Fantasy in transhumanism and Tolkien

In the world of human ideas, the word 'fantasy' is usually associated with a literary genre for which the work of JRR Tolkien is held (for better or worse) to be largely responsible. A further implication is that fantasy is, almost by definition, the opposite of reality and realism. In a very different corner of that world, transhumanism is often taken quite seriously. This is a movement which favours, broadly, the radical enhancement of the human body and mind through hi-tech prosthetics, ostensibly to the point of achieving immortality (or at least living 'forever'). With the ecological implications of both discourses in mind, then, I would like to compare the two, starting with the latter. I won't need to go into great detail to show something interesting about both, before concluding with a question.

Let me take as a major representative text *The Proactionary Imperative: A foundation for transhumanism*, written by two reasonably respected if controversial authorities in the history and sociology of science and law respectively, Steve Fuller and Veronika Lipińska, and published in 2014. Their title refers to a counter to the precautionary principle, and they define transhumanism as "the indefinite promotion of the qualities that have historically distinguished humans from other creatures, which amount to our seemingly endless capacity for self-transcendence, our 'god-like' character" (Fuller and Lipińska, 2014: 1). This divine anthropocentrism underwrites the complete domination and exploitation of the Earth, including other forms of life, through bio-prospecting, biomimesis, 'natural capital-ism' and so on. But in case that doesn't work out – even for us – we should also prepare for space colonization (Fuller and Lipińska, 2014: 4, 100).

In their ideal society, everything and everyone, including ourselves, would be subjected to the logic of instrumentalization. Every means, every loss and any suffering can be countenanced if the greater human end is sufficiently glorious (Fuller and Lipińska, 2014: 104). Not surprisingly, Fuller and Lipińska favour eugenics, and with credit for consistency, if nothing else, even experiments on humans conducted by Nazi doctors should be considered justified if the research "had been selected and applied in a scientific manner" and if the suffering caused "resulted in significant cognitive benefit" (Fuller and Lipińska, 2014: 92). They also believe that all citizens should volunteer and, if necessary, be compelled, to "participate personally in cutting-edge scientific research" – as its subjects (Fuller and Lipińska, 2014: 109).

It gets better, so to speak. The authors envisage an amalgam of capitalism (hedge fund economics) with technoscience (genetic research and engineering), thereby reordering the entire world as biocapital. Enrolment in this eugenic programme would, they agree, require close mass surveillance as well as enforcement, but the high ideal – a 'Humanity 1.0 ideal' – would justify everything (Fuller and Lipińska, 2014: 63, 133).

It's fair to say that all leading trans-humanists – Ray Kurzweil, Elon Musk, Peter Thiel *et al.* – are terrified of death, so their ultimate ideal also requires replacing organic body parts with sophisticated technology, and mental functions with advanced software. The result, we are assured, turns mere humans into immortal cyborgs. Or a few of them, anyway, since it doesn't seem the masses are invited.

I am not going to mount a critique, whether practical, theoretical or ethical,

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of these ideas and proposals. One needs to remind oneself that they are not meant to be parodic or ironic but serious. I shall trust readers to draw their own conclusions, and turn to Tolkien.

Many readers will already know, or at least know of, *The Lord of the Rings*: an anti-quest not to gain but to lose something, centred on a hitherto unknown race of three- to four-foot-tall humanoids with hairy toes and supplemented by several other non-human races, not to mention sentient trees, all set in a place (Middle-earth) both like yet unlike our home planet. So far, so fantastic.

The Ring which the hobbits seek to destroy is an artefact and symbol of ultimate power, and they are obliged to do so because using it would inevitably corrupt and finally destroy both its user (no matter how well-intentioned) and their ends (no matter how noble). Yet essential to the story though that point is, Tolkien wrote in his *Letters* that more importantly, his tale concerns "something much more permanent and difficult [...] it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness" (Tolkien, 2006: 246, 262). But the two are linked, because the Ring endlessly defers death until for those under its power – chiefly the Ringwraiths – life comes to be an endless weariness, and they desire death as much as they fear it.

Tolkien thus insists that "Death is not an Enemy! [...] the 'message' was the hideous peril of confusing true 'immortality' with limitless serial longevity" (Tolkien, 2006: 267). The former lies, if at all, only on the other side of Earthly death; and of that, we have only "Hope without guarantees" (Tolkien, 2006: 237). Meanwhile, a culture which accepts death is, paradoxically, freed to cultivate and celebrate earthly delights, as hobbits do: food and drink, family and friends, the fruits of the Earth as well as its wonders. In Middle-earth, any desperate attempt to 'conquer' death through magic (whose Indo-European root, as Tolkien understood, is the same for 'machine') not only fails but destroys life along the way.

The temptation of absolute power is underlined by its capture of the treacherous wizard Saruman. Just listen to his speech – not only familiar but instantly recognizable – attempting (unsuccessfully) to enlist Gandalf to the cause: "our time is at hand: the world of Men, which we must rule. But we must have power, power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see [...] We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order" (Tolkien, 2012: 259).

Now I haven't emphasized the ecological dimension of this comparison, because it should be pretty obvious. The transhumanists' ruthless, imperialistic, Promethean anthropocentrism is almost a *reductio ad absurdum* of fear and hatred of the independent value and agency of the Earth, other animals, the body and, insofar as it is inseparable in practice, mind. But as I say, they are perfectly serious.

Tolkien himself wasn't particularly ecocentric. More importantly, he was an artist, and in his tale there are moments of ecocentrism, of animism, and of theistic stewardship. So sue me, as he wouldn't have said; to be a storyteller is often to be a truth-teller, and there is more than one truth. Furthermore, no reader can doubt his deep and abiding love of the natural world. But his characters' reluctance to leave it, though eventually they must, doesn't stretch to trying to live there forever, except as a warning against it. And melancholy (which should not be confused with depression) never killed anyone, while courage is never not needed for long.

To conclude, then, this is my question: *Who here is the fantasist, and who the realist?* ∎

References

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