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Contemporary Theory Seminar
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Foundation to Informational Humanities:

Establishing How to Infer from Narratives Ethical Creation, Consumption, and Communication of Knowledge via Surface Reading of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien

A Seminar Work

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31/01/2023

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Conceptual Foundation

Introduction

The correlation between knowledge and power has been a subject for debate since antiquity, but it was Michele Foucault who equated the two terms, arguing in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1977) that "there is no power relation without the correlation constituting of field of knowledge nor knowledge which does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power" (p. 27). As power is relational and general, according to Foucault's doctrine, it does not visibly emanate from the top of the sociopolitical hierarchy, but invisibly "from innumerable points" within the discourse, as he explains in *History of Sexuality* (1978, p. 15).[1] Yet power and knowledge, by their nature as relational, do not produce and distribute themselves unobstructed. Indeed, Foucault says, "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95), but any resistance, he argues, is ever internal to the discourse, "distributed in irregular fashion: the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities" (p. 96) within it, synchronously with power and knowledge. Changing or dismantling the systems that uphold power and knowledge is near-impossible, for the points against which one might resist are transitory and ever-shifting (ibid.). However, Foucault submits that we may only "escape the Law-and-Sovereign" system if we "try to analyze the mechanisms of power" based on "strategy that is immanent in force relationships," rather than seeking out *sources* of power to revolt against (p. 97).

In recent times, though, this suggestion was met with disappointment by critics and activists. In the article "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proves that exposing the violence infused within the culture and discourse did little to annul it. In a personal anecdote, she describes her friend's response to news about how gays and Afro-American, being deemed as tainted sub-humans, were systematically neglected and abused during the AIDS epidemic: "[…] even suppose we were sure of every element of a conspiracy […] – what would we know then that we don't already know?" (Sedgwick, p. 123). Sedgwick's anecdote challenges Foucault's claim and instead exemplifies that analyzing "systemic oppressions" and concluding their mechanics "is separable from the question of whether the energies of a given […] activist intellectual or group might best be used in the tracing and exposure" thereof (p. 124). Moreover, Sedgwick argues that "there is

[1] In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault terms that concepts are "'put into discourse'" by a set of means of communication (verbal, silent, or otherwise), topics of communication, viewpoints, and institutions "which prompt people [what] to speak about […] and which store and distribute the things that are said" (p. 15).

[…] an ethos where forms of violence that are hypervisible from the start may be offered as an exemplary spectacle rather than remain to be unveiled as a scandalous secret" (Sedgwick, p. 140). This violence, by its nature, need not be dealt with via unfoldment of its mechanism, but to be fitted into a "different framework of visibility" – meaning, it can only be "combated by efforts to displace and redirect (as well as simply expand) its aperture of visibility" (ibid.). Thus, Sedgwick demonstrates that the "hermeneutics of suspicion" approach applied by critics, while at times effective in divulging the mechanisms of the power and knowledge relations, rarely allots for the disruption of the oppressive forces they uncovered.

Sedgwick directs her criticism more specifically to paranoid reading, or symptomatic reading, of sociopolitical relations within discourses and of texts, too. "Paranoia," Sedgwick says, "has by now candidly become less a diagnosis than a prescription" (Sedgwick, p. 125). She underscores that issue with this is that paranoia "is drawn toward and tends to construct symmetrical relations, in particular, symmetrical epistemologies," thus asserting certain narratives and systems of knowledge on reality (p. 126). For Sedgwick, the same issues apply when conducting paranoid reading of texts. She criticizes reading texts from a paranoid position[2] that is based on envy and anxiety and instead advocates for the depressive position that is affiliated with guilt and hurt, wherefrom stems reparative reading (p. 128). This reading assembles the broken objects "into something like a whole – though […] *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*. Once assembled to one's own specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn" (ibid.). Upon the distaste for paranoid reading and the affects accompanying it is surface reading founded. By relating to a text's surface we denote to "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what […] has […] no thickness, and therefore covers no depths," to quote Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's words from "Surface Reading: An Introduction" (2009, p. 9). Directing our gaze to "what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must see *through*" in a text allows us to avoid violently dissecting its elements, assigning meanings of our own to its parts, and recognizing schemes or trends hidden within it (Best & Marcus, p. 9). All these processes that we may avoid have the risk of bearing products of our own mind, not of the text, albeit provoked by it. This in itself is not a troubling process, but to appreciate narratives and texts, we should consider what they plainly perform rather than judge it as less meaningful and dismiss it.

[2] The term "position" is defined in *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* and Sedgwick borrows it from Melany Klein's work to understand paranoia as a kind of epistemological practice. The term "position" means "the characteristic posture that the ego takes up with respect to its objects" (qtd. in Sedgewick, p. 128).

Retaining this in mind, I will venture to show that just by reading a story we foster a sense of how to handle knowledge the right way.[3] The potential of stories to teach us morals has been theorized before in academic literature, though mostly via a reversal of subject-object relations with the text, placing the text as the agent working on the reader. In the essay "Narrative, Ethics, and Pain: Thinking *with* Stories" (2001) for instance, David B. Morris suggests that the human mind can think not just *about* stories, but *with* them too (p. 55). Meaning, we "do not so much work on narrative as take the radical step back, […] of allowing narrative to work on us" with its affect (ibid.). Morris shows how thinking with stories can evoke a desire "to live right" and "to replace yourself" (p. 56) but may also provoke constant tension and anxiety (pp. 56-57). These, in turn, Morris demonstrates, can invoke pain or affect the experience of pain and illness, since pain is "an emotional experience" too, and consequently, "pain is 'always subjective'" (qtd. in p. 57). Though the analysis Morris employs of medicine in the context of stories and the term "thinking with stories" are notable, I hold that by defining the story as the main subject in the story-audience relations is inaccurate. The subjective experience of the narrative that Morris describes should not be devalued, as it shows how each reader processes and comprehends a narrative individualistically; at the same time, it is obvious from the anecdotes that Morris supplies that a narrative has the potential to affect us, provided that its aesthetic form and use of language is pleasing enough for a reader to immerse themselves in (see section "The limits of informational humanities"). I reason that from this follows that should a reader immerse themselves in a narrative, they would also inevitably immerse in its ethics – though the way they would process them varies between audience members and the particular context in which they expose themselves to it.

Following these ideas, this seminar work will aim to develop a preliminary framework to a theoretical discipline: by reading the surface of narratives, one may draw conclusions about how to ethically create, communicate, and consume knowledge. This kind of endeavor has yet to be pursued heretofore, and I offer the term "informational humanities" for this would-be theory. The name should allude to the discipline of medical humanities, which aims to use fields of the humanities to lend ethical guidance and support to medicine and its practices and to make it more human-oriented – precisely as Morris contextualizes experience of pain and

[3] The term "just reading" is defined by Sharon Marcus in her book *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, published in 2007, as a reading that does not searches symptoms for a meaning that is underneath the surface. "Just reading" means to read texts "without construing presence as absence or affirmation as negation" (p. 75), but, as Best and Marcus add, "lets ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghost *of*" (Best and Marcus, 13).

illness, and the ethics of their treatment, in narratives. Comparably, in this seminar work I will strive to prove that being attuned to a text or a narrative can expand our notion of how to operate knowledge and information ethically. On the question of how this attentiveness to narratives accomplishes this I will expound in subsequent section of this seminar.

The literary work whereupon I will ground this study is *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2004 [1954]). There are several reasons for it being a suitable case-study literary text for informational humanities. *The Lord of the Rings* has long since been accepted into the canon of so-called "high literature," which led to a high volume of critical thinking about it, while also being accepted into popular literature and inspiring the rise of interest in fantasy literature. Moreover, this work has what can be understood as a battle between two opposing forces and ideologies, one good and one bad. This makes easier identifying what are the morally good and bad uses of knowledge, which is beneficial for demonstrating informational humanities' initial appliance; this is not to say that informational humanities can only be applied on works containing a tension between morally dichotomous ideologies, or that the book necessarily has a mere dichotomous view of good and bad. Lastly, I personally enjoy *The Lord of the Rings* to an immense degree and have been deliberating about it before I set to write this seminar work, which would contribute to discussions about both its affectual and theoretical significances.

Method

Using surface reading for establishing that we can learn about ethical operation of knowledge from written works may seem counter intuitive, as one core principle behind the method is that texts have no meaning or a message beyond their confines. However, I wish to emphasize that this project does not rely on the notion that they have hidden or transcendent meanings. Rather, this project will analyze not what the *story* says or implies about knowledge and information, but what the *characters* (including the narrator) say about the concepts, how they operate them for their goals, how their words and operations take effect, and what the involved characters' attitude to those is. The conclusions which the reader may draw from reading a text as a narrative unity do not originate from the work, then, but from the reader themselves in reaction to the values and ideologies that they may discern in its narrative and to its aesthetics.

Intentional inclusion of casual readers of literature in this thought, and not just critical thinkers of texts, is crucial for the choice of surface reading. A casual reader may not choose

to linger and inspect the hidden mechanisms of knowledge and information within a text but would likely "just read" the narrative as it is, recalling the term of Sharon Marcus. Their reaction, be it positive or negative, will probably be affectual in respect to the narrative experience. Contrarywise, a critic who would inspect the text while presuming it has veiled workings or meanings, may discover something crucial and provoking about the ethics of knowledge, but their findings will stretch beyond the narrative and its affective impact on the audience. At this point it is crucial to reemphasize that informational humanities' foundation is narrative analysis: we wish to understand the conceptions of knowledge and information and their uses in a narrative's limits; only then can we appreciate what the reader may infer about knowledge from taking in a narrative.

The value of reading the surface of *The Lord of the Rings* resonated to me from J. R. R. Tolkien's own critical essay about folklore and fairy-stories, "On Fairy-Stories" (1964 [1947]). The essay, preceding the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* by seven years, delineates Tolkien's critical views on how fairy-stories are distinct from other narrative forms while highlighting their value and how their target audience should be expanded beyond children exclusively. In the essay, Tolkien concedes that claims about tales' sources "may express […] some element of truth," but argues that "they are not true in a fairy-story sense, they are not true in art or literature" (Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories"). By that, Tolkien means that while inspiration and adaptation can be discerned, to attempt to comprehend or analyze a literary work in relation to its alleged source tell us nothing about the story itself or the ethics it contains. Detecting the sources or inspirations of fairy-stories is valueless for understanding them, since "it is precisely […] the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count," he argues; Tolkien contends that instead, it would be more valuable "to consider what they are, what they have become for us, and what values the long alchemic process of time have produced in them" (Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories"). By that, Tolkien does not ask us to discard history, biography, and all things shaping the author or a work, but he urges us to consider "the story as it is served up by its author or teller," rather than "desire to see the bones" of it (Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories"). This part of Tolkien's manifesto remarkably resembles the definition of Best and Marcus to surface reading in their introduction to it, although the practice had yet to be formalized at the time. Still, it extends the theoretical groundwork for surface reading – to which contemporary critics added the affectual aspect – and lends it relevance even in the context of less-discussed fantasy literature. Still, it will be well to retain that Tolkien's main concern in "On Fairy-Stories" is not reading the surface of narratives, nor

do his theoretical thoughts fully correspond with the current definition of it. Reading Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, it would also be tempting to compare it with this part of the essay, particularly ones where characters comment on how research and inquiry of test subjects should be conducted (see section "Ethical value of modes of operating knowledge"). However, as Tolkien himself underscores, these associations are not true within the literary frame, for they artificially compare our reality with mere aspects of a wholly different reality that has separate rules.

The limits of informational humanities

There are two issues concerning the ethical operation of knowledge in narratives that informational humanities are not designed to resolve: uncertainty of how a narrative might affect readers on individual or general scales, and obscurity about whether the values we identify in a narrative are necessarily moral outside its confines. Though informational humanities acknowledge the cognitive process involved in delving to the ideological and ethical systems of a narrative, in contrast to cognitive analysis, it strives not to make claims about the effects of it on the audience. Rather, this theory makes its conclusions in the context of the narrative, as a form of narrative analysis. Moreover, I contend that attempting to ascertain whether a particular text or narrative is good or bad in its ethical nature or effect on its audience would be fallacious. In the introduction to the book *The Ethics of Knowledge Creation* (2017), "The Ethics of Knowledge Creation: Transactions, Relations and Persons," Anne Grønseth and Lisette Josephides affirm that they "take a position in which we see ethics as telling us about knowledge as it is negotiated, managed, distributed and challenged by judgements, ideologies and genealogies in shifting social and cultural contexts" (Grønseth & Josephides, p. 10). So, though one literary work was authored in a certain context, appreciating the ethics of how its knowledge functions is heavily "flexible and contextual, not to be defined or placed once and for all" (ibid.). Grønseth and Josephides demonstrate that in social sciences, the qualitative value of actions, sayings, and decisions is "made sense of a posteriori", as the judgements differ between given cultures or societies (p. 11). Hence, it would be false to assume that literary works or their epistemology bear absolute ethical value. Then again, if we were to commit to an "ethic of regard" when dealing with narratives, that is, to "[an] engagement in […] relations of respect and equality in which knowledge is transacted," we would recognize it as a valuable "source of knowledge creation," all while acknowledging the differences in values between the society of the narrative and of its

audiences (p. 6). Granted, these quotes were said about knowledge creation in a socio-anthropological context, about humans interacting with each other. However, as Mark Kingwell shows in the essay "The Ethics of Ethics and Literature" (2014), similar comments can be made on works of literature. During an ethics seminar that he carried out, for which he assigned literary readings, a student had a sense that "the seminar was making them more sensitive and nuanced readers, if not better people" (Kingwell, p. 25). Hearing this, Kingwell doubts: is "this subjection of novels to a rubric of ideas, however loose and in itself virtuous, a good thing? Was it ethical […] to treat novels as means to an end, rather than ends in themselves?" (ibid.). In fact, he begins to misgive that "books, like persons, should not be instrumentalized" as "vehicles of moral instruction," but be "inherently inviolable" (ibid.). Contemplating his dread, Kingwell concludes at last that although we encounter humans, we do not know their minds directly, "but words printed on a page give us the best possible chance at coming close, better even than interacting with others," because stories teach us that there is something to relate to in each person (p. 26). Therefore, for Kingwell, "reading novels as morally instructive is part of what it means to take them seriously" – we do not learn from them as objects, rather, we have something akin to a conversation with them, he argues (ibid.). By the nature of separate contexts, no two people will "converse" with a text the same way, nor will they necessarily come to the same conclusions about ethical creation, communication, or consumption of knowledge. Nevertheless, in engaging with various narratives and immersing ourselves in their systems of knowledge and ethics, we reanimate our own by allowing ourselves to either shift uneasily or be vindicated by them.

Analysis of *The Fellowship of the Ring*

The Lord of the Rings's plot succeeds that of the children's book *The Hobbit* (1937) by sixty years. *The Hobbit* follows Bilbo Baggins's unexpected recruitment by the wizard Gandalf the Grey on a quest to help the dwarves reclaim their home and treasure from Smaug, the dragon. The dwarves' assessment of Bilbo evolves from a liability to a dependable leader, partly owing to him finding a ring that grants him invisibility.

The Lord of the Rings is vastly distinct. Though by and large considered a trilogy, Tolkien has always envisioned it as a single story divided into six books with no names, following the medieval custom. Therefore, I would often associate *The Fellowship of the Ring*'s scenes with their corresponding book number – book 1 or book 2. Book 1 delineates Bilbo's departure for a life of travel and the passing of his ring to his heir, Frodo Baggins, followed by the discovery that it is the One Ring which holds the power of Dark-lord Sauron and the power to dominate all. Pursued by the Enemy for its power, Frodo and co. smuggle the ring out the Shire to the safety of Rivendell, the Elven city, facing mortal dangers on their way. Book 2 opens with a council whereat the full scope of the state of things becomes clearer and the Fellowship of the Ring is assembled; its directive is to journey to destroy the Ring at the volcano where it was made, thereby defeating Sauron. Their journey is upset by the treason of the wise wizard Saruman the White, who seeks to abuse the power and authority of the Ring, but they find safety under the protection of the Elf-lady Galadriel, who teaches them the contents of her visions. Eventually, though, the Fellowship breaks; the hobbits Frodo and Sam carry the Ring onward, while the rest face various fates.

Knowledge – good or bad?

Though knowledge and information are widely considered concepts associated with goodness or as worthy aspirations, whether the nature of knowledge or certain branches of it are good or bad is not always manifest in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

One occasion in which the ambiguity around the morality of knowledge is clear in book 1 is when counsel is bidden from the elf Gildor. This scene transpires in chapter "Three Is Company", immediately after Frodo and his hobbit companions narrowly elude a second time the Black Riders, whom they will learn are the Nazgûl, Sauron's most fearsome servants. The hobbits come across the noble elf Gildor Inglorion, well versed in the ways of the world. And yet, despite Frodo and his friends' bids for guidance, Gildor is reluctant to impart from his knowledge or input. At first, his reason seems to be that he does not know how to help Frodo,

for the elf comments, "you do not ask me or tell me much that concerns yourself," so he would not know how to offer help (*LotR*, 83). Nevertheless, after Frodo repeats a common proverb, that elves always "say both no and yes" when they are asked to offer advice, Gildor concedes that this is because "elves seldom give unguarded advice, for advice is a dangerous gift, even from the wise to the wise, and all courses may run ill" (p. 84). Gildor does not say that knowledge in general or the specific knowledge he has is bad or corruptive to have, but he worries that sharing knowledge without knowing how it would be used, for whatever cause, and what it would bring about could damage rather than avail the hobbits. The concept of the impact of knowledge, its risks and potentials, is echoed in chapter "The Mirror of Galadriel" in book 2, in which Galadriel offers Frodo to gaze into her mirror that shows "things that were, things that are, and things that yet may be" (*LotR*, p. 362). Frodo asks Galadriel, "do you advise me to look [in the mirror]?", but she refuses to counsel at all – repeating the Elven custom – and says that what Frodo could see may "be fair or evil, [and] that may be profitable, and yet it may not" (p. 363).

The Elvish attitude to knowledge may very well be considered ambiguous from these two scenes, though I think describing it as "neutral" is more fitting, in the sense that the concept is not inherently affiliated with either good or bad values. Reading what the elves say regarding the information that they have illuminates that they do not judge its morality. Gildor does not fear the knowledge he has is bad or corruptive at its core, he worries about *rashly* giving out advice, as he is uncertain whether imparting it would bring about harm or benefit for the hobbits. Galadriel does not say that the mirror could show wicked or perversive visions – her use of the words "evil" and "fair" is in a less-used sense nowadays of "unfortunate" or "causing discomfort",[4] and "promising" or "pleasing",[5] comparably. It seems that she rather relates to the impact that acquiring the information could carry, like Gildor does, not to the moral nature of the information itself.

In the case of the *LotR* then, we should shift the focus of our study from inspecting how one may infer the ethics of *knowledge* to judging the ethics of *knowing*. Absorbing new information is "both good and perilous," Galadriel says in the paragraph we last discussed, relating to the absorption of information, not to the information absorbed (*LotR*, p. 363). One of the most famous examples of how knowing can be morally risky would be the scene in which the members of the Fellowship of the Ring are selected to guide and protect Frodo on

[4] Defined by *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), "evil", sense I.4.a. and I.5.a.
[5] Defined by *OED*, "fair", senses II.10 and I.2.

the quest to destroy the Ring. Lord Elrond, the wise and powerful elf who rules Rivendell, is reluctant to send with Frodo his young kinsmen, fearing it is too dangerous for such weak, little people; when they insist to enroll regardless, he says that "that is because you do not understand and cannot imagine what lies ahead" (*LotR*, 276). Gandalf, though, aligns himself with Frodo's kinsmen, reminding Elrond that "nor do any of us see clearly. It is true that if these hobbits understood the danger they would not dare to go. But they would still wish to go, or wish that they dared, and be ashamed and unhappy. I think, Elrond, that in this matter it would be well to trust rather to their friendship than to great wisdom" (ibid.). Gandalf's claim in this scene is extraordinary: recognizing the grave threat that the vulnerable hobbits would face and the prudence in Elrond's caveat, Gandalf backs the foolish course nonetheless, as ignorance enables the hobbits' act of loyalty; risking their life out of love for Frodo, he deems, is better than appreciating what risks they would face and avoiding them. From that, a reader may infer that knowing too much is morally dangerous, for it risks disabling more important values: love, loyalty, bravery, and commitment.

Following this reading, we better understand that information in itself is devoid of moral charge, while knowing, and avoiding knowing for that matter, are actions that could lead to morally favorable or unfavorable decisions. Therefore, it seems appropriate to amend at this point our terminology for ethics in the context of *The Lord of the Rings*. Instead of the terms "Good" and "Bad" to describe the ethical quality of actions and decisions, I propose to relate to the *ethical potential* of actions – i.e., *Dangerous* and *Promising*.

But although the essay so far handled the moral quality of concepts and actions based on their results or potential thereof, it is key to consider that the view about how to create, communicate, and consume knowledge and information is not a utilitarian one necessarily; the nature of reasons and purposes must be considered. Few narrative events exemplify so well the aspect of motives in the context of ethical usage of knowledge as Saruman the White and his betrayal. In chapter "The Council of Elrond" in book 2, Gandalf uncovers his confrontation with the Order of the Wise's leader, Saruman the White, who is wisest and most powerful of the Wise, and the one who betrays it. During the confrontation, Saruman reveals "[the] truth [of] why I brought you here" – he desires to "command" the Ruling Ring so that the rising "Power would pass to *us*," to him and Gandalf (*LotR*, p. 260). This power and the deeds required to seize it, Saruman says, would be "approving the high and ultimate goal: Knowledge, Rule, Order" (p. 259). I argue that the key word which distinguishes Saruman from Gandalf as immoral in this scene is "command". Across the confrontation, Gandalf does not scrutinize the grand purpose which Saruman specifies for its moral quality;

he admonishes him for using the plural pronouns, “us” and “we”, as “only one hand at a time can wield the One” (p. 260). Gandalf, who already refused Frodo’s offer to own or safekeep the One Ring in chapter “The Shadow of the Past” from book 1, understands that to desire the Ring is to lust for power and knowledge to control what is not subjected to one’s will. Certainly, having power, knowledge, or rule are not things of evil – Elrond for example is a wise and powerful ruler, yet he is also considered good by the characters – but to desire means and knowledge for obtaining more power, for asserting control over what is free of one’s governance, appears immoral in *The Lord of the Rings*. This stands out most in Saruman’s willingness to inflict harm when he concedes that gaining the One, and thereby the awesome Power, could require “evils done by the way” (*LotR*, p. 259). Saruman does not simply signify here that the end justifies the means; he places himself as superior to all, living or elsewise, so everything else is expendable to him. Gandalf is conscious of this and refuses to align with Saruman and the power of the Ring.

Concluding this analysis, we can make explicit two claims about ethics and knowledge in *The Lord of the Rings*: one, neither knowledge, knowing, and power, nor certain fields of them, are intrinsically bad concepts; two, to be evil is to desire asserting mastery and control over things and beings which are free of one’s will, and to do this, one would often seek to increase its power and knowledge at the expense of others’ wellbeing. The characters in *The Lord of the Rings* seem to be (or grow) aware of that, as towards the end of chapter “The Council of Elrond”, Gandalf says that the Enemy “is very wise […]. But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power; and so he judges all hearts,” so he would not imagine they would seek to destroy the Ring (p. 269). Having considered all other courses, the quest to destroy the Ring is the only one with hope of stopping Evil in Middle-earth. And yet, it is also the hardest course – indeed, nearly impossible, Gandalf recognizes – so it would seem like folly to Sauron, who can only imagine them wielding the Ring (ibid.). So, Gandalf asserts, “let folly be out cloak, a veil before the eyes of the Enemy!” for, “if we seek this [i.e., to destroy the Ring], we shall put him out of reckoning” (ibid.).

The ethical value of knowledge-operating modes

Having covered how in *The Fellowship of the Ring* knowing and making known can be both good and bad while knowledge is a neutral concept, we will now classify modes of founding, structuring, and distributing knowledge appearing in it. For each mode we will then

determine whether operating knowledge by it is morally promising or dangerous based on their results, characters' responses, and the affective impact they cause.

Recording and sharing experiences. This is a mode of knowledge distribution and acquisition appearing early in the book, with two examples of it to learn from about its moral nature: Bilbo's recording project, and Gandalf's examination of historic records. Bilbo, Frodo's adopting parent and the former bearer of the Ruling Ring, has been recording his own adventures from *The Hobbit* and translating numerous important texts from Elvish, which were included in the Shire Records. Once Bilbo's own adventures end, Gandalf advises him that his part in the affairs of Middle-earth is "as a recorder" henceforth (*LotR*, p. 270). Gandalf encourages Bilbo to dedicate himself to this part, saying, "finish your book, […] but get ready to write a sequel" which would capture the tale of those who set out to destroy the Ring and oppose Sauron (ibid.). Similarly, in the prologue to *LotR*, when the narrator relates to the Shire Records following the events of *LotR*, they describe the translation and recording of the ancient Elvish texts as "a work of great skill and learning" (*LotR*, p. 15). The approach of Gandalf and the narrator to Bilbo's endeavor is tellingly positive, though it remains unclear wherefore they approve of it. My suggestion is that it relates to the nature of the act of recording: to preserve what has been or to negate the wearing of time. Yet just as we validated that knowing is not good or bad in itself, it seems to me that so are preserving or recording neither good nor bad in themselves. For example, when Saruman studies the arts of the Enemy and the Elven-rings, instruments which have special gifts or impacts, he relies on ancient records to learn about their power and their history, yet he ends up corrupted to desire power at the expense of others' life and freedom nonetheless. It is crucial to remember that Gandalf wishes to learn about the Rings of Power too, to ascertain that the ring Bilbo had found and passed onto Frodo is the One Ring. He recalls the information that Saruman had shared with them before, yet "great though his lore may be [regarding the Rings]," there was much "he had not said," Gandalf recognizes, and he traces the same source of Saruman's lore (*LotR*, p. 252). Its recovery reveals the information that Gandalf needs to impede the Enemy's plans and to warn Frodo about the power he safekeeps. The preservation of the knowledge of the One Ring allows Gandalf to share it with his allies and work for the benefit of them and of the peoples of Middle-earth. Hence, recording and absorbing recorded knowledge is moral if it is done for posterity's learning and for sharing with others (repercussions of learning knowledge without meaning to pass it on is discussed in mode "insulated scholarly study").

There is one more minor aspect in the story which presents preservation as a benevolent thing, and that is the three Elven Great Rings. The Three are mighty, but Elrond says that "they were not made as weapons […] of conquest," as their makers "did not desire strength or domination or hoarded wealth, but understanding, making, and healing, to preserve all things unstained" (*LotR*, p. 268). The Three therefore are the epitome of this mode of operating knowledge, as they possess the power to prevent the decreasing and withering of things over time – they are preservation taken to an extreme. They make the recording experiences obsolete, because they have the power to make all that is worth recording permanent, or at least keep sharp the memory of what had passed before their power took effect. This, combined with their power to make their wielders understand existence without mastery over it, render the Three morally promising elements in the story.

Unmediated information. For interpretating this mode, we will examine instances when knowledge or information are informed or experienced without being told *about* them or having them recounted by other means but are transmitted or received directly. This mode of operating knowledge is in contrast with the former mode therefore, which is associated with recorded experiences and historical, biographical accounts. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the channels we encounter for unmediated imparting of knowledge are the Mirror of Galadriel, the One Ring itself, and via the effects of Frodo's stabbing by the Nazgûl. The Nazgûl are wraiths and the most fearsome servants of Sauron who pursue Frodo throughout Book 1 for the Ring, until, in chapter "A Knife in the Dark", they stab him with a blade that can eventually make him a wraith too. Aragorn helps the Hobbits flee the Nazgûl and guides them on the last part of their journey for Rivendell while Frodo is gradually drawn into the wraith-world. At the last moment Elrond saves him though. And yet, "that grim wound had not been without effect," the book tells us: "his senses were sharper and more aware of things that could not be seen. One sign of change that he soon had noticed was that he could see more in the dark than any of his companions" (*LotR*, pp. 311-312). Moreover, on several occasions, he perceives "[a] faint fall of soft bare feet," which sounds like an echo but is not so (p. 312). Frodo is the only one able to perceive these, as being drawn beyond corporeality has made him capable of sensing more than most can, specifically when they are in deep darkness or silence, when others struggle. Yet the narrator adds that "he was in any case the bearer of the Ring […], and at whiles it seemed a heavy weight," right after divulging this newfound keenness (p. 312). In doing this, the narrator pairs it with another sensitivity stemming from bearing the One Ring: "he felt the certainty of evil ahead and of evil

following; but he said nothing" (ibid.). So, while being physically drawn to the wraith-world has made his senses sharper, bearing the Ring heightens Frodo's attentiveness and intuition. It seems that the attitude towards the sensitivity that Frodo gains by experiencing directly is ambivalent, even on a textual level. Frodo has been experiencing unmediated exposure to information by means that allow him to enter the wraith-world, and, though this knowledge is helpful, it is a burden, too. A debate about this topic is raised in the podcast *The Tolkien Professor*, in which Professor Corey Olsen from Washington University discusses from an academical standpoint Tolkien's works. In episode 12, "Tolkien Chat 1: Ben Kozlowski" (2009), Olsen's guest, Ben Kozlowski, wonders if "[the] knowledge that Frodo has as a result of the Ring […], if that hasn't […] warped him in some way" (00:21:17). Kozlowski questions this because he worries that Frodo "has gotten the evil side of things" (00:21:48), given that when wearing the Ring, "you see into the land of the wraiths," and even simply bearing it has an effect (00:20:05). Frodo's perspective is affected to focus on the dark side of things (literally), so what he sees could be askew, and yet it is undeniable that he is more sensitive to reality at the same time. Indeed, the footsteps he has been hearing turn out to belong to a creature who covets the Ring, his sense of danger turns out to signify the presence of a balrog (a terrible creature which kills a member of the company), and later in the *Fellowship*, he even sees more clearly than anyone into the heart of Galadriel, the wise, powerful Elven lady. Galadriel bears one of the three Elven Rings of Power, yet she hides it from sight. However, Frodo sees it plainly, and she admits that "it cannot be hidden from the Ring-bearer, and the one has seen the Eye" – the Eye being Sauron (*LotR*, p. 365). Moreover, Frodo, Galadriel testifies, "have perceived my thought more clearly than many that are accounted wise," though some have known her for thousands of years: though she would not take it, Galadriel desires the power of the Ring (p. 366). The Mirror of Galadriel is another way to receive unmediated knowledge: it shows the viewer vision of the past, present, and possible futures, though one can never be sure when what they see happens. Though the Mirror belongs to Galadriel, it would always "show things unbidden" of it (p. 362). So, though the Mirror offers knowledge that may have been otherwise inaccessible, it is also "a dangerous tool as a guide of deeds" (p. 363). In this sense, wishing to view the Mirror could bring its viewer to desires like those of Saruman – knowledge for knowledge's sake. Though this is not evil on its own, as viewing it corrupts neither Frodo nor Sam, it is morally risky, as Sam exemplifies. After viewing the Mirror and seeing evil taking effect in the Shire, Sam cries wildly, "I can't stay here […]. I must go home," but is eventually pacified by Galadriel (ibid.). This supports Gandalf's claim that knowing too much may diminish one's resolve or

bravery and sabotage the quest. Though Sam wishes to go home to protect it from evil, which is not a bad wish, his dedication to the quest and to Frodo momentarily lapses. Had he decided to renounce his duty and comradery due to the unmediated exposure to knowledge, he would not only risk immorality, but make an immoral decision altogether, judging by the attitude of the characters.

Insulated scholarly study. Saruman's use of information contrasts with that of Gandalf in several aspects. In chapter "The Shadow of the Past", before he learns of Saruman's betrayal, Gandalf says about him that "his knowledge runs deep" in "the lore of the Elven-rings, great and small" (*LotR*, p. 48). In chapter "The Council of Elrond", Gandalf reiterates Saruman's grasp of the lore, saying that he "has long studied it, seeking the lost secrets" of the Elven-rings (p. 250). He later adds that "Saruman has long studied the arts of the Enemy himself, and thus we have often been able to forestall him" (p. 257). The attitude of the characters regarding Saruman is complex, perhaps even ambivalent. On the one hand, Gandalf describes Saruman as "great among the Wise" (p. 48) before his betrayal is unmasked, yet the characters do not stop appraising his wisdom and learning even after it is revealed. Moreover, Saruman used to couple his knowledge of Evil's arts with the skills of others to thwart Sauron, the Enemy, so he had done good in the past. It is clear nonetheless that while he made good use of his knowledge occasionally, he refrained from sharing it with others or cooperating with them in his studies. This, in turn, has brought evil results. Gandalf recalls how Saruman calmed down the Wise when they heard that Sauron has started searching for the One Ring, reminding them that he has "earnestly studied this matter" and knows for certain it is lost (*LotR*, p. 251), yet he had also withheld information from the Wise (p. 252). Gandalf, being "lulled by the words," did not pursue the truth, but he laments that had he relied on his intuition and did seek it out, "our peril would now be less" (p. 251). Even when Gandalf did begin searching for answers, Saruman's reticence forced Gandalf to travel vast distances and spend nearly seventeen years of searching before finding the information he needed to resist Sauron and alert his targets – the hobbits. We see that though Saruman relies on information that was recorded for posterity, he is protective of the knowledge that he has gained; he insulates himself and withholds information even from those who would be his allies. Saruman has amassed immense knowledge of the Elven-rings, Gandalf says, "but his pride has grown with it, and he takes ill to meddling" (*LotR*, p. 48). This line is perhaps significant in particular as it suggests that lengthy, isolated studying has corrupted Saruman into evil. The decision to hoard knowledge solely to him, make only himself wiser, while

hindering the learning of others, runs parallel to the desire for obtaining the Ring to make himself the most powerful, to raise his stature above all else and command over everything. It should be emphasized: we do not know that Saruman desires this evil goal from the start, but reading the narrative shows that deciding to place knowledge as a goal of its own and concentrate it to him and no one else has made the danger to develop perversive desires imminent. The view of a subject as the sole possessor or power and knowledge directly correlates with the Ring's potential, on which is etched, "One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, / One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them" (*LotR*, p. 50).

Dissecting, in*quiring research.* Another mode of erecting knowledge practiced by Saruman is probing research – meaning, looking "under the skin" of a subject or splitting it into its components for learning's sake. In a key point of Gandalf's recounting of Saruman's betrayal, Saruman proclaims his new name to Gandalf the Grey, "Saruman of Many Colours!", thus forgoing the title Saruman the White (*LotR*, p. 259). And indeed, Gandalf then notices "that his robes, which had seemed white, […] were woven of all colours, and if he moved they shimmered and changed hue so that the eye was bewildered" (ibid.). Saruman regards that by splitting white to its hues, he had multiplied his knowledge and grew wiser. What characterizes Saruman's actions as morally dangerous though, is that he asserts his command over the subject of his research, which is why he is comfortable with breaking it to learn its mechanisms. As we discussed earlier, Saruman's goals are the capital "Knowledge, Rule, Order" (*LotR*, p. 259). Splitting the white color exhibits how Saruman acts for this goal and why it risks immorality: he handles white light by his ruling, he breaks it to discover how it is ordered, thereby supposedly increasing his knowledge and power beyond their previous measures. Assuming control over another thing to advance one own knowledge and power renders its operation corruptive. Evidence to the moral risk behind Saruman's action is provided in the podcast *The Tolkien Professor*, in which, during episode 46, "WC Tolkien Course 29 – Two Towers part I" (2010), Olsen shares an insight that was sent to him by podcast follower Tom Routen. Olsen shows how Saruman conceives that by splitting the white that characterizes him to many colors he correspondingly amplifies his knowledge and power, that it is "a step up" (*Tolkien Prof.*, 00:10:41). But in fact, "in splintering his own white into many colors, he is subtracting from himself," and thus also from his power (00:10:48). Olsen tells about the parallel that Routen draws between Saruman's reduction and Sauron's actions – particularly the creation of the Ruling Ring. Sauron stole the secrets of the elves and abused their craft to create the One Ring – a ring whose only purpose is to master

over the others and over everything. But to make it, Sauron was forced to pour into it much of himself and of his power. Thus, though his power persists through the Ring, he himself is reduced and weakened to such a degree, that his very existence depends on the Ring enduring, meaning that "when the Ring is destroyed, he's gonna be destroyed," Olsen clarifies (*Tolkien Prof.*, 00:11:18). Relating to Routen's words, Olsen highlights how Saruman conducts "that same splintering, […] that same move towards fragmentation which seems like wisdom, which seems like power – [but it] is not" (00:11:42). Olsen argues that this is one of the main trends of Evil in this literary world: "Evil is itself self-consuming […]. It is not possible to be evil and self-sustaining" (00:12:48). Evil always seeks to assert mastery over other things via increase of power and knowledge, yet its efforts instead result in the reduction of those, and thus it consumes itself down to a fall.

Systematic and holistic study. This is a mode of operating knowledge which is directly contrasted with the former, even within the same scene wherein Gandalf and Saruman confront the breaking of the white color in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Learning of Saruman's action, Gandalf expresses his disapproval, and Saruman mocks him, claiming that white "serves as a beginning. White cloth may be dyed. The white page can be overwritten; and the white light can be broken" (*LotR*, p. 259). To this Gandalf retorts, "in which case it is no longer white […]. And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom" (ibid.). Gandalf argues that by splitting the white light, Saruman no longer studies his subject but had reduced it to entirely other things, so he is not wiser – perhaps he is even diminished in wisdom. We understand from Gandalf's assertions that appreciating a research subject as a whole, without looking to master and manipulate it, is a mode of operating knowledge which has the promise to be more moral and that may better cultivate one's wisdom. This correlates with the insight provided in *The Tolkien Professor* podcast, that the act of reducing something to its makeup correspondingly reduces – rather than increases – oneself, as one was expecting (*Tolkien Prof.*, 00:10:48).

Conclusion

Having read the surface of *The Fellowship of the Rings*, allowing the story to communicate how knowledge is operated in it and how the characters judge and react to it, we find that we have made insightful conclusions sans striving to bare its hidden meanings.

Having identified modes of operating knowledge and the moral value of them, do we gain practical takeaways regarding operation of knowledge? Perhaps not. I doubt for instance that I would altogether disapprove of probing into chemical mechanisms for making medicine, or that I would avoid watching unedited videos of recent events. Then again, I would personally acknowledge that splintering nature or manipulating it for medicine can have immoral significances, and that just like viewing the Mirror of Galadriel, explicit, unbidden information broadcasted in social media and news channels can be perilous to consume. Still, this may not be the takeaway of every reader of the book; we each interact with its narrative in a discreet way, so each reader would likely make different judgements – some of which may even be in contradiction to those identified in the book, but in response to it. Texts do not categorically inform us how to operate knowledge ethically, even if they try to – by corresponding with texts as subjects, we challenge and further our notion of good and bad handling of knowledge and information. This potential is at the core of informational humanities.

How can informational humanities be applied in practice to effect on a societal scale? The implications of this field should advance digital humanities, a scholarly discipline which aims to combine skills and principles from human sciences with analytical tools and techniques from computer sciences. One example of a digital tool which could profit from the application of informational humanities' principles to become more ethical is large language models (LLMs), popularly referred to as AI chatbots (e.g., OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's Bard). LLMs use machine learning to analyze text for improving how naturally they communicate with humans, gaining a wider scope of context and reference, and automizing complicated yet mundane processes – particularly ones involving data analyses and calculations. These models attempt assuming the way humans communicate by imitating the linguistic thinking and articulation of humans; yet since these models absorb data passively, "they can inadvertently perpetuate biases or make decisions that have harmful ethical implications" based on the databases they scan, as OpenAI details in the article "Can We Train AI to Be Ethical" about their LLM, ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2023). The article explains that one approach to prevent these consequences is made of an initial "implementation of ethical

frameworks and guidelines. This includes identifying potential biases […]" in the used databases, "involvement of diverse voices and perspectives in its [i.e., ChatGPT's] development," all accompanied by ethical supervision (OpenAI, 2023). However, these measures do not grant the models themselves means to analyze the values or biases of narratives and texts. Therefore, by instituting a method to infer moral standards of information in narratives, we may create for large language models a reference point to learn how to react to texts in relation to the cultural ideals of good and bad and what to take away from texts. The nature of their reaction though, and the quality of the identified values, would have to be determined by humans. In addition to identifying ethical values, the fact that informational humanities rely on the expansion of the notion of right and wrong uses of knowledge, implementing it into the calculation processes of LLMs would lend it tolerance for a wide set of beliefs and contexts. This could be especially significant for LLMs, since they are trained on immeasurable databases, so they are exposed to numerous texts that no single human would ever read – possibly even ones which were censored.

To further the research of the discipline of informational humanities, I would like to explore in the future the question if gaining information from texts, and stories specifically, is a moral way of acquiring, structuring, and distributing knowledge. Naturally, if we were to rely on our findings from the analysis of *The Fellowship of the Ring* or consult the opinions of David B. Morris, we would receive a positive answer. But this in itself is a flawed way to approach the question, as it relies on taking in information from texts structured as a narrative to answer whether texts and narratives are ethical mediums of learning information. This question fascinates me, as offering an answer to it could validate or annul the methodology proposed for informational humanities; but how it should be developed is a subject for another study.

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[6] The date of upload it not specified. This entry indicates the year of publication that the uploader used.