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# The Christian Platonism of Lewis and Tolkien



If you go to Oxford today you can pop into a little pub and sit down in the room where Lewis and Tolkien and a few other likeminded friends used to have a pint and chat late into the night about what they were most seriously concerned with: imaginative stories. In our very down-to-earth times it may seem strange, even eccentric, for this bunch of English academics to take imagination so seriously, but, as we shall later unpack, imagination is indeed a very serious matter. What they were doing was seeking to clothe the Christian vision of reality, which they shared, in stories that engaged the hearts and imaginations of ordinary people. Given that Western culture is historically embedded in a Christian vision of reality, Lewis and Tolkien saw themselves as plugging into convictions and attitudes still dormant in the collective reality assumptions of modern Western consciousness. Once these near-forgotten visions had imaginative life, Lewis and his friends hoped that a quiet revolution would take root in people's minds. For this fellowship of storytellers believed that the loss of vitality in a distinctly Christian imaginative vision of reality was at the heart of the dying of the light that was so pervasive in the cultural trends of their times.

The metaphysical vision that Lewis and Tolkien were imaginatively clothing was, in fact, Christian Platonism. This means that if you have read and enjoyed the stories of Narnia and Middle Earth you already know a lot about Christian Platonism. So, let us start unpacking what Christian Platonism is by spelling out what we already know.

## C. S. Lewis' Christian Platonism: His Metaphysical Vision

In *The Chronicles of Narnia* Lewis uses the mytho-poetic medium of the Narnia stories to carry a profoundly Christian message in a fresh, creative, and philosophically powerful way. This is not, of course, what Plato was doing, for Plato lived some four centuries before Christ, but the manner in which *The Chronicles of Narnia* can carry both a Christian message and an exposition of recognizably Platonist insights is what makes Lewis' works such a good illustration of Christian Platonism.

Let us note also that Lewis' choice of the children's story as a means of communicating both the Christian message and his Platonist metaphysical convictions is no accident. As already alluded to, something about the outlook of the child is crucially important both to the Christian understanding of faith and to the metaphysical outlook that believes in things it cannot directly see. Lewis grasped this "child-like" dynamic deeply. From within this stance, when it comes to the really profound truths of reality, we are all as children before them. So it is only in the openness, trust, wonder, and plasticity of the child's mind that any illumination of primary things comes to us at all. Here humility before a reality that always stands over us (that is, we *under*-stand and live *within* reality, we do not have a God's eye overview of reality) is a necessary requirement for any true illumination of reality. While Lewis was no stranger to complex and highly demanding intellectual endeavors, he clearly held that due to the intrinsic profundity and transcendent heights of reality, myth, imaginative analogy, and fairy tale can often go further than science and logic in disclosing truths regarding really primary things.

The entire *Chronicles of Narnia* are embedded in a three-dimensional metaphysical outlook. Lewis' books soak the imagination in an alternative reality perspective to the functionally 1DM outlook of what I will simply call modern Realism. So the best way to understand the reality outlook of Lewis' Christian Platonism is to sit down with a child and read them any of the Narnia books. But I am here going to focus on two specific passages to draw out how Lewis combines Christian doctrine with Platonist metaphysics.

## "It's all in Plato . . ."

Towards the end of *The Last Battle* all the heroes of the story have died and find themselves in Aslan's country. But it is not a world where they are disembodied spirits and it is a world that they strangely recognize. Professor Kirke—Digory from *The Magician's Nephew*—explains that the true reality of all good things does not pass away. The mortal world that we call "real"—the realm of birth and death, change and struggle, chance and entropy—is really a realm of shadows, yet these shadows somehow participate in the reality to which they point. So when we die and our soul leaves the realm of shadows, we enter reality (still as embodied souls, but with a very different, yet strangely the same, body) properly for the first time. Aslan's country—the origin and destiny of all that is truly Real—is the home of all that we taste as true, beautiful, and good in the shadow lands. Aslan's country is the home of what reality we do know here in the realm of shadows, and it is the country to which we are travelling through our mortal lives.

After this explanation Digory Kirke observes that "It's all in Plato, all in Plato: bless me, what *do* they teach them at these schools!"[1] Here you can clearly see Lewis connect the belief frame of Christianity with the metaphysical outlook of Plato. Lewis' imagination discloses to us a reality outlook where there are transcendent dimensions to the world of immanent materiality and these dimensions are sourced in God. So the primary measure of reality is not tangible, perceivable, immediate materiality; not the stuff we can pick up, see, hear, smell, and taste. Rather, the ultimately real is unseen, inherently and eternally meaningful, transcending flux and contingency. Here immediately perceived reality is never simply what one's perceptions contact; here an enchanted cosmos undergirded by divine meaning is not simply an object of scientific knowledge, but the reality we experience is in some way alive and speaking and full of meanings beyond the small frame of human knowledge. The poet Gerard Manly Hopkins put it like this:

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.[2]

It is important to note that for both Lewis and Hopkins, the world of immediate experience is not "seen through" and then discarded, but rather that world as we experience it is the necessary medium through which we hear the music of heaven.

1. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 154.
2. Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, 27.

Let us now skip across from Professor Kirke in *The Last Battle* to Puddleglum in *The Silver Chair*, via Plato's *Republic*.

## The Analogy of the Cave in Plato's Republic

The dramatic center of *The Silver Chair* is a confrontation between evil enchantment and the liberating power of truth. This confrontation occurs in a cave. Lewis' cave scene has strong parallels to probably the most famous analogy in Plato's dialogues, which is also a struggle between enchantment and truth set in a cave. So let me quickly describe Plato's analogy of the cave to you so that you will be able to see how deeply Lewis draws on Plato in *The Silver Chair*.

In *The Republic* Plato asks us to imagine a cave.[3] The main chamber of this cave is a long way underground so that no natural light reaches it. This chamber is inhabited by people who are all chained so that they must look at the back wall of the cave and cannot easily turn their heads and look at what is behind them. On that back wall they see their own shadows and an entertaining show made up of other shadows. All the shadows are generated by a fire that is behind and above them, which is used by a small group of people who manipulate shadow puppets and cast their voices so that it echoes off the cave wall and seems to come from the wall. Because the chained up people have been in this cave for a long time, they no longer remember that the shadow show is an artifice, but think that the shadows of trees, animals, and themselves that they can see on the cave wall are real trees, animals, and people.

Now imagine that one of these cave dwellers is freed from their chains. Such a person—Plato discloses—is a philosopher, a lover of wisdom. What the philosopher sees when he is free and can turn around is the fire and the puppets and the controllers of this strange theatre. But the philosopher also sees a long narrow passage behind the fire that has just the hint of real daylight coming from it. So, when the philosopher's eyes are adjusted to the brightness of the fire and can clearly make out the nature of the illusions he has been living under, he then manages to creep past the fire and its sinister dramatic artists and struggle up the long passage towards the outside world. With much effort he makes it to the top. When he gets outside the cave his eyes are so unaccustomed to normal luminosity that it takes him a long time until he can bear to look at things clearly, even by starlight. But finally, he gets so familiar with the

3. Plato, *The Republic*, 514–17. This is found at the opening of book 7.

astonishing realm of the outside world that he can look on the sun itself, the source of all illumination and the true fount of life and beauty. At this point the philosopher remembers his former fellow prisoners down in the cave and decides he must return to them and try to liberate them. So back he goes, down the long tunnel into the darkness. His eyes are now very unaccustomed to the dark, and when he finally gets to the bottom, he can hardly make out the supposed meaning of the shadow drama on the cave wall. Not surprisingly, his inability to discern the meaning of what the cave dwellers take to be reality leads them to think that the philosopher has become blind to the real world because of his supposed journey. Further, should anyone try and unchain the non-philosophers, they will most likely turn on him and kill him, for cave dwellers of the shadow lands think themselves comfortable and secure in their little world of illusions and greatly fear any attempts to "free them" from the world they know and love.

We will unpack the meaning of this analogy further as we go, but at this point all that is needed is familiarity with this remarkable analogy. Let us return, now, to C. S. Lewis.

## The Cave of Dark Enchantment

In *The Silver Chair* two children, Eustace and Jill, are sent on a mission by Aslan to find and free Rilian, a Prince of Narnia who has been missing for many years. They are assisted on their quest by Puddleglum, a Marsh-wiggle. Marsh-wiggles are a curious race of creatures that seem to have many of the dispositional characteristics often attributed to dower Scottish Calvinists. Their quest leads them to an underground realm ruled by a charming yet evil enchantress.

In chapter 12 of *The Silver Chair* the Prince, freed from his dark enchantment, and the two children and Puddleglum are locked in a cave in a life and death encounter with the enchantress. She tries to re-enchant the Prince and to entrance the other three and turns all her powers to that end.

The enchantress seeks to convince them that the world from which they come—reality outside the underground cave—is not real; instead, only that which they can directly see in the cave is real. In Plato's analogy of the cave there are keepers of the cave who are the manipulators of its shadowy show, and the enchantress in Lewis' story is such a keeper. She tries to get her four assailants to accept that the inner world of the cave

is the only world, that anything they say of the supposed world outside of the cave is an imagined fiction composed out of things they see in the cave, and she tries to stop them from thinking clearly, to relax into her comforting enchantment and to go to sleep. She is determined to convince them that reality is only what she presents to them, reality is only what she manipulates and crafts for her own political ends.

The main obstacles of metaphysical resistance to the enchantress' purposes are their beliefs in the sun and in Aslan. The enchantress seeks to break their belief in this truth beyond her artifice by simple yet, under the conditions of enchantment, powerful means. She asks:

> "What is this *sun* that you speak of? Do you mean anything by the word?"
>
> "Yes we jolly well do," said [Eustace].
>
> "Can you tell me what it is like?" asked the Witch . . .
>
> "Please it your Grace," said the Prince, very coldly and politely. "You see that lamp. It is round and yellow and gives light to the whole room; and hangeth moreover from the roof. Now the thing which we call the sun is like the lamp, only far greater and brighter. It giveth light to the whole Overworld and hangeth in the sky."
>
> "Hangeth from what, my lord?" asked the Witch; and then, while they were all still thinking how to answer her, she added, with another of her soft silver laughs, "You see? When you try to think out clearly what this *sun* must be, you cannot tell me. You can only tell me it is like the lamp. Your *sun* is a dream; and there is nothing in that dream that was not copied from the lamp. The lamp is the real thing; the *sun* is but a tale, a children's story."[4]

The same strategy is employed on their belief in Aslan. They can only explain what a lion is to the Witch, who professes no knowledge of it, by using a cat as an analogy. Then the cat is taken for the real thing and the lion a fancy. So the Witch implores them, "Put away these childish tricks. I have work for you all in the real world. There is no Narnia, no Overworld, no sky, no sun, no Aslan. And now to bed all. And let us begin a wiser life tomorrow."[5]

It is Puddleglum who saves the day. He finds it simply impossible to believe that the world of impoverished darkness under the control of sinister manipulative power is able to generate such wonderful imaginative

4. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, 141–42.
5. Ibid., 143–44.

fictions as the sun and Aslan. But, reasons Puddleglum, even if his beliefs are fictions they are so much better than the shallow and oppressive "realities" of the Underworld (the real world, according to the Witch) that he will be happier believing in fantasy than in reality and will by no means accept such a dark reality. Puddleglum is prepared to be insane in relation to the reality beliefs projected by the Witch, and there is nothing she can do to change his mind. When Puddleglum defies the spell of the Witch by acting on his crazy metaphysical stance he becomes impervious to the technologies of enchantment the Witch has set in place and he threatens the entire realm of illusion she has spun in order to entrap their minds. She is forced out of her sweet and patronizing disguise then and reverts to open violence as her true nature is unmasked.

Lewis is here pointing out—as does Plato—that there are powerful, vested interests at work that make the matter of the outlook of reality one believes probably the most significant issue in relation to how the norms and laws of the political context in which we live work. Metaphysics is never simply metaphysics; metaphysics is always also politics, commerce, technology, morality, religion, art, and knowledge. So what we assume to be the nature of reality—what metaphysical beliefs we are committed to—is a matter of the utmost practical and political significance.



## Lewis, Reality, and Analogy

As with Jesus' use of parables, and as with Plato's use of dialogues, in the Narnia stories Lewis speaks in imaginative, narrative, and analogous ways about what reality is really like. Indeed, this very poetic mode of speaking cannot be dispensed with when seeking to communicate truths about reality that cannot be contained within the quantifiable and logically necessary order of human knowledge. We will look more closely at this later, but here it is important to note that the one-dimensional "scientific" view of reality seeks to describe and then control reality in explicitly non-poetic modes. Modern notions of truth—be they probabilistic, correspondence, pragmatic, or coherence notions—all assume that only some direct and non-analogous relation between reality and human knowledge is valid when one is trying to think about what is real. This explains why Lewis is not often studied in twentieth-century courses on philosophy in our universities, for he is seen as a writer of fantasy, not as a serious philosopher at all. And this has a lot to do with why Christian Platonism—strongly represented in the cultural imaginary of the twentieth century by Lewis and Tolkien—remains

largely undetected in the modern academy. For who now seriously believes that multi-layered, meta-scientifically framed, deeply theistically located, and poetically expressed stories could have any valid relation to reality? Yet it is not simply Christian Platonist metaphysics that strikes our modern sensibilities as fantastic, it is the morality of Christian Platonism that is also radically out of place in our very pragmatic and one-dimensional understanding of reality. Here we can turn to Tolkien to get a feel for what the moral vision of a Christian Platonism outlook entails.

## J. R. R. Tolkien's Christian Platonism: His Moral Vision

The most obvious points of contact between *The Lord of the Rings* and Plato is the myth of Gyges in the second book of Plato's masterpiece, *The Republic*. In Plato's myth a shepherd robs a grave and finds a plain gold ring that confers invisibility. This ring empowers its wearer with the ability to disregard all the usual constraints of piety and morality, without detection. The shepherd quickly learns how to use the ring in order to greatly advance his own situation, at the expense of all the people he kills, seduces, and manipulates along the way. With this myth Plato is setting up an argument against treating morality as simply humanly constructed by pointing to the notion that justice is not merely instrumental and conventional and that the corruption of good character by the lure of power is a spiritual disaster, even if it does confer material advantages. So while Tolkien shamelessly borrows Plato's imaginative idea of a ring of power as the key narrative device for his epic fantasy, more centrally, deep psychological and spiritual explorations of the relationship between power and morality are as basic to Tolkien's text as they are to *The Republic*. In this light it is not unreasonable to read *The Lord of the Rings* as something of an extended imaginative meditation on book two of *The Republic*.

Viewed thus—though without viewing Tolkien reductively so—it is easy to see that Hobbit morality has within it the promise of true moral greatness in Tolkien's eyes. Tolkien is, of course, well aware of the pettiness and pragmatic mean spiritedness that small people are prone to. The Sackville Baggins' long-standing interest in acquiring the real estate of Bag End makes it clear that Tolkien is no blind romantic regarding the explicitly small moral context of his hero. Yet, via Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin, Tolkien presents us with the notion that what happy small people see as good—simple contentments, simple fairnesses, simple embodied and shared pleasures, guileless loyalty—has a profound moral beauty to it. Hobbit goodness is for small people who love and serve, for

people who do not want to dominate and who refuse forceful ambition as a mode of operation. Hobbit morality is the opposite of Nietzschean greatness, the opposite of Wagnerian poetics, the opposite of the quest for self-defined personal glory that characterizes inherently agonistic and constructivist understandings of virtue. All too often grand enterprises in human greatness, like the grave-robbing shepherd in the myth of Gyges, explicitly defy the sanctities and mutual commitments of the common folk. Thus Plato and Tolkien set the wisdom of the little people against the power of the great. But—Nietzsche and Glaucon both wonder—are the good little people only "just" *because* they are not powerful?

In book two of *The Republic* Glaucon (Plato's brother) puts forward the argument that if there were two magic rings of invisibility and one was given to a just man and one to an unjust man, the difference between the just and the unjust would quickly disappear. For

> no man would keep his hands off what was not his when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with anyone at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a god among men. . . . [For] a man is just not willingly or because he thinks justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever anyone thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust.[6]

Via Frodo, Tolkien examines the inner psychology of the type of just man who would not be corrupted by the ring of power. In doing so Tolkien, like Plato, means to show us that the difference between good and evil is not merely conventional and that justice is not merely an instrumental social construct. In this manner it is clear that Tolkien's understanding of morality and power has profound continuities with Plato. Further, in both Plato and Tolkien, the apprehension of true moral significance is tied to metaphysical vision: what one sees and does not see, what one takes as real and illusory, these matters are intimately tied up with the moral challenges of life for both Plato and Tolkien. Here again, this is an idea that is of profound significance for our day.

6. Plato, *The Republic*, 360b-c.

## Plato and Tolkien on the Politics of Visibility and Invisibility

Tolkien and Plato share the same type of outlook on the political significance of the relation between the visible and the invisible.

In Plato's cave analogy illusions are thrown onto the screen of the cave wall by those who control the lives of the enslaved occupants of the cave (such as the enchantress in Lewis' *Silver Chair*). This analogy roughly means that the artifice of human culture, and the structures of power linked to the control of human production—both material and cultural—generates a life-world that only looks real to those who unphilosophically accept what they immediately see. The real controllers of culture and power know it is an artifice, and the philosophers know it is an artifice. But the controllers of culture and power have a vested interest in maintaining that the illusions they generate are real, whereas the philosophers are seeking to liberate ordinary people from the shadows of unreality so that they might know the truly real and value what is truly important. Thus, philosophers and the powerful are typically locked in combat for the hearts and minds of the people. And what the philosopher (prophet?) sees and says is real is what the controllers of culture and power often say is delusional fantasy designed merely to trick and control ordinary people. Likewise, what the controllers of culture and power say is real and inevitable is what the philosophers often say is delusional fantasy designed to trick and enslave ordinary people.

Explicitly, Plato maintains that the Good is analogous to the sun in the physical realm, and that the Good gives being itself[7] its life and reality, and all real things are only seen aright in the light of the Good. So that which gives moral value to the world transcends the world and is the ground of reality in Plato, and thus power that moves one out of harmony with the transcendent source of reality is actually power that makes one less real, whatever temporal and material advantage it delivers. Thus Plato has a means of understanding why power is not simply a matter of instrumental use, but is always cutting either with the grain of deep and

7. In classical Greek thinking, existing in the world—being—is an astonishing action performed by every thing that in some manner *is*. Things within space and time perform the action of being, but only partially, for they come into being, they change, and they go out of being. So to Plato "being itself" is partially expressed in all physical beings when they exist, perfectly expressed by the eternal intelligible realities Plato calls "ideas" or "forms," and Goodness is an order of reality more primary even than being itself. To Plato, being arises out of Goodness.

high reality or against that grain and "into" nothing. So Frodo, in refusing power that cuts against the moral grain of reality, is fighting evil without becoming evil, and this spiritual perspective regarding the intrinsically moral nature of the real is necessary for any genuine struggle against evil. So the central battle for goodness is not fought with arms and by soldiers in *The Lord of the Rings*, but the central struggle is spiritual and concerns how one sees what is real and free and what is false and necessary.

Plato, the New Testament, and Tolkien all maintain that the narrative trope of visibility and invisibility opens up an indispensable way of approaching the connections between knowledge, imagination, belief, and power.[8] This trope is of necessity imaginatively rich and both Christianity and Platonism understand this dynamic within a metaphysically three-dimensional outlook on reality. And perhaps, if Western culture can re-learn how important matters of visibility and invisibility are in the context of collective imagination, we may yet be able to integrate desire and imagination with reason again (not that these can really be dis-integrated) and this might be critical for philosophy's usefulness in relation to the central concerns of power in our times. For what different discourses of power consider as real and knowable, and what they do not perceive and thus label as unreal and unknowable, has enormous importance on how we actually live. Disciplines of desire and character formation are naturally aligned with the tacit collective goals of any given life form,[9] and these goals are only visible within shared frames of belief, and those shared frames of belief have deep leverage on our way of life because they are richly, imaginatively, and allegorically constructed.

Yet ironically—as Nietzsche himself understood—any view of reality that is only defined within the order of the tangibly apparent, the empirical realm, is just as much imaginatively constructed and a shared

8. This stance is also apparent in George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis, and G. K. Chesterton. See, for example, MacDonald's comment that "Seeing is not believing, it is only seeing" (*The Princess and the Goblins*, 177).

9. In this book I use the term "life form" in the manner that German sociologists and philosophers like Wittgenstein use it, to indicate the dynamic matrix of physical, cultural, political, religious, and linguistic conditions in which we actually live. Thus the broadly common life form experienced by people who live in New York is in many regards strikingly different to the broadly common life form experienced by people who lived in ancient Athens. For this reason there is no simple translation of meaning from one life form context to another, even if we know what the words might mean. Even so, that translations can, to some extent, be done, does indicate that all life forms have some areas of sociological function in common, and possibly, the basic meaning syntax out of which human culture as such is produced is not that extensive.

frame of *belief* as are outlooks situated within a metaphysically three-dimensional frame of belief. Formation in any collective belief alignment is deeply mytho-poetic and happens below the conscious and adult radar of our stated metaphysical convictions. The metaphysical formation that we absorb from the stories and ideas of our culture's collective imagination become the background cultural wallpaper of any given way of life. Thus, typically unknown to us, it is the distinctive narratives and particular imaginative landscapes of our culture that shape our sympathies, our apathies, and our social norms. These deep narratives discipline our desires and motivate our actions. Thus, the visibilities and invisibilities thrown up by a culture's mytho-poetic outlook shape its most basic moral and political framework.

Take buying a shirt. Here—from a first world consumer perspective—is what is functionally invisible: the inhuman exploitation of laborers (including children) in the manufacture of cotton in Uzbekistan and Bangladesh and in the sewing factories of Indonesia and China, and the disappearance of local and fairly paid clothing producers in the first world.[10] This is all out of sight in contrast to the highly visible and carefully crafted shopping mall experience of buying clothes. What we see when we shop are the illusions of "value for money," and we see our freedom to browse across a vast array of desirable personal identity images, which different labels and outlets suggest their product will secure for us. We see an attractive dynamic of illusion, identity construction, and consumer freedom, and this dynamic is the fuel of desire in the engine of consumption, which drives economic growth in the first world. And, as we all know, The Economy (an invisible aggregate whose health we can apparently measure by monitoring various crude quantities of financial exchange) must have ever more fuel or growth will collapse, the economy will go into recession, and our standard of living will drop. So those wealthy corporations, clever marketers, and financial institutions who drive the economy are essentially the rulers of our way of life. In light of this fact, our realistic politicians well understand that what the instrumental logic of market place success needs must be granted to those who rule our society, or else we will all fail to realize the happiness and fulfillment that a prosperous consumer society—so we believe—delivers.

Yet this dynamic of the normalization of exploitation via the techniques of skillfully-crafted marketing illusions and production

10. Siegle, *To Die For: Is Fashion Wearing Out the World?*

invisibilities—and instead of clothing we could have talked about coffee, chocolate, oil, minerals, flat screen TVs, high tech gizmos . . . almost any tradeable commodity—is tied to a deep cultural belief that makes the modern Western consumer way of life work. The belief that makes it all work is that *public facts and material things are objective and have no inherent value or meaning, for values and meanings are matters of personal preference and are thus up to individuals to select for themselves*. And that belief is a function of a one-dimensional metaphysical outlook where only objects that you can see and touch are really real.

However, the situation is subtle because it is not as if a 1DM outlook has no interest in values and meanings. Though we are deeply embedded in a way of life that could not function as it does without staggering levels of natural degradation and human exploitation, we still think of ourselves as good people and we still believe that our personal lives of remorseless activity and ever-increasing consumption are intrinsically meaningful. However, it is the functional assumption that meanings and values are not part of objective reality but are rather essentially personal and cultural constructions that means that financial and objective "realism" trumps personal and cultural values and meanings, without us even noticing that there is a contest.

When our way of life operates within a functionally materialistic consumer life form, an entirely instrumental outlook towards reality makes perfect sense. Yet, Plato and Tolkien, who hold to an objective understanding of the true source of value, maintain that a value-free understanding of objectivity—along with its way of seeing and not seeing and its vision of objective power and subjective value—is incurably morally inadequate. For this way of seeing and acting easily makes abstract fantasies (such as money) into real objects, and embodied normative realities (such as human dignity) into abstract fantasies. But if there is only one dimension to reality then both money and human dignity are equally artifices of manipulation, and there is no meaningful way of saying why one of them is more intrinsically important than the other. But what *is* clear to the practical metaphysical one-dimensionalist, is that money is more measurably useful than human dignity. So when it comes to making a rational and efficient decision regarding the management of "human resources," money will trump human dignity every time. Thus hardheaded market realists are typically brutally pragmatic in their treatment of the people and natural resources that are at the bottom of the global economic food chain. For, whatever one's personal values, the objective economic

reality is that low cost production and high margin sales are the iron law of financial survival in the global economy. If a market place competitor is outperforming you then, if you want to survive in the "real" world, you also must employ whatever "immoral" means they are using to undercut your price and exceed your profit margin.

In old-fashioned terms, only *moral* realists can see that people are intrinsically more important than money.[11] Where reality only has the single dimension of immediate appearance, there is, in functional realistic terms, *no intrinsic meaning* and *no inherent moral value* to anything. Thus a culture's metaphysical perspective radically shapes the norms of its moral vision and practical action. Indeed, the very idea of moral realism presupposes a Platonist metaphysical vision, and if one gets rid of such a vision then Plato thought one also gets rid of the very comprehensibility of the idea of morality. If morality is simply conventional, simply a subjective and cultural construct, then it is, in reality, only concerned with the manipulation of people for non-moral purposes and loses what is distinctive about moral reasoning itself.

What makes *The Lord of the Rings* a work of Christian Platonism is its realist moral vision and its equation of evil with brute amoral and instrumental power. In the moral vision of both Plato and Tolkien connections between one's metaphysical outlook on reality, one's moral vision, and one's framework of political operation, are seen as both intimate and of vital human importance.



## The Discarded Vision

So far we have noted that a 3DM approach to reality is very much embedded in the fantasy stories of Lewis and Tolkien. Further, the particular nature of the metaphysical outlook assumed by Lewis and Tolkien is not simply made up by them, but is, in fact, a contemporary imaginative expression of Christian Platonism. And yet, the manner in which Lewis and Tolkien are overwhelmingly *not* studied as two of the most important metaphysical minds of twentieth-century British thought—despite their astonishing cultural reach—tells us something very pointed about how Christian Platonism is seen by contemporary academia. That is, Lewis and Tolkien are seen as great scholars of the humanities in their fields and as great writers of wonderful stories, but they are not seen as serious philosophers, or even as seriously

11. Moral Realism is the philosophical stance that maintains that moral value is a real (and in modern terms, objective) feature of the world.

philosophical. Further Christian Platonism is not seen as a live option in contemporary philosophical circles. Indeed, every flavor of Platonist metaphysics is now almost entirely marginal in mainstream academic circles. Further, many modern Christian theologians think the historical partnership between Christian faith and Platonist philosophy seen in patristic and medieval times was a great disaster, and its residual ghost still needs exorcising. So it cannot be avoided: the fact is, Christian Platonism has long been a discarded vision of reality in Western high culture. But we need to ask, was this rich Christian vision of an inherently meaningful and God-upheld reality discarded for *good* reasons? And, is the reality this vision perceived still there and waiting to be recovered, even if our modern world does not see it? It is to these questions that we will now turn.