the sense of ‘doom’ which Tolkien strives to create from oaths and curses and bargains, and from the interweaving of the fates of objects, people and kingdoms.” (Shippey 1992:231)

The combination of the Oath of Fëanor is also perceived by Felagund, who states, that “it seems that this doom goes beyond his [= Thingol’s] purpose, and that the Oath of Fëanor is again at work.” (Sil:169) By his own vow to Barahir, Felagund too is ensnared. As he and Beren are captured by Sauron, only Lúthien comes with Huan¹⁰ to their

¹⁰ Huan’s fate decreed in Valinor “that he should meet death, but not until he encountered the mightiest wolf that would ever walk the world” (Sil:173) can be under-

aid, after being held fast by Celegorm and Curufin. Combined with the later meeting of Beren, Lúthien and Celegorm and Curufin, by which Beren took Angrist, now all is provided which is needed to fulfill the task. This can be interpreted as chance but also as providence, since the text leaves no doubt about their freedom. This is clearly stated in the choice which Lúthien puts before Beren:

You must choose, Beren, between these two: to relinquish the quest and your oath and seek a life wandering upon the face of the earth; or to hold to your word and challenge the power of darkness upon its throne. But on either road I shall go with you, and our doom shall be alike (Sil:177).

While this expresses above all Lúthien's love for Beren, it also hints at a providential pattern which demands the consent of free creatures, rather than fate as a power which overrules all wills. The same concept is present in the words of Huan when he speaks for the second time. According to him, Beren can deny his doom, but this denial is combined with danger:

You can turn from your fate and lead her into exile, seeking peace in vain while your life lasts. But if you will not deny your doom, then either Lúthien, being forsaken, must assuredly die alone, or she must with you challenge the fate that lies before you – hopeless, yet not certain. (Sil:179)

In this scene, Beren recognizes the inseparable bond between his and Lúthien's doom and that they can only fulfil their task together. The

stood in terms of a task for Huan since he has to stay alive until he fights Carcharoth and thereby saving the Silmaril. Sauron's "thought that he himself would accomplish it" (Sil:175) turned out to be incorrect but was it necessary for him to be overthrown by Huan.

snapping of Angrist as Beren tries to cut out another Silmaril indicates another doom for them and can be understood in the context of a providential pattern that provides sufficient help for the accomplishment of one's task but not beyond. The rescue of Beren and Lúthien by Thorondor and his vassals as "the Quest of the Silmaril was like to have ended in ruin and despair" (Sil:182) bears the main points of a eucatastrophe, "the sudden joyous 'turn' [... which] denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*" (*On Fairy Stories* [FS]:68f).

Beren at last persuaded Lúthien to return to Doriath for he could not forget his oath and would not withhold her from Thingol. "So their doom willed it." (Sil:183) They return in the time of Carcharoth's onslaught and listening to their tale,

it seemed to Thingol that this Man was unlike all other mortal Men, and among the great in Arda, and the love of Lúthien a thing new and strange; and he perceived that their doom might not be withstood by any power of the world. Therefore at the last he wielded his will. (Sil:184f)

Since Thingol's will is spoken of, his perception that the doom of Beren and Lúthien might not be withstood should rather be interpreted as expression of a providential pattern which demands the consent of free creatures than as expressing a power which overrules all wills. But because of Carcharoth, the Quest is not yet fulfilled, so they have to encounter him. According to Shippey (1992:227), three meanings are present in Beren's last words to Thingol ("Now is the Quest achieved [...] and my doom full-wrought" (Sil:186)): "That sentence on him has finally been executed[, that disaster has come at last[, and] that his life has now reached a proper close, with all debts paid, promises and curses fulfilled". In my opinion, the last meaning is the most present one.

The events after the first death of Beren are of central importance. Initially, at Luthien's request, he does not leave the world like every other human being but waits in the Halls of Mandos. Lúthien comes to Mandos and moves him to pity with her song. But because he "had no power to withhold the spirits of Men that were dead within the confines of the world, after their time of waiting; nor could he change the fates of the Children of Ilúvatar" (Sil:187), he goes to Manwë to whom the will of Ilúvatar is revealed. Lúthien is given the choice to dwell without Beren in Valimar or to become mortal and dwell in Middle-earth.

This doom she chose, forsaking the Blessed Realm,
and putting aside all claim to kinship with those that
dwell there; that thus whatever grief might lie in wait,
the fates of Beren and Lúthien might be joined, and
their paths lead together beyond the confines of the
world. (Sil:187)

Throughout this story, the free acceptance of the appointed plan of an authority is present. This illustrates the concept of providence and the combination of an appointed plan and the freedom to consent to it and thereby fulfil it.

FREEDOM AND PROVIDENCE IN THE LORD OF THE RINGS

The significance of themes such as providence, fate, chance or free will were recognized early in Tolkien criticism and evidenced by Tolkien scholars (cf. Dubs, Spacks, Pirson, Urang and many others), and thus it is not necessary to prove it with many examples.

Providence acting in the world is obvious in many episodes, and a recitation of them all would prove tedious. The 'fortuitous' appearance of Strider at *The Prancing Pony*, and the 'lucky' rescue by elves who

aren't usually seen in those parts but who just 'happen' by, are but two of the many episodes which illustrate the providential pattern. (Dubs 1981:38)

Spacks (1959:57) speaks truly of a "repeated emphasis on the importance of free will and on Fate which is not chance", of the "necessity for free decision" which "is to become a central issue of the trilogy", of the implied structured universe, a "plan in the universe", an "ordering force in the universe", "one ordering power in the universe" (Spacks 1959:59). She combines this with the Valar and the One mentioned in the appendices and states – still valid: "So it is that the Fate which governs all here is not arbitrary. Indeed, as has been hinted already in relation to Bilbo's act of mercy, it is to some extent determined by individual acts of will." (Spacks 1959:59) Without being explicit, this is a clear reference to a theological understanding of the interaction between providence and free will. But Tolkien (Letters:201) states

[I] purposely kept all allusions to the highest matters down to mere hints, perceptible only by the most attentive, or kept them under unexplained symbolic forms. So God and the 'angelic' gods, the Lords or Powers of the West, only peep through in such places as Gandalf's conversation with Frodo [...].

This hidden presence may be a reason for the success of *The Lord of the Rings*, since it does not force a theological understanding upon the reader but leaves the conclusions to his or her freedom. Regarding the significance of Boethius for medievalists, it is small wonder that Dubs explains this by referring to Boethius' concept of providence, fate and chance. It is important to note

that Boethius presents a universe created and governed by a benevolent providence, a universe of

order and harmony in which everything – including fate and chance – has purpose, even if that purpose is beyond the perception of human understanding.
(Dubs 1981:37)

The main aspects of a theological understanding of the interaction of providence with free will as dependent upon each other (as in Boethius' view) are clearly present in the debate between Gandalf and Frodo in *The Shadow of the Past*. Gandalf emphasizes the providential pattern which, on the one hand, chooses individuals and puts them in situations in which they have to act,¹¹ but on the other hand depends on the free decisions of these chosen individuals. The individual has to be aware of his role in the larger pattern but is not forced to act according to this role. In this way, individual freedom challenges providence since the individual can deny or accept the appointed task. The view that each individual has a special role to play, is emphasized by Elrond's reaction to Frodo's decision to take the Ring: "I think that this task is appointed for you, Frodo; and that if you do not find a way, no one will." (LotR:264) This raises the question of what would have happened if Frodo had chosen not to take the Ring. Bullock (1985:29) thinks because of the importance of free will "someone else would have", which is possible if we regard Eru's power to integrate free decisions in his own plan. But this scene can be read also as expression of the theological view of grace as enabling the creature to accept the grace offered by God and thus supporting the free will thesis. Tolkien himself comments upon Frodo's failure as a hero in his drafts to Eileen Elgar (Letters:326):

¹¹ "But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have." (LotR:60) "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. And that may be an encouraging thought." (LotR:54f) The chosenness may be encouraging since the notion of an ordering power may provide hope as long as this power is regarded as good.

But grace is not infinite, and for the most part seems in the Divine economy limited to what is sufficient for the accomplishment of the task appointed to one instrument in a pattern of circumstances and other instruments.

This can be seen as valid for the entire plot of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien expresses his belief of a continuous acting of Providence. Drury (1980:9) refers to the paradoxical coordination of affairs by a providential design while it does not force actions upon characters and sees a parallel to “the traditional Christian view of God at work through history”.

Dickerson (2003:182f) refers to Elrond’s welcoming of the Council where he says, each person present was called thither but not by him and interprets Elrond’s phrase “by chance as it may seem” (LotR:236) as “a clear implication that it is not by chance at all, but by some greater intentional purpose that only seemed like chance.” Elrond indicates the existence of an ordering power.

The importance of choices recurs throughout the work and they appear *ex eventu* as the right ones. In this way Aragorn’s choice to follow Merry and Pippin, his choice to take the Paths of the Dead, the Ents’ choice to attack Isengard, Faramir’s choice to let Frodo and Samwise go, Samwise’s choice to take the Ring, Merry’s insistence of riding with the Rohirrim and many others are, in retrospect, all necessary to overcome Sauron. Thus they are interesting examples for the interaction of divine will and individual will in fulfilling the plan of the providential power. The different alternatives within the interaction of fate and free will (to accept one’s fate) is expressed in Frodo and Gollum:

Perhaps the ultimate refinement of Tolkien’s concern with interactive fate and free will is embodied in these two, for one willingly accepts his fate while

the other is fated to follow his will. [...] Frodo freely accepts what is destined to happen. [...] Gollum is destined to be driven by his own desires.

(Flieger 2002:151)

In my understanding, ‘destined’ does not mean that this is inevitable but that this is the plan and role appointed by Providence for each individual. Even though Gollum does not accept his role, his desires combined with the mercy of Frodo and Sam can be used by Providence to destroy the Ring without denying their freedom.

Another aspect of providence are the many prophecies and visions in *The Lord of the Rings* and their impact on the plot. But even this does not deny free will, rather it is “somehow used by the manager to bring about the very events that were fated and foretold by prophecy.” (Dickerson 2003:181) Dickerson combines this with Ilúvatar’s power to use free individual choices for his own ends. Regarding the *Ainulindalë*, these prophecies may partly be derived from a knowledge of the Music – directly or indirectly.

Having stressed the existence of free will throughout *The Lord of the Rings* I should at least mention the one example in which free will is not present, Frodo’s declaration: “But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!” (LotR:924) Flieger (2002:153f) states that Frodo believes he is acting freely but “his will has been perverted and his choice preempted”, whereas Shippey (2000:140) regards the choice of words as accurate and indicating that Frodo’s will is subdued, “Frodo does not choose; the choice is made for him”. Like Spacks (1959:64), he refers to the statement that in the heart of the realm of Sauron “all other powers were here subdued.” (LotR:924) The domination of other wills is the declared purpose of Sauron and the Ring is the means by which he wants to achieve it. But this is not a proof for a lack of free will in Middle-earth. Instead it expresses the experience of a situation in which a free decision is limited

or no longer possible. In my opinion, Tolkien himself offered a valid interpretation: “Frodo had done what he could and spent himself completely (as an instrument of Providence) and had produced a situation in which the object of his quest could be achieved.” (Letters:326) But it is not necessary that he himself achieves the object of his quest, since grace is not infinite and Tolkien himself was aware of a Divine economy of grace. In another draft he wrote that by a ‘grace’ the last betrayal of Gollum “was at a precise juncture when the final evil deed was the most beneficial thing any one cd. have done for Frodo!” (Letters:234). Flieger (2002:154) comments, regarding the freedom of Frodo and Gollum beyond the Music: “Fate and free will have come together to produce the inevitable, unpredictable, and necessary end.” Hibbs (2003:170) expresses pointedly how the destruction of the Ring depends on earlier events: “Gollum is, as Gandalf had predicted, an unwitting instrument of divine providence, but he manages to serve this role only because Frodo had earlier recalled Gandalf’s words and taken to heart his plea for mercy and patience.”

Concerning Frodo, Dubs (1981:38) explains clearly the interaction: “Fate helped Frodo because he helped himself.” The destruction of the Rings can be understood as an act of Providence by the means of Gollum without stating a direct intervention of Eru. This is in accordance with Tolkien’s statement in a letter to Amy Ronald: “The Other Power then took over: the Writer of the Story (by which I do not mean myself).” (Letters:253)

Comparing *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, one cannot deny that there are great differences in the presentation of the problem of free will and providence. But I hope to have shown that the patterns are the same, that is, that Providence exists in Middle-earth and that this does not deny but rather challenge the freedom of the individual. Providence is the will of Ilúvatar and he has the power to use the free decisions of the protagonists to his own ends without limiting

their freedom. This appears often as paradoxical but accords with our own experience of free will and a providential pattern, 'luck' or 'chance'. Maybe one of the reasons for the great success of *The Lord of the Rings* is its authenticity and complexity regarding the concepts of chance, fate, providence, freedom of will, etc. Furthermore, Dickerson's observation (2003:171) is worth considering: "For part of the wonder of the Hobbits' existence in Middle-earth is precisely their anachronistic nature: the fact that we see regular people placed in heroic situations, situations that require heroic actions." A similar view is expressed by Shippey (1992:240) who sees in *The Lord of the Rings* a balance "between ancient and modern modes of presentation, and between ancient and modern theories of virtue." I would add that the hidden character of the highest matters also adds to the applicability of *The Lord of the Rings*.

FREEDOM AND PROVIDENCE AS ANTI-MODERN ELEMENTS?

Returning to our starting question we can ascertain that Tolkien provides a more or less traditional theological concept of the interaction of providence and free will. In this way, Tolkien's works explain the interdependence of freedom and providence and this does not contradict necessarily a modern conviction of freedom. Since the free will is not limited by Providence, but challenged by it, this does not necessarily result in a conflict with modern (a-theistic) concepts of freedom. A conflict with these arises out of the origin of freedom (and thereby out of the question of the proper use of freedom) for Tolkien declares the One God to be the creator and origin of freedom. Combined with this is the great significance of a providential pattern both in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. This and the emphasis on God's acting in history both by means of interventions and providence are indeed anti-modern elements in the sense that they express old and continuous theological convictions and stand against the modern questioning of these concepts.

But since these theological concepts are only implicitly present in *The Lord of the Rings*, the reader may be aware of them but he can explain them with other concepts. Even the explicit mentioning of Ilúvatar in *The Silmarillion* can be explained as due to the use of mythological language. Both texts, *The Lord of the Rings* more than *The Silmarillion*, can be classified as ‘open texts’ with a wide range of applicability and a strong ethical impact (which can be shared also by modern readers). By not denying paradoxical experiences their authenticity contributes to their success and significance.

Furthermore, with its strong emphasis on free will Tolkien’s work contradicts naturalistic positions. If naturalists enjoy reading *The Lord of the Rings*, they should be aware that they are enjoying a book which contains with its strong emphasis on free will and freedom views that are – according to their own view – wrong. But since they are naturalists, they have to be convinced not to have an alternative to enjoying this book. But I prefer enjoying Tolkien’s book because of its quality rather than because of merely biochemical processes.

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