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<div align="center">The Virtue of Wisdom in The Lord of the Rings</div>

Sewn into the fabric of the time-space continuum are tales of epic proportions on virtues: the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, from Mesopotamia; Homer's *Odyssey*, from Greece; Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy,* from Italy; and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings,* the British storyteller's magnum opus. One of Tolkien's most predominant themes of virtue throughout his trilogy is that of wisdom, a moral defined best by Plato, Thomas Aquinas, and Raymond Devettere. With the definitions set in place by these men, one may begin to ascribe the actions of Gandalf the Grey, Frodo Baggins, and Samwise Gamgee to the virtue of wisdom.

Plato proposed multiple definitions of wisdom throughout his oeuvre of works, specifically in his dialogues *Meno, Theaetetus,* and *Republic.* David Wolfsdorf, a published professor in ethics at Temple University, analyzed Plato's definition of wisdom in *Meno* as "true belief with [aetiological reasoning]" being that "aetiological reasoning" is the reason or cause of an entity's existence in a certain state or form (Wolfsdorf 59). Take, for instance, the question, "why is the sky blue?" In order to answer it, one must both explain the question asked and justify it (when one looks up at the sky, it appears blue), at which point the asker of the question will imbue their belief upon the answer. Wisdom and knowledge are two separate beasts; knowledge can be included in wisdom, but the reasoning and justification of concepts which one does not know is pure wisdom, not knowledge. In the Platonic era, natural scientists did not *know* why the sky was blue; it was up to the philosophers to rationalize why it was blue with their *wisdom.*

In *Theaetetus,* Wolfsdorf interprets Plato's definition of wisdom further as, "true belief with an 'account,'" with the "account" being "one kind of aetiological reasoning" split into a

decompositional and a differential form (Wolfsdorf 61). The decompositional account is akin to Bacon's inductive reasoning, in which a concept is characterized by its elements. It is like identifying a human skeleton by the presence of the clavicles, the spine, the pelvis, and so forth. On the other hand, the differential account is like Descartes' deductive reasoning, since it argues that a concept can be uniquely characterized based on general principles instead of its individual parts. To expand on the skeleton example, one can distinguish a human skeleton from other animal skeletons because it appears different; there is no presence of wing structures, a tail, or horns--it is distinct.

In *Republic,* Plato makes an even further distinction of wisdom, dissociating it entirely from belief. It is here that Plato defines wisdom simply as aetiological reasoning. Wolfsdorf argues that there is a dichotomy of persons mentioned in this work: philosophers and "perception-lovers." The former "possesses knowledge," and the latter "merely possesses belief" (Wolfsdorf 63). For example, a casual lover of art (the perception-lover) might view a painting and admire it for its aesthetic qualities, its rendering of forms, and its atmosphere; a critic (the philosopher) would admire the artist's application of brushstrokes, its anatomical form, and the layering of paint to create illusions of depth and light and shadow.

As Plato progresses in his work, his definition of wisdom dwindles in length, but not in depth. From *Meno* to *Theaeteteus* to *Republic*, Plato carves down his conception of wisdom from "true belief with [aetiological reasoning]" to "true belief with an 'account'" to simply aetiological reasoning (Wolfsdorf 59-63).

Thomas Aquinas, a more faith-based philosopher than his forebear, Plato, further separated the ideas of belief and wisdom; however, instead of discounting belief, he took it as another form of wisdom, unlike Plato in *Republic.* Douglas Soccio from *Archetypes of Wisdom*

perhaps put it best when he wrote, "[Aquinas] was not free to *pursue* the truth wherever it led; he *started from the truth*" (Soccio 259). Christopher Brown from the peer-reviewed *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* acknowledges that Aquinas' theory of science-based wisdom, or scientia, is along the lines of, "if I believe [in a concept] by [scientific experimentation], then I am confident that [a concept] is true," and it can be backed up by compelling reasons and understanding of those reasons (Brown). We know that the acceleration due to gravity on Earth is 9.8 meters per second squared because it can be tested and measured by anyone with a meter stick and a stopwatch.

As for Aquinas' theory of faith-based wisdom, Kieran Conley, an author on theology, writes, "a second wisdom finds its beginning in faith… whose light, no longer merely that of reason, is rather reason illuminated by faith" (Conley 20). Aquinas' theory of belief-based wisdom, or faith, is such that "if I believe [in a concept] by faith, then I am confident that [a concept] is true," and it can be backed up by testimony or scientific fact (Brown). In this regard, faith is backed up by reasoning of scientia. We know that the air exists because we believe with confidence that it does, and this belief is backed up with our empirical proof of being able to breathe.

The most recent philosopher of these three, Raymond Devettere, introduces a new definition quilted from the fabric of the thinkers who came before him. Devettere defines wisdom as "prudence," the "deliberation and reasoning in any particular situation that determines what feelings and behaviors will truly promote my good or at least avoid the worse bad [option]" (Devettere 33). The foundation of this prudential way of life and understanding is the center of the golden scale, in the sense that "a good life is enhanced by striking a balance between feelings and behaviors that are neither excessive nor deficient" (Devettere 34). It has not just one or two

components, but eight: memory, understanding, learning from the prudent, shrewdness, reasoning, consideration of consequences, consideration of circumstances, and caution. On their own, these diminutive virtues do little; but when combined, all these facets form a powerful bond to produce wisdom.

Devettere's form of wisdom is more practical and focused on performing wise actions rather than on thinking wise thoughts or stewing in thought. All the wisdom of humanity will not do anything unless it is actually applied to a situation. In Norman Melchert's analysis of Plato's theory of the tripartite soul, reason is personified by the charioteer who "guide[s] the soul," while spirit and desire are personified as the two steeds driving the cart (Melchert 144). Reason cannot drive the chariot when there are no horses to draw it; this is why Devettere gives merit to prudence and practical reasoning.

As for the different kinds of actions and decisions to take, Devettere defines two forms of decision making: "rational choice" and "naturalistic decision making." Rational choice decisions are comparative; when one uses this strategy, they "[lay] out as many alternatives as possible and… [compare] the favorable and unfavorable consequences of each" (Devettere 38). Rational choice is, in essence, deliberation, since it is a slow, methodical process of decision making. On the other hand, naturalistic decision making is much quicker, since one using this strategy "[considers] only one or a few options in light of their goal and then [recognizes] what would likely achieve that goal" (Devettere 38). Naturalistic decision making is quicker than the deliberation involved in rational choice decision making, but that does not mean that it is hasty. It is more pointed, since it eliminates the unnecessary choices and factors one might consider in a rational choice decision process. One such form of naturalistic decision making is "recognition-primed decision," in which one "[recognizes] quickly what is going on and what to do about it"

(Devettere 39). Recognition-primed decision cuts to the chase quickly, and it is an imperative form of judgement to have in a fast-paced environment. In the context of a chemistry laboratory, a new chemist may look through every jar of chemicals to find what he needs; this is rational choice. A more seasoned chemist may head to where the alkaline earth metals are stored in order to find a jar of magnesium; this is naturalistic decision making. The head chemist knows exactly where her materials are, and she may reach for the jar of magnesium quicker than her coworkers; this is recognition-primed decision. Quicker, wiser decisions are borne from experience, hence why the head chemist can find her materials faster than her new coworker.

To put these theories in context, Gandalf is the primary exemplar of wisdom in *The Lord of the Rings.* He serves as the moral standard for all other characters in the story, good or bad. During the council on the Fellowship of the Ring, Lord Elrond cautioned against the hobbits going on the journey, saying to them, "'you do not understand and cannot imagine what lies ahead.'" Gandalf replies, "'[n]either does Frodo…[n]or do any of us see clearly...in this matter it would be well to trust rather to their friendship than to great wisdom'" (FR 269). Here, Gandalf displays a Devettereian form of wisdom, exercising shrewdness and careful consideration of the consequences and circumstances. In a sense, he has rephrased the Socratic paradox from Plato's *Apology*, "He, O men, is the wisest who, like Socrates, knows his wisdom is in truth worth nothing" (Kessler 41). He knows that no seasoned rider or wisened sorcerer can compare to the bonds that Merry and Pippin have with Frodo; he is acutely aware of Frodo's motivation, and he appeals to the council according to what he thinks will be best for Frodo's well-being and the Fellowship as a whole.

When in the mines of Moira, Gandalf spent quite some time deliberating over which way to lead the troupe of Middle-Earthers. In "trying to recall every memory of his former journey in

the Mines, and considering anxiously the next course that he should take," Gandalf exercises Devetterian wisdom here again. He then decides to "take the right-hand passage," explaining, "'I do not like the feel of the middle way; and I do not like the smell of the left-hand way: there is foul air down there, or I am no guide'" (FR 306). He uses his memory, reasoning, shrewdness, and caution to form a course of action to pass through the mine safely. This intuition does not save him from encountering the balrog, but it steers the entourage clear of other dangers, like more orcs. As this method took quite some time, one may argue that it goes against Devettere's quick-paced theory of prudence; this careful deliberation was as a result of Gandalf being forced to think with the rational choice strategy as opposed to the naturalistic decision making strategy, and he suffered for his decision. He's only Maia.

Fighting the Balrog on the bridge of Khazad-Dum, Gandalf turns to battle alone, exclaiming, "'Fly! This is a foe beyond any of you. I must hold the narrow way'" (FR 321). Though the balrog is "'something that [Gandalf has] not seen before,'" he uses his quick wit to concentrate the beast's attacks on him instead of the rest of the company (FR 319). This fast-paced decision is exactly what Devettere idealized wisdom to be: this prudential "recognition-primed decision" allows Gandalf to make the wise naturalistic decision to fight the balrog on his own, minimizing damage to the group (Devettere, 39). Though self-sacrifice is often not viewed as wise, per se, it is wise here since Gandalf has the best chance at defeating the balrog, and he inhibits the other members of the party from damaging themselves. Gandalf knows it is more conducive to the journey to lose one party member than the whole party; they can go on without him, but they cannot go on if they are all wounded from the balrog.

From these applications, it is apparent that Gandalf's wisdom ties in most closely with Raymond Devettere's concept of wisdom, since it is complex, contemplative, and lofty compared to the wisdom of the other characters.

Aside from the story's primary exemplar of wisdom, there are other characters who display the virtue as well, just not in the same way. In terms of on-the-ground reasoning, Frodo is adept at making quick, wise choices based on his intuition and emotional judgement. Gauging the atmosphere on the road, Frodo decided to hide from the path, telling the others, "'I wonder if that is Gandalf coming after us,' said Frodo; but even as he said it, he had a feeling that it was not so, and a sudden desire to hide from the view of the rider came over him" (FR 73). Here, Frodo operates with Plato's differential account, feeling that the energy of the rider is darker than that of Gandalf. Though he had not seen visual proof of the rider's darkness, Frodo's intuition alerted him to the danger of the path. With this wisdom, he is able to lead his comrades to safety, out of the view of the rider. If he had not used this differential judgement, they may have been done in before even reaching Bree.

Sidestepping the riders was far from the only danger Frodo would face on his journey. At Parth Galen, Boromir tries to convince Frodo to give the ring to him, thinking Frodo might have a more naive opinion on the Ring's fate than the members of the Council. Boromir argues, "'The Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner!'" In this language, Boromir explains only how the Ring's power would fuel him: it "'would give me power… [h]ow I would drive the hosts of Mordor… all men would flock to my banner!'" Because of this self-important language, Frodo denies his quest, "'glad to have heard you speak so fully. My mind is clearer now'" (FR 389). Already untrusting of Boromir, Frodo's knowledge fits into the realm of Aquinas' scientia; he believed Boromir was

not to be trusted, and this interaction gave him the evidence he needed to ground his confidence in Boromir's character. All that he needs to do is crack the reins for his spirit to follow through with his wisdom.

Later, when Boromir tries to seize the Ring from Frodo, the hobbit's quick wisdom kicks in. As "[Boromir's] fair and pleasant face...hideously changed," Frodo knew he had no other logical options to take. "There was only one thing he could do: trembling he pulled out the Ring upon its chain and quickly slipped it on his finger, even as Boromir sprang at him again" (FR 390). Though Frodo knew putting on the Ring was against Gandalf's best wishes and would reveal his location to Sauron, he made this decision to save the Ring from falling into the hands of evil. This is different than the confrontation in the Barrow-Downs, in which Frodo contemplated putting on the ring, because there was no immediate danger to the Ring falling into enemy hands. Frodo risks his life to keep the Ring safe, knowing that its safety is more imperative to the fate of Middle Earth than his own. In this instance, he most likely did not consider the consequences of his actions, but he still acted with a Devetterian recognition-primed decision to keep the Ring from harm.

Clearly, Frodo's conception of wisdom is multi-faceted and draws from several different sources on the virtue. He is not stretched thin across these theories; rather, he keeps them in his mind to use when needed, as valuable and useful as his mithril armor.

While Frodo's wisdom is more complex than Gandalf's, Sam's version of wisdom is hardy and quick, rooted in expertise and knowledge of his friend, Frodo. In order to prevent Frodo from any harm, Sam eavesdrops on him when gardening the Baggins' property to ensure that Frodo does not get into harm's way. When confronted, he explains to Frodo, "'Begging your pardon, sir! But I meant no wrong to you, Mr. Frodo, nor to Mr. Gandalf for that matter. *He* has

some sense, mind you; and when you said *go alone,* he said *no! Take someone as you can trust'"* (FR 103). Sam puts Frodo's trust in him on the line in order to keep him safe. Here, Sam represents the Platonic ideal of wisdom; at least, the version of wisdom Plato proposed in *Republic.* Sam is, in a sense, a philosopher in this respect--he sees past Frodo's facade of well-being and uses his gossip-gathering skills for good. In temporarily betraying Frodo's trust, Sam cements himself as a moral character who puts the greater good above all else, taking charge when it is wise to do so.

Before Frodo put on the Ring to escape from Boromir's fit of greed, Sam jokingly foreshadowed Frodo's faux pas, saying to Aragorn, "'If he screws himself up to go, he'll want to go alone. Mark my words! We're going to have trouble when he comes back. For he'll screw himself up all right, as sure as his last name's Baggins,'" to which Aragorn replied, "'I believe you speak more wisely than any of us, Sam'" (FR 394). Aside from Aragorn's verbatim use of the virtue, this comment speaks to the level of intuition Sam has about Frodo. This interaction aligns Sam's wisdom with Plato's definition of wisdom from *Meno,* since he is acutely aware of Frodo's tendency to "'screw himself up'" (FR 394). Sam believes that Frodo will screw up on this leg of the journey, and he knows from prior experience (his aetiological reasoning) that his friend is a real star student at screwing up.

As Frodo's disappearance became known, Aragorn attempted to wrangle together a search party, but, "It was no good. They took no notice of him. Sam had dashed off first" (FR 395). Again, Sam is leading the charge with his knowledge of Frodo's behavior and his intuition. When attempting to find Frodo, Sam cycles through his options of where to go, much like in Devettere's rational choice method. "'Think, if you can! He can't fly across rivers, and he can't jump waterfalls. He's got no gear. So he's got to get back to the boats. Back to the boats! Back to

the boats, Sam, like lightning!'" (FR 396). This method of decision making is not nearly as effective as naturalistic decision making, but it still results in Sam stopping Frodo from leaving alone. Though Sam's wisdom here is unfitting of the definition Devettere proposed, it does fit in with Plato's decompositional account from *Theaetetus*. Sam eliminates Frodo's potential paths of escape in his mind by visualizing the landscape of Parth Galen and remembering Frodo's abilities to flee with the Ring on.

With his technical form of knowledge, Sam proves himself to be wise in practical situations, using Plato's form of wisdom to reason on the ground, much like Frodo. However, Sam is different; he is more of a novice in wisdom than Frodo or Gandalf, as can be seen by his use of rational choice decision making.

The virtue of wisdom is exemplified by nearly every character in *The Lord of the Rings,* but the characters who most closely embody wisdom are Gandalf the Grey, Frodo Baggins, and Samwise Gamgee. While the theories of Plato, Thomas Aquinas, and Raymond Devettere fit quite well into their archetypes, these characters are just fictional, and these thinkers are just three of many philosophers who have contemplated what it means to be wise. However, without fictional characters and scenarios, there would be no one to explore the vast expanses of morality and ethics, of which we cannot travel within the confines of reality. Tolkien's work is invaluable to the moral landscape of humanity.

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