

Love and Hate in War: Reflections on Monstrous Evil in Lewis and Tolkien

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Let me begin by recalling a conversation C. S. Lewis overheard “during a night journey early in the Second World War in a compartment full of young soldiers” (*RP*: 34). The conversation revealed that “they totally disbelieved all that they had read in the newspapers about the wholesale cruelties of the Nazi regime” (*RP*: 34). They simply took for granted that reports thereof were “lies” the government put out to “pep up” our troops (*RP*: 34). “They did not think the matter worth discussion: they said the one word ‘Propaganda’ and passed on” (*EC*: 606).

Lewis was shocked by their response – of the lack thereof. He was shocked not by their skeptical assessment of their government’s veracity but by “the complete absence of indignation. They believe that their rulers are doing what I take to be the most wicked of all actions - sowing the seeds of future cruelties by telling lies about cruelties that were never committed. But they feel no indignation: it seems to them the sort of procedure one would expect” (*EC*: 606). Years after he overheard that conversation, in his reflections on the imprecatory psalms, Lewis

commented: if the soldiers on his train had “felt as a man should feel the diabolical wickedness which they believed our rulers to be committing, and then forgiven them, they would have been saints” (*RP*: 34). But they accepted that wickedness “as the most ordinary thing in the world,” they were not even “tempted to resentment,” and they revealed thereby “a terrifying insensibility” (*RP*: 34).

Lewis’s assessment conveys a general normative truth that he took to have very great importance: that emotions and attitudes can “rise ... to the dignity of error” (*AM*: 20). That is, they can be assessed for propriety, fittingness, or congruity with objective moral reality. So, for example, indifference ill befits the moral reality of grave injustice. Indignation is vastly out of proportion to a minor slight. Joy in response to atrocity is utterly perverse. And so on. Lewis articulated that normative truth most systematically in **The Abolition of Man**, but it is a thread that winds its way through many of his works – the **Screwtape Letters**, **Mere Christianity**, and so on.

My primary focus today is a particular emotion in a distinctive context – hatred in war ... and more specifically the hatred that combat soldiers are often tempted to direct at their enemies. I will briefly articulate Lewis’ negative assessment of

martial hatred, explain why that negative assessment is compatible with his apparent embrace of that emotion in his most graphic fictional depiction of violence, and then, in a kind of bait and switch, leverage that discussion to make sense of the hateful violence exhibited in another fictional work – Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. So my discussion will include principled moral assessment and the application of moral principle to fictional characters.

Before I begin in earnest, let me note that lurking in the background of my discussion is an extensive biographical and memorial literature – Eugene Sledge’s *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa*, Gray’s *The Warriors*, David Bellavia’s *House to House*, Karl Marlantes’ *What It’s Like To Go To War*, and many, many others. Hopefully that literature can provide those of us who lack combat experience with some ... no doubt very slight ... understanding of the kinds of emotions that combat tends to evoke in those who have been caught up in war. Among the lessons that I glean therefrom:

- (1) Hatred for enemies is a natural accompaniment of participation in violent martial conflict.

- (2) Embracing that emotion can be extremely useful. So, for example, doing so can help soldiers overcome fear and thereby help them to achieve the mission assigned to them.

(3) Hatred can also motivate moral atrocity and military dysfunction: those who are consumed by hatred are often tempted to violate the rights of their enemies and of those innocents who sympathize with their enemies ... sometimes in ways that undermine the mission with which they have been tasked.

(4) Soldiers have a powerful moral and military duty to manage hatred and the many other hostile emotions that accompany war. This is one of the central themes in what I regard as the best recent reflection on the American experience of war, Jim Frederick's *Black Hearts*.

In short, for many soldiers, hatred for enemies is a natural accompaniment of war that soldiers may leverage as a militarily beneficial resource, but one that they must manage if they are to fight well – fostering it when useful but disciplining it so that it doesn't escape control.

Love of Enemies in World War Two

For Lewis, Christian moral teaching is far more restrictive. Hatred for enemies is incompatible with Jesus' command that we love our enemies. However alluring we might find the joys of hating our enemies, and however helpful we might find

it in defeating them, Jesus commands us to love our enemies. Violation of that command has dire consequences: it forsakes friendship with God. As a consequence, we mustn't merely manage hatred for our enemies; we must extirpate it. Let me briefly explain Lewis' understanding of what Jesus' love command requires of us, as well as how a proper understanding of that command helps us to resist the temptation to hate our enemies.¹

Consider a fascinating letter Lewis wrote on May 4, 1940 to his brother Warnie, then deployed to France as an officer in the British Army. It's a response to a (now lost) letter in which Warnie must have conveyed to Lewis his difficulty in loving his German enemies – both in understanding what it could mean to love them and in carrying out the command to do so. It seems that Warnie suggested to Lewis that his German enemies were possessed. In his response, Lewis acknowledges that this has “very much” been on his mind: every time we say the Lord's Prayer, Lewis insists, we are reminded that we are offered forgiveness for

¹. I will then turn one of Lewis's most graphic portrayals of violence, in the context of which he seems to affirm a kind of proper hatred: Ransom's destruction of Weston, motivated at least in part by Ransom's “lawful hatred” of his enemy. There need be no tension here, much less contradiction: the hatred that helps Ransom overcome his fear of mutilation is compatible with the love that Jesus commands us all to bear towards our enemies. Indeed, I think that Lewis's affirmation of lawful hatred in *Perelandra* is not only compatible with but also reinforces his theologically grounded rejection of hateful violence. This in turn will provide some insight into hateful violence as manifest in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*: the sometimes gleeful, and normally exterminative, violence directed at Orcs. In brief, Jesus's love command does not preclude hatred for monstrous evil of the sort manifested by both the Unman and Orcs ...

our sins only on condition that we forgive the sins of others (CL/II: 408). “No exemption is allowed.” Lewis acknowledges that this “sounds impossible.”

What is impossible? Actually complying with Jesus’ command that we love our enemies. How so? Lewis believed that prayer for enemies is an essential component of loving them: we are “under orders to pray for our enemies” (*MC*: xvi). He prayed nightly “for those [he] was most tempted to hate and despise” (CL/II: 408): Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini and three departmental rivals! But love-driven prayer for enemies is not merely a matter of uttering words. Rote utterance is not ‘real’ prayer unless it arises from a sincere commitment to the good of the enemy. In order to make his prayers real, and so manifest the love commanded by Jesus, he had to “do a good deal of thinking.”

Lewis proceeds to sketch an understanding what it means to love enemies that would later find public expression in his BBC talk on “Forgiveness” published eventually in **Christian Behavior** (1942) and later **Mere Christianity** (1952).

Here is the gist of his understanding: to “love your neighbor as yourself” [requires] an act of will [in which you] aim at your neighbor’s good in the same way that you aim at your own” (CL/II: 408). We aim at our own good by drawing a familiar distinction. “It’s the old business about loving the sinner and hating

the sin” as applied to ourselves. There is me and there are my many distinguishing features. Some of those features are pretty repulsive. But I can, and do, commit myself to furthering my own good even given those repulsive features. Indeed, part of what I commit myself to doing in furthering my own good is to extirpate those repulsive features. I do so, of course, because they are bad for me. According to Lewis, our loving our neighbors as we do ourselves consists at least partly in our respecting the same distinction as it applies to them: we must distinguish between our neighbor and her various repulsive features even when those features tempt us to repudiate her entirely. Lewis applies this conception to the Nazis Warnie mentions in his precipitating letter:

In fact I provisionally define Agape as 'steadily remembering that inside the Gestapo-man there is a thing wh[ich] says I and Me just as you do, which has just the same grounds (neither more nor less) as your "Me" for being distinguished from all its sins however numerous, which, like you, was made by God for eternal happiness - remembering, and always acting for the real interests of that thing as far as you can (CL/II: 409).

Of course, in some cases sin and sinner seem so closely entwined that we resist making the distinction on which Lewis’ conception of enemy love depends. That

is, our enemies have become so completely corrupted that we find it difficult to pry the two apart, even in thought. Perhaps this is the import of Warnie's suggestion that the Nazis have been possessed: because demonic, they seem ineradicably execrable and so worthy only of hatred. Lewis responds with a thought experiment:

Suppose your eyes were opened and you[could] see the Gestapo man visibly fiend-ridden - a twisted and stunted human form, covered with blood and filth, with a sort of cross between a mandrill and a giant centipede fastened onto it? Surely you, and the human remains, become almost allies against the horror which is tormenting you both, him directly and you through him? (CL/II: 409)

Lewis grants that, at some stage, that is, when the fiend's victim has wholly ceased to be human, when the will of the victim has been irrecoverably identified with that of the fiend, we are no longer required to love. But, Lewis insists, "we are not allowed to assume that this has taken place in any man alive" (CL/II: 409). We must never succumb to the temptation to identify any human being with her corruption, however much she embraces her corruption, and however hard it might in some cases be for us to resist. It is from this perspective that Lewis

explains how we can love our enemies – particularly the mode of enemy love that is manifest in praying for their good.

These 'swine', as you rightly call them, are to be regarded as people in whom the human self (made for happiness, like you) is still alive, and steadily moving towards that final identification with its fiend - but still capable (we must assume) of being rescued. From this point of view I do not find it impossible to desire, and pray, that that rescue may occur.

Because every actual human being retains the possibility of redemption, even if only with divine aid, we must always distinguish between the corruptions possessed by the creature before us and the creature who God continues to love, and so whom might be redeemed, and so who isn't *ineradically* execrable.

Hatred for Enemies in Perelandra

So Lewis' reflections on what it means to love enemies early on in World War Two. Lewis later incorporated what very much looks like the same conception in a novel that Lewis first mentions a year and a half after his letter to Warnie.²

². Walter Hooper, **CS Lewis Companion and Guide**, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1996), pp. 224-25.

Hardly by coincidence, that novel contains what I think might be his most graphic description of violence.

In Lewis's novel **Perelandra**, Ransom, a former soldier who served during WWI, a current professor at Oxford University, and an embodiment of Lewis's chivalric ideal, travels to an Edenic Venus in order to prevent a scientist, Weston, from corrupting an unfallen, Eve-like woman, Tinadril. Weston allows himself to be possessed by demonic forces that hollow out his humanity and so render him a malevolent, manipulative, and dangerous 'Unman.' The Unman endeavors to fuddle Tinadril into believing that proper obedience to God requires her to violate God's clearly articulated commands. Ransom concludes that he can save Tinadril from disobedience only by killing the Unman.

What follows is a brutal and exhausting episode of hand to hand combat between Ransom and the Unman. As they fight, Ransom experiences a "torrent of perfectly unmixed and lawful hatred" (P: 132) and his hatred elicits in him a joy that arises "from finding out at last what hatred was made for. ...As a boy with an axe rejoices on finding a tree..., so [Ransom] rejoiced in the perfect congruity between his emotion and its object" (P: 132). The Unman was evil incarnate: "an odour of decay (P: 111), "an aimless, empty spitefulness" (P: 106), a "furious self-

exiled negation” (*P*: 132). Ransom realizes that to “corruption itself” the appropriate attitudinal response is hateful vengeance – the desire to destroy for no purpose other than to eliminate evil (*P*: 132). Moreover, Ransom’s hatred is not only proper, it is also militarily instrumental. Ransom’s hatred fuels his aggression, he is thereby able to “so fight, so hate with a perfect hatred” that he overcomes his terror of being mutilated, smashes the Unman’s face with a rock, shoves its body into a sea of fire, and so ends the temptation of Tinadril (*P*: 132). I take it that the lawful hatred that Ransom experiences plays a critically important motivational role in rescuing Tindrill: his hatred for the Unman provides Ransom with the ‘motivational fuel’ he requires to overcome his fear of being mutilated by the Unman.³

Ransom’s hate-driven destruction of the Unman helps us to understand Lewis’s rendering of Jesus’s command that we love our enemies. Lewis portrays Ransom as hating the Unman with a lawful hatred. Given Jesus’s command, how could it be that Ransom’s hatred is lawful? Hatred for another creature *is* appropriate in a fictional world in which some are accurately portrayed as evil incarnate. Were it the case that ‘monsters’ exist, were we to live in a world populated by

³. See David Bellavia’s reflections on his hatred for his enemies provided him with “fuel for aggression” during his very dangerous deployment to Fallujah in November 2004 – for his participation in which Bellavia was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. See his **House to House**.

‘essentially execrable’ creatures (Roberts, 2003: 251), we would not be forbidden to aim for the annihilation thereof for its own sake: to destroy an irremediably evil creature because it is irremediably evil. This is the “defining proposition” of hatred (Roberts, 2003: 250-52). For Lewis, the Unman is not a victim for whom Ransom ought to have compassion but a body used by a demonic being worthy only of destruction.

But in the actual world, there are no ‘monsters,’ vengeful hatred for human beings is always forbidden, and so we may never treat another human being as Ransom did the Unman. This is why, Lewis says, Ransom’s experience of hatred was one that “no good man could ever have in our world” (*P*: 132). Ransom’s hatred for the Unman conveys what a just hatred would be if it were the case that the actual world was very different than in fact it is. By reflecting on what we would be *permitted* to do were the world in which we live very different than it is in fact, Lewis conveys what we are *forbidden* to do in world as we find it. As Lewis says about the Gestapo-man in his letter to Warnie, we are never allowed to conclude about any human being that he or she has not merely become corrupt but is corruption.

Of course, one of the very great temptations elicited by participation in war is that our enemies can easily seem to be identified with their corruption. Some enemies have so embraced moral evil that they seem to have become one. This is an appearance that arises from the very structure of martial violence. Combat is a succession of violent confrontations that “must be faced under the most emotion-wrenching conditions. War is the suffering and death of people you know, set against the background of the suffering and death of people you do not” (McDonough, 1985: 138). It is fought by friends against strangers. But a war is not merely a place of death. It essentially involves killing. Strangers make it their business to kill comrades and friends. That “fraternity of exposure and danger” bonds soldiers together and thereby easily warps their perception of unit outsiders ... eliding into callous indifference to the fate of innocent strangers, hatred for those who kill friends, and vengeful violation of the enemy (Gray, 1970: 176). The natural result is hatred for those who purposefully try to kill friends and comrades: we construe our enemies in the light of their corruptions, we thereby impute to our enemies themselves the essential execrability of their sins, and thereby embrace a desire for vengeance – to make the enemy suffer as we have suffered, to destroy those who have destroyed our beloved, and so on (Gray, 1970: 139). It is an enduring fact about the human condition that ordinary human beings are powerfully inclined to respond with hateful vengeance to the

hostile violence directed at them and their friends. This temptation is particularly hard to resist when our enemies are not ‘ordinary’ soldiers who have been compelled, coerced or duped into fighting, but agents who embrace corrupt means of killing friends. They perfidiously pretend to be dead and use that deception to detonate concealed explosives on their body. They torture or mutilate friends in order to demoralize or terrorize their enemies.

It is an act of faith – indeed, according to Lewis’s Christian convictions, it is a *requirement* of faith – that we distinguish: we must treat others as we treat ourselves ... and so persistently ... hope against hope ... maintain the all-important distinction between my enemy and the many horrible things that my enemy has done to my friends.

Tolkien on Hatred for Orcs

Let me conclude this short discussion by reflecting on proper hatred in Tolkien’s **Lord of the Rings**. I think that we can see therein much the same conception of proper love and proper hatred as we find in Lewis. We can see the commonality of moral conception by contrasting Tolkien’s treatment of Gollum and his treatment of Orcs.

Gollum as a pervasively corrupted human being. Natural response is hatred. Pity and compassion is required. This is at least in part because there is hope that Gollum can be redeemed. Pity, mercy, and forbearance is persistently shown to Gollum. It is, at the end of the day, by virtue of mercy to the thoroughgoingly corrupt that the Ring is destroyed – surely an affirmation of the moral importance, if not the duty, of distinguishing between the enemy and her corruption.

Very different is Tolkien's treatment of the Orcs. Bluntly, the Orcs are to Tolkien what the Unman is to Lewis. They are constitutionally evil. They are utterly incapable of being redeemed. As I read Tolkien, Orcs are rationally incarnate creatures, but they have been horribly corrupted ... bred by the powers of evil in such a way as to mar their capacity for moral agency. They are capable of free and instrumentally rational choice: they can assess the efficacy of means to ends and they can freely choose which means they will adopt to achieve their ends. They can dominate one another, and they can acquiesce to being dominated by others. But the scope of their freedom has been limited in such a way that they can freely choose only between grades and kinds of evil. They can freely choose

as between killing and torturing, say, but they are incapable of mercy, compassion, or self-sacrifice for the common good.

And so they are worthy only of being destroyed. As with the Unman, so with the Orcs, corruption past the point of redemption befits hateful destruction. They are treated accordingly: Gandalf, Aragorn, and other forces of the West have no mercy whatsoever on Orcs defeated in battle: Orcs are constitutionally corrupt, they are therefore monstrously evil, they are utterly incapable of redemption, and they are therefore worthy only of destruction.⁴

Many have found Tolkien's treatment of the Orcs quite troubling. Given our history of racial extermination, this is at the very least an understandable worry. But I think that Tolkien would make the same basic move as Lewis.

Orcs are fictional creatures. The way that they are permissibly treated in Middle Earth differs from the way that we may treat our actual enemies. And for reasons consonant with those affirmed by Lewis in his reflections on love of enemy: because the only condition in which hateful vengeance may be inflicted on the enemy is that in which our enemies have been corrupted beyond the

⁴. Later in life Tolkien puzzled over the propriety of rationally incarnate creatures who

possibility of corruption, and because no actual human being is constitutionally corrupted as are the Orcs or the Unman, hateful vengeance is never proper for any actual human being – however much it might appear to us that they are essentially execrable. Proper hatred for Orcs in Middle Earth satisfies conditions that never obtain, or that we are forbidden to believe obtain, in the actual world.

As with Lewis, so also does Tolkien bring his conception of properly hateful vengeance to bear on his reflections on hatred in war in the actual world. He is clear that no actual human being is an Orc: Orc is an adjective not a noun when applied to human beings: we can be Orcish, but we are never Orcs. He is equally clear that Orcs lie on both sides of any martial conflict. Indeed, Tolkien is abundantly clear that there are many Orcs on his side of a conflict that mattered a great deal to him – the war against Hitler.