
Book Marks

The Fellowship of The Ring

A Movie Review By:

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*One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all, and in the Darkness bind them.*

J. R. R. Tolkien's epic tale of good and evil has finally made it to the big screen. The first installment, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, opened to rave reviews and huge audiences nationwide. As a long-time Tolkien fan, this reviewer was excited to see his major work make it to theaters, and even more pleased that the director and screenwriter stayed largely faithful to the book.

This review, however, will not focus on the plot, acting or even the special effects; though, all of these were exceptionally good. Instead, this review will examine how ethical dilemmas are portrayed and resolved. The movie is rich with scenes depicting ethical decision-making. In several memorable scenes, the deontological, utilitarian and virtue ethics approaches to ethical decision-making are contrasted. Tolkien's preference for the virtue ethics approach is crystal clear in the books, and this preference remains clear in the movie.

But first, for those who may not have seen the movie or read the books, a brief recap of the plot is in order. Several thousands of years before the movie opens, the evil one, Sauron, creates a ring of power into which he pours much of his magic powers. Sauron, however, is defeated, and his ring is taken from him. He flees, and the ring is lost. As the movie opens, Sauron has returned and is gathering his forces for another assault upon civilization. His ring, meanwhile, has turned up in the hands of a hobbit (a "little people"), Frodo Baggins. Joined by a loyal group of friends from various races (elves, dwarves, men, hobbits and a wizard named Gandalf), Frodo sets out to do the one thing that will defeat

Sauron—destroy the ring by throwing it into the volcano at the heart of Sauron’s realm.

Frodo’s journey begins with his choice to leave his beloved homeland, the Shire. In attempting to cater to the modern craving for action, the director has made Frodo’s departure seem more precipitous, as though it were a necessity born of fear. The book, however, makes it plain that Frodo does in fact have a choice. He chooses to leave and take the ring out of the Shire. His initial reasoning is utilitarian: departing is the best course of action to protect the other inhabitants of the Shire from the forces of Sauron that are desperately searching for Frodo—and the ring. But his *motivation* for this ethical choice clearly comes from the virtues he possesses—a deep love for his homeland and fellow hobbits, and courage.

The next major ethical decision point comes in the Council of Elrond. The wisest of the elves, Elrond hosts a meeting of representatives from the various races to discuss what should be done with the ring. He urges that it be destroyed as the only sure way to defeat Sauron permanently. However, one of the men at the council, Boromir, disagrees and presents the utilitarian argument. The ring is a weapon of great power; using it would guarantee victory. Therefore, it would be better to use it to defeat the enemy, rather than pursue the highly risky strategy of destroying the ring. Tolkien will have none of this argument. Speaking through Elrond and Gandalf, he reminds the audience that the ring confers power, and power corrupts. Whoever would take the ring to use it would simply become another Sauron. In short, the ends do not justify the means.

Once the collective decision to destroy the ring is made, the next major decision is to select the ring bearer. Once again, Frodo makes the difficult decision to walk into danger—he agrees to take the ring. This time, however, it is clear that he does so because he believes it is the right, the virtuous thing to do. “I will take the ring,” he says, “although I do not know the way.” With this choice made, Elrond rapidly assembles the band, the “fellowship of the ring,” that will undertake the journey to destroy the ring.

The journey takes the band underground, into what was once a great dwarf kingdom. During this dark journey, Frodo and Gandalf engage in another important discussion on ethics. The creature, Gollum, who once possessed the ring, is following the band. As Frodo and Gandalf discuss this fact, Frodo proclaims that he wishes his uncle Bilbo, who had

originally found the ring, had killed Gollum when he had the chance. After all, Gollum tried to kill Bilbo, and has since betrayed the existence of the ring, the Shire, and the fellowship, to Sauron. Frodo, argues that Gollum “deserves to die” for his crimes. Gandalf, however, urges Frodo to remember that “many who die deserve life, can you give it to them?” His point is that Bilbo demonstrated the virtue of mercy by sparing Gollum, and virtuous behavior benefits the beneficiary, the virtuous actor, and society as a whole. “Bilbo’s mercy may rule the fate of us all,” he prophetically remarks.

At the end of the movie, the audience is once again presented with a clash of approaches towards ethical decision-making. As it turns out, Boromir was not convinced by the arguments of Elrond and Gandalf at the council, and he attempts to take the ring from Frodo. Clearly, he believes that such disloyalty and theft is the lesser of two evils. That is, he is convinced that taking the ring and using it would benefit far more people than attempting to destroy the ring. Here we are presented with utilitarianism’s worst side—theft, and the use of an evil weapon is proposed as bringing the most good to the largest number of people.

Tolkien, however, does not buy into such arguments. Frodo escapes Boromir and flees the fellowship, departing for the enemy’s realm with only his friend, Sam. Boromir is left to face the consequences of his actions—the destruction of the fellowship. Finally understanding that the ends do not justify the means, Boromir confesses his actions to another member of the band before his death in battle.

The redemption of Boromir concludes *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Throughout Tolkien’s trilogy, and in this movie, we are confronted and reminded of what we intuitively know to be true. Good and evil do exist. We make ethical choices, and our choices matter. Utilitarian and deontological approaches to ethical decision-making have limits. Virtue is its own reward. Indeed, the virtues of loyalty, courage, mercy, honesty and love are celebrated and contrasted sharply with the vices. The movie and the books speak to our soul. Perhaps this is why *The Lord of the Rings* is one of the most popular epics ever to be written, and why *The Fellowship of the Ring* defied predictions and became a hit movie.