

ARTYKUŁY

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DRYAS¹ NON EST ANIMA TANTUM. ON THE METAPHYSICAL IDENTITY OF J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S CONCEPT OF THE ELVES IN THE CONTEXT OF THOMISTIC HYLOMORPHISM

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the argument is to analyse J. R. R. Tolkien's conception of the metaphysical status and character of the Middle-earth's Elves which emerges from the materials collected in *The Nature of Middle-earth* volume. The analysis will focus specifically on the interrelation between the soul/“spirit” and the body, or the *fëa* and the *hröa*, against the Thomistic interpretation of the Aristotelian hylomorphic framework. Stemming from the recognition of Tolkien's considerable indebtedness to Aquinas' philosophical and theological legacy the argument will aim to position Tolkien's idea behind the most distinctly unique species of his secondary world in the context of the polarity between the medieval Platonic tradition which seeks to define personal identity as a function of the *anima intellectiva* solely and the Aristotelian perspective whereby the notion of personal identity is the function of the concept of form and matter united in the natural substance.

KEYWORDS: Tolkien, Aquinas, fantasy, personality, medieval philosophy

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the argument is to analyse J. R. R. Tolkien's conception of the individual identity developed in the context of the Middle-earth's Elves, as it emerges from the materials collected in *The Nature of Middle-earth* volume. The analysis will focus specifically on Tolkien's definition of the interrelation between the soul/“spirit” and the body, or the *fëa* and the *hröa*, problematised against the

¹ I use “dryas” as equivalent for “elf” following M. Walker's Latin translation of *The Hobbit*, see Bibliography.



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Thomistic interpretation of the Aristotelian hylomorphic framework. Stemming from the recognition of Tolkien's considerable indebtedness to Aquinas' philosophical and theological legacy, the argument aims to position Tolkien's evolving ideas behind the most distinctly unique species of his secondary world in the context of the polarity between the medieval Platonic tradition, which seeks to define personal identity as a function of the independent human soul and the Aristotelian perspective, whereby personal identity is understood as emerging from the joint operation of the *anima intellectiva*, which is form of the human person and the matter constituted by the corporeal body, both organically united to constitute a complete natural substance.

In his conceptual work at defining the specific identity of the Elves Tolkien steps beyond the modern notions and terminology customarily used in relation to the question of the definition of the identity of sapient species, choosing instead to base his ontology and metaphysics on the existence of a dual scheme comprising a spiritual and material component which harks back to the pre-Cartesian understanding of the idea of the rational being of the natural kind. It is easy to see that behind this decision there clearly lies an urge to position the Elves more firmly within an explicit spiritual context which would have possessed more relevance in a juxtaposition with, and reference to, the Christian philosophical and theological heritage.

Given this context, Tolkien's evolving ideas are best exemplified against the normative background of the dominant intellectual traditions developed before the Cartesian intellectual revolution, which irrevocably redefined our approach to the question of what constitutes human identity. As Tolkien seeks to establish coherent framework which explains the ontological status of his sub-created species, he constantly finds himself oscillating between the two major medieval philosophical traditions as he encounters parallel conceptual problems while exploring the actuality of his secondary reality.

The following discussion is meant to trace Tolkien's frequently inconclusive intellectual endeavor in the context of the interaction of these two major traditions, focusing on those crucial areas which mark the most interesting points of creative effort spent on seeking to reconcile potentially divergent intellectual traditions.

The thrust of the argument is that Tolkien, despite leaning towards the Platonic/Augustinian legacy in his most explicit formulations concerning the Elves' metaphysical status, adopts significant elements of Aquinas' Christian version of Aristotelian hylomorphism in order to account for the intricacies incumbent on the distinctive character of his unique secondary world species.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE PRE-MODERN CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

In order to conceptualise the core of human identity and the underlying referent of self-awareness, it has become customary in modern times to resort to two key concepts: “consciousness” and “personality”. The ubiquitous presence and overwhelming acceptance of the validity of these notions, which have determined our understanding of the human self in recent centuries, may all but obscure the fact that the words themselves had not existed before the seventeenth century² and their roots lie in the Cartesian redefinition of the philosophical determinants of human identity which took place around that time. Indeed through the course of the previous epochs the evolving formulation of the concept of human identity revolves around the notion of the soul.³

As most other ideas, the idea of the soul entered the reservoir of ideas shared across European civilization through contact with the intellectual legacy of ancient Greece. As it crystallised around the IV–Vc. BC the Greek idea of the soul served to define the unique character of the animate forms of being which distinguished them from the inanimate. Determined by this underlying context, the soul was variously defined by the various Greek philosophical schools and traditions, in correspondence to how it was conceptually attached to the various phenomena which were perceived as determinants of what one would term today ‘biological life’ (like respiration, movement, or sensation). Among these opinions, the Stoic concept of the souls is most memorable in this context for laying foundations for a hierarchical scheme whereby the faculties determining biological life functions are distinguished from the higher intellectual operations presided over by the *hēgemonikon*.⁴

The most important redefinition of this tradition happened within the context of the Platonic philosophy, where one of the founding cornerstones was the clear-cut duality between the spiritual and the material forms of existence. Within this framework the human soul was perceived as the independent core of human identity which determines each person’s intellective functions though recourse to the ideal intellectual forms, for which it needs to overcome the obstruction of the corporeal body that

² As the Oxford English Dictionary informs us, the first recorded use of the word “consciousness” in the sense of “Internal knowledge or conviction; the state or fact of being mentally conscious or aware of something” [the restricted meaning, with the preposition “of”] is 1605; in the sense of “The faculty or capacity from which awareness of thought, feeling, and volition and of the external world arises; the exercise of this” the recorded instance is 1678 (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/consciousness_n?tab=meaning_and_use). For “personality”, in the sense of “the quality, character, or fact of being a person, as distinct from an animal, thing, or abstraction; the quality which makes a being human” the first recorded instance is 1655 (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/personality_n?tab=meaning_and_use).

³ For more detailed context, see also Seager (1999: 1–32); Martin, Barresi (2006: 20–152); Heinämaa *et al.* (2007: 29–199).

⁴ For more background, see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ancient-soul/> and <https://iep.utm.edu/stoicmind/>.

it animates by means of its lower functions. Thus Plato memorably states in the XIIth Book of *Laws* “what makes each one us to be what we are is only the soul” (*Laws*, Book XII).

This distinct dichotomy between the corporal and the spiritual was continued in the thought of Aristotle. Within the hylomorphic scheme, the soul was the form, and therefore the act, of the matter constituted by the corporeal body. It was dependent on the physical body for the actuality of its existence and likewise it relied on the sensory and perceptual apparatus which functioned in correlation with the material body for access to the universal concepts which it had to abstract from the particulars of nature in order to actualize its potency for intellectual operation which was central to its essence as a substantial form:

The soul is the first actuality [form] of a natural body that has life potentially (Aristotle, *De Anima*, II, 412a 1).

Because of this status, the soul is not thought of by Aristotle as an independent receptacle for the core of human identity, but it merely constitutes central faculty through which the substantial compound is able to realize its natural potential:

And, since the whole made up of the two is an ensouled thing, the body is not the actuality of soul, but soul the actuality of a particular kind of body. Hence those are right who regard the soul as not independent of body and yet at the same time as not itself a species of body. It is not body, but something belonging to body, and therefore exists in body and, what is more, in such and such a kind of body (Aristotle, *De Anima*, II, 414a 4).

Once we enter the intellectual environment of the Christian Middle Ages we quickly become aware that the contrastive approach developed within the respective Platonic and Aristotelian traditions determined the medieval response to the question of the definition of the soul and its function in defining human identity throughout the whole of the historical period.⁵ By the advent of the High Middle Ages, the general consent on the soul being a spiritual substance composed of the vegetative, sensitive and intellectual parts was shared by both the intellectual elite and the general population. When we narrow our focus to trace the intellectual debates over the specific nature of the soul, we shall clearly distinguish between the Platonic tradition descending through the towering presence of St. Augustine, who states emphatically that “Man, then, as viewed by his fellow-man, is a rational soul with a mortal and earthly body in its service” (*De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* Ch.27.52). This intellectual tradition was later kept alive by the likes of St. Anselm of Canterbury or St. Bonaventure.

⁵ For an extensive treatment of the cultural, historical and intellectual context, and the interaction of the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition, see Haren (1985: 37–206); Maurer (1982: 7–169); Cory (2014: 7–66).

On the other side of the spectrum of opinion we shall encounter the Aristotelian tradition, refreshed by contact with the Arab thought of the X–XIIth centuries, and culminating in the Thomist philosophy of the XIII c. Aquinas explicitly rejects the Platonic/Augustinian understanding of the soul, stating instead:

But it has been shown above that sensation is not the operation of the soul only. Since, then, sensation is an operation of man, but not proper to him, it is clear that man is not a soul only, but something composed of soul and body. Plato, through supposing that sensation was proper to the soul, could maintain man to be a soul making use of the body⁶ (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q75, A4, C).

Thus in a flat rejection of the Platonic/Augustinian tradition, St. Thomas declares that “anima autem cum sit pars corporis hominis, non est totus homo, et anima mea non est ego, / the soul, since it is part of man’s body, is not an entire man, and my soul is not I” (*Super primam epistolam ad Corinthios lectura*, xv, lect. 2, reply v. 19).

What these divergent approaches have in common is the acceptance of the idea of the soul as the causative factor behind the hierarchy of biological, cognitive and intellectual functions which jointly determine the operations of a living organism. Moreover, the two traditions accept the intellectual functions, which constitute the pinnacle of this organic sequential arrangement, to be *par excellence* spiritual involving a recourse to the exemplars existing in the Divine Intellect.

It is this existential status which underlies the insurmountable conceptual gap which yawns between the medieval and modern definitions of the self, based on the concepts of “personality” and “consciousness”. Indeed, this dichotomy has for decades been the focus of scholarly attention:

First of all, the modern concept of “personality” was completely unknown in the sixteenth century. The Greeks had no such concept, and no word for it; in scholastic Latin, *personalitas*, a word unknown in Classical Latin, meant simply the quality of being a man as distinct from being an animal. During the eighteenth century the word “personality” came to mean the sum of the characteristics of an individual, [...] (Robertson 1980: 314–315).

The substantial shift in terminology is evident to have been caused by an equally profound redefinition of the determinant markers which delineate the conceptual framework for the definition of the self.⁷ As J. Haldane elaborates on the distinctiveness of the Thomist tradition against the Cartesian model:

⁶ Cum igitur sentire sit quaedam operatio hominis, licet non propria, manifestum est quod **homo non est anima tantum**, sed est aliquid compositum ex anima et corpore. Plato vero, ponens sentire esse proprium animae, ponere potuit quod homo esset anima utens corpore.

⁷ See also James (2000: 111–130); Cory (2014: 67–220); Cory (2012: 358–270); for an overview of the hylomorphic idea in St. Thomas, see García-Valdecasas (2005: 291–310).

[This is] a philosophy of mind that views the intellect not as in Cartesian fashion, as an entity, but rather as a set of capacities characteristic of substances possessed of a certain type of nature. On this account, thoughts are exercises of these capacities; mental actions of the psychophysical individual.' In Aquinas's philosophy of mind, the nature of the human person – what Stump and Pasnau refer to as the 'cognizer' – is an ontological entity characterized by sets of powers or dispositions that are actualized (Haldane 1989: 18).

Thus, while the modern model defines consciousness as the kernel of a concentric model of the mind, where it corresponds to the emergence of an unique mental space of self-reflection which incorporates the cognitive functions as well as emotional, and even instinctual, responses, the medieval model conceived of self-awareness as the pinnacle of a vertical, hierarchical construct where it corresponds to the degree of participation in an objectively existing universal reservoir of concepts the grasp of which allows one to become cognisant of reality on its ultimate, spiritual level. Thus the Cartesian shift essentially entails a transition for an etic to an emic perspective in viewing the mental operations of the rational mind. As A. Kenny elaborates further on the topic in his seminal *Aquinas on Mind*:

For Aristotelians before Descartes the mind was essentially the faculty, or set of faculties, which set off human beings from other animals. Dumb animals and human beings shared certain abilities and activities: dogs, cows, pigs and men could all see and hear and feel; they all had in common the faculty or faculties of sense-perception. But only human beings could think abstract thoughts and take rational decisions: they were marked off from the other animals by the possession of intellect and will, and it was these two faculties which essentially constituted the mind. Intellectual activity was in a particular sense immaterial, whereas sense-perception was impossible without a material body.

For Descartes, and for many others after him, the boundary between mind and matter was set elsewhere. It was consciousness, Mind and metaphysics not intelligence or rationality, that was the defining criterion of the mental. The mind, viewed from the Cartesian standpoint, is the realm of whatever is accessible to introspection. (...)

Descartes would have agreed with his Aristotelian predecessors that the mind is what distinguishes human beings from other animals. But for the Aristotelians what made this true was that mind was restricted to intellect, and only humans had intellect; for Descartes what made it true was that though mind included sense-perception, only humans had genuine sense-perception. (...)

By introducing consciousness as the defining characteristic of mind, Descartes in effect substituted privacy for rationality as the mark of the mental. The intellectual capacities which distinguish language-using humans from dumb animals are not in themselves marked by any particular privacy (Kenny 1994: 16–18).

The embracement of the Cartesian model which has taken place in the modern age has meant a redefinition of the core characteristics behind the idea of what constitutes a rational being. From now on it is not the ability to think rationally,

but the consciousness of one's mental states which differentiates the human being from other animals. An ensuing consequence of this transition has been the disappearance of the concept of the soul from the conceptual apparatus of natural philosophy as the disciplines which emerged from its decline rejected the dichotomy between the material and the spiritual and, most crucially, separated the concepts of the spiritual and the intellectual.

Thus, although the definition of the rational person based upon the idea of the union between a spiritual component like the soul and the material component like the corporeal body has seemingly lost its immediate scientific validity beyond the realm of theology, the enduring appeal of the model based upon this kind of dichotomy appears to be the effect of the fact that it allows to relate not only an individual's mental states and operations, but also the totality of one's life functions, to an extraneous spiritual point of reference.

AN OVERVIEW OF TERMINOLOGY

It has long been a recognized fact that J. R. R. Tolkien's firm adherence to the principles of the Christian faith, coupled with his most elementary convictions about the role of literary sub-creation as a reflection of the essentially teleological dimension of human existence, as well as his professional expertise, affection and reverence for medieval culture conditioned and determined the character of his literary endeavours. Tolkien's meticulous care in providing a firm sense of underlying realism to the fictional narratives unveiling in the secondary world he worked at for most of his life can indeed be easily traced to each of these factors and the materials collected in *The Nature of Middle-earth* would arguably constitute the most explicit testimony to this aspect of his creative work.⁸

If we focus specifically on the question of the metaphysical status and constitution of the species of the Elves, it might be best to begin with the observation that throughout the early four hundred pages of dense philosophical speculation the word “consciousness” appears once, while “personality” is used twice. Rather, it is consistently the case that Tolkien, while referring to the metaphysical constitution of the Incarnates, or the sapient species of Middle-Earth (a category which is used with reference to Elves and Men, and presumably is implicitly understood as extending to the Dwarfs, Hobbits etc.) makes use of the twin terms: *fëa* (pl. *fëar*) and *hröa* (pl. *hröar*; or, in materials created before 1958: *hrondo*, pl. *hrondor*). These twin Quenya terms are rendered into English as “spirit” and “body” respectively. It is potentially significant, that, while the term “spirit” is ubiquitously used throughout the collected papers, the word “soul”, which is treated by Tolkien as an equivalent, is

⁸ For a more extensive treatment of this aspect, see Kreeft (2005: 31–70); Wood (2003: 11–47); Coutras (2016: 7–77). On Tolkien's indebtedness to Aquinas, see also McIntosh (2017: 28–183).

used only sporadically (i.e. four times in the main body of the texts collected), and, in all but one case, it appears alongside the word “spirit” as a supportive synonym (Tolkien 175, 223, 235, 237). The significance of this lies in the fact, that, if we adopt the Thomist perspective, we may take such usage as a testimony of Tolkien’s preference for treating the spiritual component as independent of the material body wherein it resides and thus adhering somewhat to the Platonic understanding of the soul/body relationship.⁹

In addition to these two basic terms, Tolkien’s also makes persistent use of the Quenya term *sanar* which he translates as “mind”. *Sanar* is consistently used while taking about “thinking” i.e. all forms of intellectual activity, and, crucially, it is “attributed to *fëa*” (Tolkien 223). This conceptualisation is easily reconciled with the cornerstone assumption prevalent in classical philosophy about the intellectual functions bestowing the defining character and identity of the soul of rational beings. This idea does not undergo an substantial change between the Stoic idea of the *hègemonikon* and the Thomist hylomorphic concept of *mens* as the quiddity of *anima intellectiva*.

Tolkien also mentions terms like: *órë*, meaning “innermost mind”, and *indo* rendered mostly as “the will”, and more rarely as “mind”, and defined at one stage as ”a part of the function of the *sanar*” (Tolkien 221). While commenting of the semantic range of *órë* (Tolkien 219–221) Tolkien states that the term “does not correspond in sense to any of the English confused uses of “heart”: memory, reflection; courage, good spirits; emotion, feelings, tender, kind or generous impulses (uncontrolled by, or opposed to the judgements of reason)” (Tolkien 220). This comment amounts to an explicit rejection of the post-Cartesian definitions of the self, and, instead, identifies the concept with “the inner mind”, conceived of in the sense of a constant innate, intuitive sense of relationship with the extraneous spiritual forces, or a state of being alert towards experiencing “things arising in the mind or entering the mind (*sanar*) which the Eldar regarded as sometimes the result of deep reflection (often proceeding in sleep) and sometimes of actual messages or influences on the mind” (Tolkien 221).

Because Tolkien refers in his discussion to “judgements of the *sanar* based on evidence brought to it by the senses or experiences but also by the *órë*” it might perhaps be a useful parallel to conceive of *órë* as the Elvish counterpart to the faculty of *synderesis* – the inborn ethical *habitus* whose function is an instinctive guidance in basic principles of moral actions, and which scholastic philosophy found indispensable to the conscious practice of virtue in primary world humans.¹⁰

⁹ As St. Thomas explains: [f]or the human form and soul is also called spirit. For insofar as he is concerned with the care of the body, namely, with animating, nourishing and generating, thus it is called ‘soul.’ However, insofar as he is concerned with knowledge, namely, with understanding, willing and the like, thus it is called ‘spirit.’” (St. Thomas Aquinas – 1Cor.C15.L7.n991).

¹⁰ For a more extensive discussion of the concept of *synderesis*, see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conscience-medieval/>.

It would seem here that all the various concepts defining rational identity function and are subordinated to the basic duality of the *fëa* and the *hröa*. It is therefore time to explore the nature of their mutual relationship.

THE SPIRIT AND THE BODY IN ELVES

It may be useful to begin the discussion of the reciprocal status of the spirit and the body in Tolkien's Elves by comparing them to the Valar. The Valar are in their nature and constitution a kind of angelic beings which, being the guardians of the created universe of Æa, would, in medieval lore, be clearly identified with the middle triad of the Dominations, Virtues, and Powers (as envisaged in Pseudo-Dionysius' seminal classification of angelic orders enshrined in his *Celestial Hierarchy*).¹¹ Belonging to the category of autonomously existing spiritual beings (or *substantiae separatae* in scholastic terms), they are able to assume corporeal bodies at will without effecting a change in their nature. Tolkien clearly differentiates between the type of bodies which the Valar can take on – calling them *fanar*, and the “normal” physical bodies inseparably combined with the *fëar* of the Incarnates, which are called *hröa*. It is equally significant the Tolkien invariably uses here as equivalent the English term “raiment” (Tolkien 198, 209, 209). Now, “raiment” is evidently an echo of St. Augustine's famous categorisation of types of *habitus* developed in *De Diversis Questionibus LXXXIII*, 73.2. Augustine uses the comparison with clothing to illustrate Christ's adoption of human nature, which becomes the kind of union which ennobles human nature without in any way effecting change in the Divine nature.¹² The importance of this parallel consists in the fact that it seems to introduce an implicit, but principal distinction between the Valar and the Incarnates in the context of the impact the corporal body has on the identity of the spiritual existential core of the respective creatures. Thus Tolkien appears to indicate that it is only in the case of the Valar that the relationship between the spirit and the body does not in principle somehow affect the *fëa*. It seems it is in the context of this assump-

¹¹ See Gilson (2002: 198–203).

¹² “However, this [bodily] habit (habitus) is not of the first kind, for human nature, in its own abiding character, has not changed the nature of God. Nor is it of the second kind, for it is not the case that man has both changed God and been changed by him. Nor [is it] of the fourth kind, for he did not assume humanity in such a way that this humanity neither changed God nor was changed by him. But rather, it is of the third kind, for he took up humanity in such a way that it was transformed for the better, and it was filled out by him in a manner more inexpressibly excellent and intimate than is a garment when put on by a man. Therefore, by this name habit (habitus), the Apostle has adequately indicated what he meant by saying, “having been made into the likeness of men,” because he became a man not by way of a transformation, but by way of a habit (habitus) when he was clothed with a humanity which he, in some way uniting and adapting to himself, joined to [his] immortality and eternity” (St. Augustine, *De Diversis Questionibus LXXXIII*, 73.2). For more critical evaluation of this, see also: Isabelle Bochet (2018: 50–62).

tion that we should look at the specific formulations by means of which Tolkien seeks to express his ideas for the reciprocal interactions between the spirit and the body in Middle-earth's Elves.

First, the distinctively spiritual character of the human and Elven *fëa* is highlighted when it is characterized as an "intrusion": ("The *fear* of the Elves and Men (and Dwarves via Aulë, Ents via Yavanna) were intrusions into Eä from outside", Tolkien 290). It is also stated that, while, in the case of Men the union between the *fëa* and the *hröa* remains stable throughout the whole lifetime, in the case of the Elves, due to their unique status as "immortal within Arda" (Tolkien 18), the *fëa* gradually assumes prominence as the body slowly wanes due to the strain of old age (as is explained in the detailed discussion of this aspect in Tolkien's account of the Elves' ageing process in *The Nature of Middle-earth*, see Tolkien 18–27).

Further on, while concentrating on the specific nature of the relationship between the *fëa* and the *hröa* in the context of the Elves, Tolkien refers to "the separate nature of the *hröa*, engaged in its own process of achieving its complete and mature form, and which are not under the will or conscious control of the *fëa*" (Tolkien 23). The importance of this comment lies in the fact, that it reinforces the sense of other passages (Tolkien 271, 272, 237) where Tolkien, breaking with the whole of ancient and medieval tradition, implicitly denies any normal form of *fëa* to animals and plants, making it a sole prerogative of the Incarnate, or creatures possessing reason and rationality. Looking from the medieval perspective we thus would say that Tolkien's *fëa* is a kind of truncated *anima intellectiva* which does not include in itself the vegetative and sensitive layers which are autonomously managed by the *hröa*. Thus nothing like the vegetative souls of plants or the sensitive souls of animals exists in Middle-earth, which allows Tolkien to talk about "a healthy living thing without *fëa*" (Tolkien 253) which would be an oxymoron in medieval philosophy. This strikingly modern departure is arguably the logical outcome of the fact that Tolkien's *fëa* is, after all, a "spirit" – a purely spiritual substance removed from corporeal concerns, rather than a "soul" – an underlying principle encompassing all aspects of organic life.

Yet, for all that, Tolkien's concept of the union of the *fëa* and the *hröa* points to an organic connection between the two, clearly in contrast to the corporeal "raiment" casually adopted by the Valar:

[...] it was part of the nature of a *fëa* to desire to dwell in a body (*hrondo*), and by that mediary or instrument to operate upon the physical world; and the *fëa* did not and could not make its own body, according to its desire, or conception of itself, but could only modify its given or appointed *hrondo* by indwelling (as a living person may modify a house, filling it with a sense of his own personality, even if no visible physical alterations are made in its shape) (Tolkien 234).

This definition of the relation between the *fëa* and the *hröa* is closely reminiscent of the hylomorphic model which is the cornerstone of the Aristotelian legacy in

medieval scholasticism. Not only is the organic character of the union stressed here by Tolkien, but he also uses the term “nature” in the sense which saw its fullest conceptualization in the Thomist system where natures are the essences of substantial forms in the teleological context. Indeed, Tolkien consistently uses “nature” in this meaning, as may be gauged from phrases like: “{the Eldar} discovered that (...) to be naked was against their nature” (Tolkien 247–248). Consequently, the clear implication passages convey is that the *fëa* must be joined to the *hröa* in order to fulfil its destined function.

At the very same time, however, Tolkien seems to conceive of the specific mechanism of the union in terms reminiscent of the Platonic model whereby the body is “the instrument” of the soul, rather than a constituent part of an organic whole.

Another interesting aspect of the passages above is the occurrence of the word “personality”, which has here the sense of ‘the unique character of each individual *fëa*’. Tolkien’s use of a modern concept is here, in a sense, predictable, and indeed justifies, as there is no single-word term in Thomism to express this meaning – one would have to say ‘the essence of the *anima intellectiva* in combination with all the incidental forms it engages while unified to matter’.¹³

TOLKIEN’S CONCEPT OF INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

Despite this apparent indebtedness to the holomorphic tradition when it comes to formulation of an explicit definition of what constitutes the core of individual identity in the context of the Elves Tolkien appears to take a clearly Platonic stance and state emphatically, through the mouth of Eru himself, that “[...] identity of person resideth in the *fëa*, and in its memory” (Tolkien 258–259). This categorical assertion is further developed in the following passage:

For the individuality of a person resides in the *fëa*. A *fëa* alone may be a person. In the case of the Incarnate, though they are by nature embodied, their identity resides no longer, as it does in things of corporeal life only, in that embodiment, but in the identity of the *fëa* and its memory. A *fëa* of this kind requires a “house” by which it may inhabit Arda and operate in it. But a house exactly equivalent is sufficient for it – for it will exactly correspond to its memory of its former house, and that memory being in the mind only and incorporeal will not be concerned with the history of the material used in the realization (so long as it is fitted for this purpose) but with the form only (Tolkien 254).

¹³ Incidentally, the apparent lack of an epistemological apparatus to define this quality was the objection raised against Aquinas’ philosophy ever since Duns Scotus proposed to rectify the situation by introducing the term *haecceity* (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/medieval-haecceity/>).

Although Tolkien again explicitly acknowledged the unity of the *fëar* and the *hröa* constitutes the “nature” of the person (which, in medieval hylomorphism would have alone sufficed to express ‘identity’) he yet identifies “individuality” and “identity” with the “spirit” alone. Another vital circumstance is here that the use of an unqualified reference to “person” seems to suggest this model of the self is not applicable to the Elves solely, but is implicitly valid for all sapient species inhabiting Middle-earth.

This stance may seem to offer little room for nuance, yet we may also observe that it may seem to stand in contradiction to other passages from among those collected in *The Nature of Middle-earth*, like i.e. when Tolkien speaks of the Elves being “[...] persons (in whole being *fëa* and *hröa*) [...]” (Tolkien 23). One mundane explanation of the apparent inconsistency may be that this reference comes most likely from materials written earlier than the more elaborated passages above.¹⁴ Further yet, in defense of the consistency of Tolkien’s ideas, we might yet argue that Tolkien in his most reconsidered and mature formulations of his ideas, would distinguish between “nature” understood as defining the species and the form it is supposed to adopt to fulfill its eschatological purpose on the one hand, and the “person” denoting the unique identity of each individual within the species on the other. Still, it seems that this sort of understanding is potentially susceptible to inherent difficulties when this model is tested against the various fortunes which the Elves encounter during their sojourn in Middle-earth. In this context it is crucial to pay attention to the fact that Tolkien, in a significant afterthought, adds “memory” as the constituent part of “identity” within the “spirit”. The true significance of this addition will become apparent if we focus on how the individual identity is supposed to survive the process of reincarnation which is a natural condition of this particular species.

ELVISH PERSONAL IDENTITY IN REINCARNATION

The importance of the question of Elven reincarnation for Tolkien’s definition of individual identity consists in the fact that it is in the context of this aspect that Tolkien’s model was subjected to its most challenging test. The result of this fact is that, as *The Nature of Middle-earth* papers reflect, Tolkien struggled for decades to bestow the finite shape on his definition of this process, and never managed to finalise his vision and provide a definitive conceptualisation of this aspect of the Elven existence. For Tolkien, the central question he continuously wrestled with concerned the function of the *fëa* in rebuilding the destroyed *hröa* and thus recon-

¹⁴ This would indeed seem to be that case as the discussion of the Valian Year dates to the early fifties while the discussion of the Elvish reincarnation comes probably from, from which first two passages come, the sixties-seventies.

stituting the new person who would be identical with the original individual. Although the Elven *fëa*, unlike its human counterpart, does not have the prospect of an afterlife beyond Æa, yet, being designed to partake of the universal longevity of the organic life within its bounds, it invariably survives the destruction of the *hröa*, which, in the case of the Elves is never a natural process. Therefore it seems fully justified to resort to reincarnation of the body as a way to return to a given individual the chance to fulfill the rest of its “pattern”, or providentially sanctioned fullness of existence.

The obvious question Tolkien encounters at this point is whether this newly recreated individual carries on the same individual identity as before the obliteration of the *hröa*. If, as we have seen stated, individual identity resides solely in the *fëa* then it may seem, somewhat paradoxically, that it is this very ‘independence’ of the *fëa* that prevents it from performing a function in the reconstitution of the body. In fact, if we once again recall the Thomist perspective, we will find that the very same problem is analysed by Aquinas in the context of the status of the souls awaiting Final Judgement and subsequent resurrection of the body. As we already know, the individual identity is, for Aquinas, a function of the complete substance, because they come into being only as a unity. Thus the soul, by coming into existence in virtue of being its form, retains the individuated being into which the body may reenter on its resurrection:

Now, the individuation of the soul depends on the body for the occasion of its inception, for the soul does not acquire for itself individual existence unless in the body of which it is the act. But nevertheless, if we remove the body, the individuation does not perish; rather, its existence remains individuated because, since the soul was made the form of a particular body, it acquired individuated existence and so has absolute existence (St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, ch.5.5).

For the soul, even after separation from the body, retains the being which accrues to it when in the body, and the body is made to share that being by the resurrection, since the being of the body and the being of the soul in the body are not distinct from one another; [...] Consequently, there has been no interruption in the substantial being of man as would make it impossible for the same man in number to return on account of an interruption in his being (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III Sup. Q79. A2. Rep1).

[...] at the resurrection man’s body ought to correspond entirely to the soul, for it will not rise again except according to the relation it bears to the rational soul (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III Sup. Q80. A1. Obj3).

Because in Tolkien the *fëa* possesses an independent metaphysical status, he proceeds in a distinct, though parallel way, to devise the mechanism for the re-assumption of the body in the case of the Elves. Tolkien’s first formulation of the mechanism of reincarnation, which he seems to have inclined towards until the 1960s, implied that the Valar are given authority by Eru to rebuild the destroyed

hröa on the basis of the imprint which resides in the memory stored in the *fëa*. As Eru himself again explains:

[...] each *fëa* retaineth the imprint of its former body and of all that it hath experienced therethrough. That imprint cannot be erased, but it may be veiled, though not for ever. Even as each *fëa* must of nature remember Me (from whom it came), yet that memory is veiled, being overlaid by the impress of things new and strange that it perceives through the body (Tolkien 258).

Both Aquinas and Tolkien envisage the existence of a kind of imprint of the body in the soul that it has occupied, but, for Tolkien, somewhat predictably, the imprint is not immanent in the very constitution of the soul as a substantial form, but is stored in its subordinate faculty of memory. This is mostly the result of the fact that, as we see above, Tolkien's view on the specific aspect of perception of intelligent creatures is steadfastly Platonic, which testifies to the eclectic nature of Tolkien's intellectual sources and inspirations.

It seems here that, in Tolkien's model, the soul remembers the *hröa* it resided in because it remembers universals, and it is through the uniqueness of relationship between each the individual with Eru, as reflected in the personal history of the individual, that the personal identity leaves an "imprint" in the *fëa*:

Some then asked whether the *fëa* re-housed was the same person as before the death of the body. It was agreed that it was the same person, for these reasons. "What means this word same?" the loremasters said. 'It means two things: in all respects equivalent; but also identical in history' (Tolkien 248).

It is then, we see, the relation of the *fëa* to its housing that makes possible the rebuilding of this house without change of identity in the whole person (Tolkien 255).

Thus, for Tolkien each *fëa* is bestowed a "pattern" the fulfilment of which is the teleological purpose of its existence, so in other words, in Tolkien it is as if the fullness of the substantial forms of living beings unveils it time. Therefore, the awareness of time and personal history is an indispensable circumstance of the soul's performing its intellectual functions:

Still more truly is the word "same" used, if we consider things with life corporeal. For life corporeal consists in a pattern, existing in itself (from the mind of Eru, directly or meditately), and neither derived from the *nassi* [i.e. prime matter] used in its embodiment, nor imposed by other living things (as by the art of the Incarnate) (Tolkien 250).

This is a different mechanism from the one operating in Thomism, where we differentiate between *vis memorativa*, which is a potency of the sensual soul, and it is concerned with storing memories of the past (or *phantasmata* of particulars which happened in time) and *memoria intellectiva*, which is a *habitus* of the intel-

lectual soul and its job is to store universal concepts.¹⁵ Consequently, a soul awaiting the Final Judgment does not have full operational access to the memories of what it experienced in life. This is because, in the Aristotelian tradition, when the soul is deprived of the body it becomes stripped of the sensory and perceptual apparatus (the internal senses) which resides in *anima sensitiva* and needs the body to operate properly. As a result, the cognition and consequent mental operations of such a soul would presumably become radically impaired, especially as regards the memory of particulars in time (because, for one thing, it is difficult to predict how the power of reviving the *phantasmata* of the past would be exercised by *vis imaginativa*, which is the internal sense normally charged with performing this function, but it is also part of the sensual soul which normally does not operate without the body).¹⁶

In Tolkien's model, because of its Platonic influences, but also because the dynamic relationship between the *fëa* and the *hröa*, the opposite is the case:

Memory by a *fëa* of experience is evidently powerful, vivid, and complete. So the underlying suggestion is that “matter” will be taken up into “spirit”, by becoming part of its knowledge – and so rendered timeless and under the spirit’s command. As the Elves remaining in Middle-earth slowly “consumed” their bodies – or made them into raiments of memory? The resurrection of the body therefore (at least as far as Elves were concerned) was in a sense *incorporeal* (Tolkien 262).

It appears here also that the idea of the “waning” of the body and, its subsequent submergence into the “spirit”, is a vital circumstance which conditions the independence of the *fëa*. It is clearly Tolkien’s desire to bestow a distinct “secondary world status” on the ‘speculative species’ that is the reason behind the elusive character of the Elven metaphysics.

Around the year 1966 Tolkien appears to have briefly flirted with an idea that the *fëa* itself could have the power to resurrect its *hröa* (Tolkien 259–262). Tolkien encounters here problems concerning the implications incumbent on “transporting” the memory of the former life across reincarnation. Finally, during the 1970s, Tol-

¹⁵ For a more extensive discussion of the specific question of the role of memory in Tolkien’s concept of the Elves in a previous paper, see Błaszkiewicz (2023: 29–44). See also Cory (2012: 371–378).

¹⁶ The difficulty [...] arises from the fact that the soul united to the body can understand only by turning to the phantasms [...] the soul has one mode of being when in the body, and another when apart from it, its nature remaining always the same; [...]. The soul, therefore, when united to the body, consistently with that mode of existence, has a mode of understanding, by turning to corporeal phantasms, which are in corporeal organs; but when it is separated from the body, it has a mode of understanding, by turning to simply intelligible objects, as is proper to other separate substances (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.Q89.A1.C.3).

Hence the soul devoid of its body is imperfect, as long as it is without the body. But it is impossible that what is natural and *per se* be finite and, as it were, nothing; and that which is against nature and *per accidens* be infinite, if the soul endures without the body (St. Thomas Aquinas, 1Cor.C15.L2.n922). See also: Haldane (2013: 493). For an in-depth background to internal senses in Thomism, see Lisska (2016: 194–258); Kemp (1993: 559–576).

kien returns to the idea that it is the Valar who preside over the process, this time without consulting the *fëa*, but instead relying on independent access to the *fëa*'s memory (Tolkien 263–266).

Here Tolkien encounters a problem which Aquinas does not have to address, because the reincarnated Elf does not reassume a body in order to being a new kind of existence in the realm of the blessed, where any disparities between the spiritual and corporeal are reconciled, but instead returns back to the former mode of existence in the same fallen world. Hence, if the personal identity of a particular individual is to be preserved, its memory should be reconstituted when the *fëa* adopts a new *hröa*. This is the logical outcome of Tolkien's definition of the self that we saw stipulated above. Yet, upon a closer examination of the consequences, Tolkien seems to realise the difficulties of that position:

Problem of memory. Unless identity of personality, and conscious continuity of experience were preserved, re-birth would offer no consolation for death and bereavement. If memory were preserved and (eventually) regained by the re-born, this would produce difficulties. Not so much psychological as practical (Tolkien 260),

[...] since a spirit that had already been born preserved a full memory of its former incarnate life, and if this was in some way veiled so that it was not immediately accessible to its consciousness, it could not be obliterated, and this would contribute to its unease: it would be “maladjusted”, a defective creature (Tolkien 264).

Tolkien realizes that preserving the memory of the past makes the re-born individual possess a recollection of their death and the not infrequently traumatic circumstances leading to it (especially since, in the case of the Elves, it would always be an unnatural, violent death). The re-born self would also be conditioned by the burden of personal bonds and obligations which it might not be able to either to discard or to continue:

It will be seen that by rebirth the memory of things and happenings in the past may be for the Eldar long and abundant and fresh. [...] But this is not complete. Those who had passed through a Waiting often desired to forget some or all of their past, and they were relieved of their memory of such things. Others, remembering, would not communicate their recollection (Tolkien 202).

Now, Tolkien becomes aware here that this kind of experience that is not natural to a living creature, and may be difficult, if not impossible to bear. In order to somewhat rectify the possible side-effects of his scheme, Tolkien rejects the idea of child-rebirth upon evidently realising that this effectually means saddling the prospective parents with a changeling (Tolkien 264).

Yet, we may observe that the “problem of memory” in defining the individual self still troubles Tolkien, and it appears he never achieved a satisfactory final model of Elven identity which would operate across the process of reincarnation.

As may be already seen in quote provided above, Tolkien's attempt to wrestle with the problem effectuates a departure from his usually terminological apparatus as Tolkien begins to introduce modern concepts of "personality" and "consciousness" to help him deal with the difficulties he encounters:

(c) But if memory and continuity of personality is preserved (as it must be) then we must suppose (as has been supposed in previous treatments) that the reborn *fëa* would assimilate its new body to its memory of the former, and would when "full grown" become visibly as interiorly the same person again (Tolkien 260).

One might indeed take the references to the modern terms as a sign of a degree of terminological panic when Tolkien may realise that his epistemic apparatus is not able to account for the territory he is now entering. Consequently Tolkien seemingly struggles for the coherence of his model of Elven personal identity. The most vivid testimony of this is the record of the dramatic after-thought revision to the above quoted passage dealing with the unwelcome consequences of the assumption of memory by the reincarnated individuals:

At a later time, Tolkien set an "X" against, and bracketed, the passage beginning with "But it is not complete", in red ball-point pen, and wrote: "No! If they would take up life they must take up memory again" (Tolkien 204).

As we see here, Tolkien feels quite adamant about the memory of past personal life being an indispensable part of personal identity and he seeks to fight at all cost to preserve this element of his model. In this context, he turns to the modern concepts of "personality" and "consciousness" because these concepts stem out of the idea of continued self-reflection, whereas "soul" or "spirit" have traditionally been defined by intellectual grasp of the universals so it sounds more natural for consciousness to have the memory of the past as an indispensable component rather than it would for the soul.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, while in Platonism the idea of reincarnation is easily reconciled with the notion that individual identity is the function of the soul alone, if we make the "spirit" the seat of "consciousness", it will become difficult for it to regain the fullness of existence after its separation from the body. Thus, despite the fact that Tolkien's model of identity appears to be consistent in nominally reconciling the Platonic idea of the independence of the soul with the Aristotelian idea of the natural character of the bond between the body and the soul, yet the practical difficulties of envisaging the spirit's return to the former mode of life in a "new" reincarnated, or

reborn, body have the effect of bringing the reality of Elven existence closer to the Aristotelian/Thomist tradition. Although in Aquinas the memory of the past is not a part of the essential identity of neither the *anima intellectiva*, nor the intelligent substance of which it is the form, yet both models ultimately share the notion of the unnatural, imperfect character of any attempt to conceive of the spiritual component of the identity of an intelligent being in separation from the corporeal part which binds it to the inevitable constraints of existence on time and space.

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