

The Ethical Dilemmas of Bilbo Baggins: Utilitarianism in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*

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Abstract

Mankind is, at its most primal form, predatory. If one were to take a look back at humanity's past, one would be confronted with the fact that ancestors were not very different in comparison to the wildlife around them. They fought and killed for survival. They were territorial and feral. This can be justified by the fact that the environment in which they had to survive demanded that they be savage and untamed. The unsympathetic nature of their surroundings did not let them let go of their wild nature even for a day. As mankind evolved and civilisations cropped up, their feral nature did not completely go away. It was masked by a façade of civility and humane values. However, the façade could easily be torn away at the slightest provocation. Even after civilisations were established and humanity, with the help of technology, progressed in leaps and bounds, Man still went to war because of his inability to share natural resources, lands etc. In wars, the common individual's life ceases to hold meaning and becomes part of one collective whole. Whole populations suffered for no good reason. Thus, the true mark of a culturally well – developed society is sharing. This is because sharing stems from the heart, contributes to the development of a society and ensures that no one is hurt in the process. No man is obligated to share his resources with his neighbour. However, when a man decides to help his neighbour just for the sake of helping, with no selfish intentions, one can say Utopia has been established. In short, a Utilitarian

Submitted: 10.02.2025

Accepted: 29.03.2025

Published 30.03.2025

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society is a Utopian society. Utilitarianism is a concept which was first introduced by Jeremy Bentham and it was further developed by John Stuart Mill. Mill's Utilitarianism posits that the action which causes the greater good for the greatest number of people must be considered as the right action. J.R.R. Tolkien is a British novelist who is well known for his Lord of the Rings series. His works explores the ramifications of being obsessed with oneself with no care for others, the harmful consequences of greed and avarice and how a humane society can be birthed with the help of selfless individuals aiming for the greater good. This research paper aims to study instances of Utilitarianism exhibited by Bilbo Baggins in Tolkien's novel The Hobbit and prove that Utilitarianism is a just model to be followed to establish an ideal society.

Keywords: Utilitarianism, Utopia, Greed, Greater Good, John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham

History is littered with the ruins of Great Empires. These ruins were brought about by self – centred and poorly thought out decisions. These decisions were mostly made with personal motives in mind, be it expansion of conquered lands or procurement of wealth. The rulers of old waged wars with the aid of their countrymen. Their war's were won at the cost of the young soldiers' lives and the common man was left with no voice or agency. The plight of the 'others' was even worse, since they were not treated as humans, but rather as living objects out of whom the maximum labour must be extracted. A closer look at the bygone ages would reveal that the bourgeois had little respect for human lives. Their thoughts catered only to their own fulfillment. They revelled in their riches, while the common man toiled for his survival. There was little respect for human lives or for individuality and a strict adherence towards class system was followed. However, as humanity evolved, mankind's herd mentality took a hit.

The advancement of the human mind occurred in tandem with the biological evolution of humankind. The human mind is a multifaceted and multidimensional tapestry of emotions and thoughts. Mankind's biggest asset, the human mind, has shaped the way societies and cultures evolve. While the world of the ancients was ruled by strength and savagery, as civilizations progressed and intellectualism developed, the person with the most well – developed mind was able to establish himself at the top of the hierarchy. However, as man's mental prowess grew, so did man's individuality. Man's individuality revealed man's innate ability to distinguish between virtue and vice. It was this ability which heralded the birth of a civilized society. A civilized society encouraged individuality, as long as it was guided by a strong moral compass.

The concept of individualism developed during the nineteenth century. People's interest were moved towards the value they hold as an individual. The shift towards individualism and individualistic values can be seen in the works of art belonging to that period. In his essay, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," Oscar Wilde writes, "Art is individualism, and individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. There lies its immense value. For what it seeks is to disturb monotony of type, slavery of

custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine”(39). Art taught men that he was more than just a mere dispensable tool.

Jeremy Bentham, an early Utilitarian, was also an Individualist. His ideas of Utilitarianism was developed from the concept of Individuality. In his work *The Book of Fallacies*, Bentham writes that “in every human breast... self-regarding interest is predominant over social interest; each person’s own individual interest over the interests of all other persons taken together”(393). Since human beings are inclined to serve their own interests, Bentham’s idea of utilitarianism stated that, “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do” (*An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* 1). In short, Bentham’s idea stated that the the actions from which one derives the greatest pleasure is the best course of action one could take. However, Bentham’s idea of Utilitarianism was not well – received. It was regarded as being too simplistic and reduced mankind to creatures of low intelligence guided by pain and pleasure.

John Stuart Mill’s idea of Utilitarianism was a well thought out concept. In his work *Utilitarianism*, Mill lays out the foundational aspect of Utilitarianism by stating, “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals utility, or the greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure” (9 – 10). Mill’s idea of happiness stated that the action which makes the greatest number of people happy is the best course of action one could take, irrespective of whether that action would make one happy or miserable. As per Mill’s Utilitarianism, mankind’s survival and strength depends on selective sacrifices one must make for the good of all. Hence, Utilitarianism can be thought of as delayed gratification, where one must sacrifice one’s pleasures and pursue the tougher decisions at the present moment in order to feel the pleasures of those sacrifices at a later date. The ideals of Utilitarianism can be seen in literature, where one protagonist selflessly sacrifices his time and resources for the well – being of his community.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (3 Jan 1892 - 2 Sept 1973) was an English writer well known for his *Lord of The Rings* series. In his novel *The Hobbit*, the protagonist, Bilbo Baggins is thrust into an unknown world and undergoes many strange and novel experiences. However, Bilbo’s strength of character helps him keep his own self and his companions safe. Throughout the novel, Tolkien, with the help of his characters’ demonstrates the importance of possessing a strong character, which enables the bearer of such virtuous disposition to not just look after themselves, but also after others. While previous studies on J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* have largely focused on the mythical as well as the allegorical aspects of the novel, little attention has been paid to the humane and utilitarian values possessed by the characters, especially, Bilbo Baggins, in the novel. This research article aims to bridge this gap by exploring

the utilitarian values possessed by Bilbo Baggins and how his presence benefits not just himself, but also others.

In *The Hobbit* one can see many instances where Bilbo Baggins, the protagonist, exhibits utilitarian characteristics. The novel begins with Bilbo being visited by Gandalf, the infamous wizard and in spite of Bilbo's insistence that he does not want to be involved with him under any circumstances, the wizard returns at night with thirteen other dwarves and since Bilbo is extremely polite - to a fault, he does not turn away the unexpected company from his home and is forced to host all fourteen of them in his house. The dwarves empty his pantry, use his dishes and take up his personal space. And on top of that they also expect Bilbo's agreement to join their quest. Bilbo, though resentful at first, decides to help them out. This is the first instance in the novel where Bilbo decides to focus on the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, irrespective of his own personal misery. What makes Bilbo's decision even more noteworthy is the fact that Bilbo, a Hobbit, is accustomed to a life of extreme comfort. He eats two breakfasts, two lunches and two dinners. Moreover, he is very particular in ensuring that he always has a handkerchief on him to keep himself clean. In short, his was a very cosy existence. However, he throws all those aside to help the dwarves selflessly in an attempt to increase their happiness in the long run. When he joins the dwarves he finds that "he had come without a pocket handkerchief" (*The Hobbit* 36). Bilbo, thus goes without his daily comforts in order to help the dwarves.

When Bilbo meets Gollum in the Goblin caves, there too his utilitarian nature is brought to the forefront. When he meets Gollum for the first time, he does not immediately attack him or force him into submission. Rather, he treats Gollum as an individual. Both Gollum and Bilbo come to an agreement that they would riddle each other and decide that the prize for Bilbo, if he wins, would be a way out of the goblin caves, assisted by Gollum. Eventually, when Bilbo wins their high stakes game of riddling, Gollum goes back on his promise, since he realises that he has misplaced his ring. This ring, however, was in Bilbo's coat pocket. When Gollum realises that Bilbo was in possession of his ring, he makes up his mind to murder him. Bilbo flees from Gollum's caves, with Gollum being in hot pursuit of him. However, as Bilbo slips and falls, he, unintentionally ends up wearing the ring on his finger and it is only when Gollum rushes past his prone figure, not taking notice of him, that he realises that the ring was precious to Gollum because it renders the wearer invisible. After Bilbo becomes invisible, due to the power of the ring, he starts following Gollum and Gollum leads him right up to the mouth of the cave. Though Bilbo, being invisible and armed, was in a much better position to fight Gollum and win, he feels a flash of pity for him. "A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart" (102). He rationalises that since Gollum has served his purpose, there remained no reason for him to murder him and so he escapes and leaves Gollum in the caves. Here, Bilbo, follows Mill's idea of liberty.

Mill states in his work *On Liberty* that, "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to

prevent harm to others”(22). Mill’s idea states that our happiness should not interfere with the happiness of others, nor cause harm to others, specially if the other person is harmless. Though Gollum was a dangerous creature, since he did not seem to be a threat at the moment when Bilbo was invisible, Bilbo decides to let him live. Moreover, Bilbo’s decision to spare Gollum’s life, in retrospect, was a well thought out decision, since his navigational skills play a major role in the *Lord of the Rings* series and Gollum also plays a very important role in destroying the ring.

Bilbo’s mettle as a utilitarian is exhibited once more, when he, along with his company get captured by the enchanted spiders of Mirkwood. The spiders catch their prey by lulling them into sleep and then swiftly cocooning their victims. When a stunned Bilbo groggily wakes up, he realises that a spider was swiftly wrapping its webs around him. “Something like a strong sticky thing was against his left hand, and when tried to move, he found that this legs were already wrapped in the same stuff”(The *Hobbit* 180). Bilbo uses his hand and his elven – sword to get free. And, since the spider seemed to be young and inexperienced, Bilbo is able to quickly kill it off. After his narrow escape, when Bilbo goes in search of his friends, he finds all of them cocooned and surrounded by even larger and more menacing spiders. One can argue that Bilbo, grabbing at this chance, could have very well escaped away from the dwarves who were causing a lot of inconveniences to him. But Bilbo’s humanity triumphs and he decides to rescue all the dwarves by putting his own life on the line. As he is confronted with the sight of the dwarves lying helplessly he realises “that the moment had come when he must do something”(183). Bilbo attacks the spiders discreetly. He avoids a full on confrontation with the spiders because he is aware of his own strength. He knows that he won’t be able to take on the whole group of spiders single – handedly. So he decides to divert them away from the group of the cocooned dwarves. Once he takes them a fair distance away from the dwarves, he brings out his elven sword. The spiders are alerted to the presence of the sword, since the sword shines in the dark. Bilbo runs with the sword in full view for a short span of time, then after successfully misdirecting them, he slips the ring onto his finger and becomes invisible and runs off to rescue the dwarves. After freeing the dwarves from the cocoons they are faced with a wholly confrontational battle with the spiders. The dwarves, being extremely weak from the spider’s poison, fight a losing battle. However, Bilbo, with the help of his ring successfully fights with the spiders by confusing them and repeatedly catching them unawares.

Bilbo aids the dwarves once more when they are imprisoned by the King of the Wood – elves. The dwarves, along with Thorin refuse to inform the King the reason for their travel and so, he imprisons them. However, here too Bilbo escapes imprisonment by using his ring of invisibility. And, he successfully helps the dwarves escape by crafting an ingenious plan, after carefully observing the ongoing of the elves in their palace. The elves threw their empty barrels into the river. Bilbo seizes his chance at escape when one fine day, after serving dinner, the elven guards drink and fall asleep. He convinces all of the dwarves to get into the barrels and he, along with his companions, clings onto one barrel and makes good their escape.

When the dragon Smaug emerges out of the caves, it is Bard of Dale who kills him and not the dwarves. The dragon flies over to Esgaroth and wreaks havoc, before being struck in the heart with an arrow by Bard. However, since the damage caused by Smaug was too great, the men in the quaint little town grow resentful of the dwarves for waking up Smaug. They come to the conclusion that the company of the dwarves must have died while facing Smaug and so they decide to divide the wealth beneath the mountain amongst themselves. The men, accompanied by the wood elves who had rushed to their aid, reach the base of the mountains. However, there they are greeted from behind walls by Thorin. When Bard asks for his compensation for the damages caused by Smaug, Thorin refuses any compensation, stating that the damage was not caused by him. This brews a war – like situation where the men and the elves decide to surround the mountain, which would eventually lead the dwarves to starve to death. Bilbo, however, finds himself with a bargaining chip. Despite being well – aware of Thorin’s obsession with the Arkenstone, the heart of the mountain, after discovering it, Bilbo keeps it to himself. When Thorin says, “For the Arkenstone of my father is worth more than a river of gold in itself, and to me it is beyond price. That stone of all the treasure I name unto myself, and I will be avenged on anyone who finds it and withholds it” (*The Hobbit* 309), Bilbo is struck with fear. However, he holds on to his courage and when the right moment comes, he uses it to manoeuvre a truce between the Men and the Dwarves. Conrad Johnson, writes in *Moral Legislation* that, “The kinds of prohibitions I have in mind include those – like the prohibitions on lying, stealing and killing – that sometimes constrain one to do or avoid certain actions even when compliance with prohibition would produce less overall good than some other action available for the agent”(1). Bilbo sets morality aside and decides to lie to and betray Thorin in order to achieve the greater good. In the thick of the night, Bilbo goes over to the camp of the Men and the Elves and there he meets with Bard and the Elven king. He gives the Arkenstone to Bard by saying, “This is the Arkenstone of Thrain, the Heart of the Mountain; and it is also the heart of Thorin. He values it above a river of gold. I give it to you. It will aid you in your bargaining”(314). Bilbo then goes on to explain that when he was recruited by the dwarves to be their burglar, he was promised one fourteenth of the share of the wealth that they would find under the mountain. So he requests Bard to bargain for Bilbo’s share of the treasure with the Arkenstone. And just as Bilbo had predicted, Bard’s bargaining for a share of the wealth with the Arkenstone in his possession proves to be effective, even though Thorin feels betrayed by Bilbo. Though Bilbo’s action seems manipulative and though he lies and cheats to achieve his ends, his actions are always attuned towards creating the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Like a true utilitarian, Bilbo is not focused on amassing wealth for himself or creating happiness for himself. Rather, he is willing to bear sacrifices if it helps the society he lives in.

Thus, inspite of being plagued by the rights and wrongs of moral choices, Bilbo remain’s true to himself. He refuses to take orders which would wreak havoc on the fragile peace of Middle - Earth and revolts against authoritarian figures in his own

way. He does not obey commands mindlessly. Rather, with the help of his mind, he asserts his individuality by always deciding to follow the course of action which would lead to the most happiness in the future, irrespective of the morality of the action in the present. Hence, we can see that Bilbo Baggins is a true utilitarian.

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