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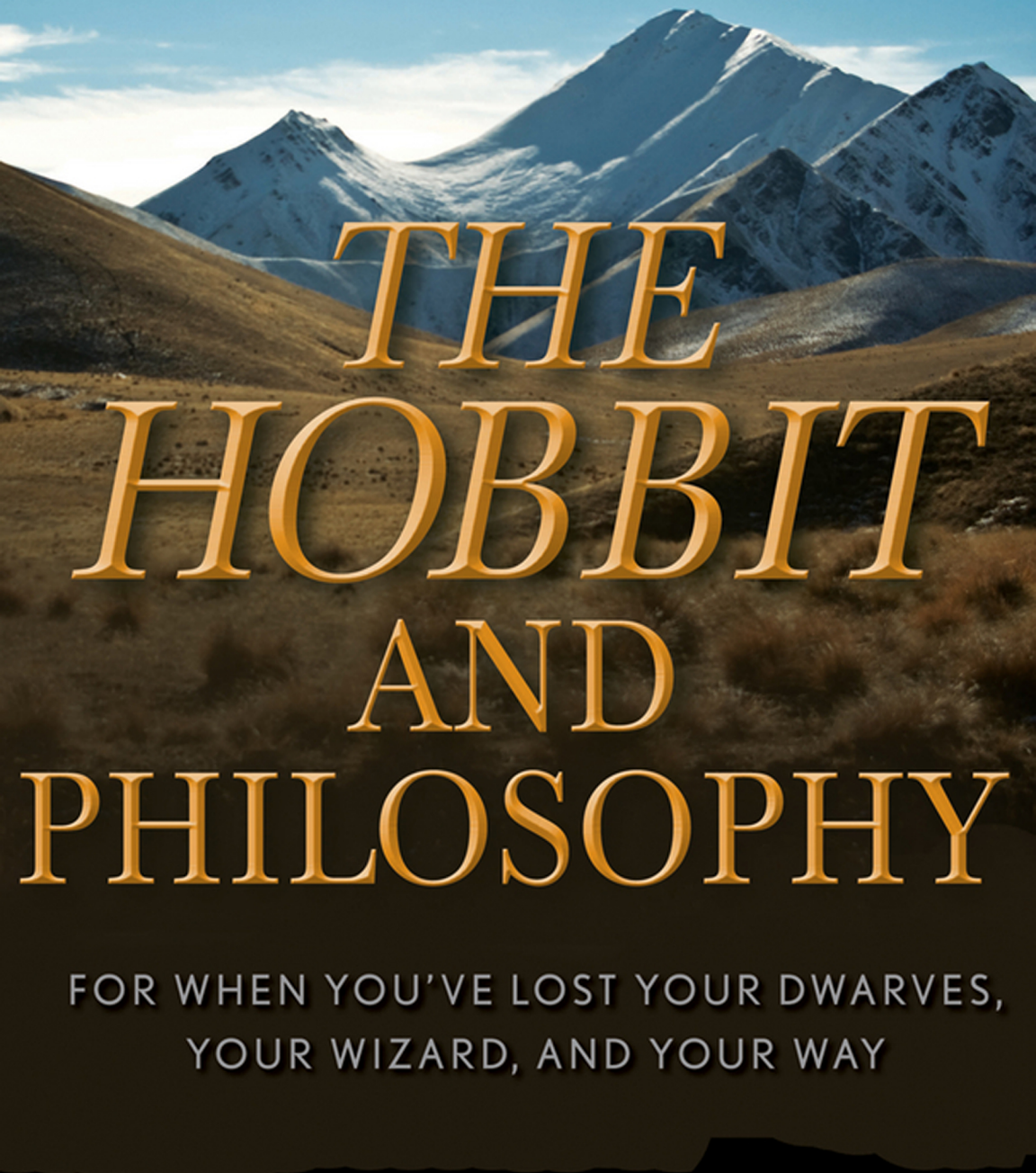

THE HOBBIT AND PHILOSOPHY

FOR WHEN YOU'VE LOST YOUR DWARVES, YOUR WIZARD, AND YOUR WAY

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AND
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AND
PHILOSOPHY

FOR WHEN YOU'VE LOST YOUR DWARVES, YOUR WIZARD, AND YOUR WAY

Edited by Gregory Bassham
and Eric Bronson

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This book is printed on acid-free paper. ♾

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For our halflings, Dylan, Asher, and Max

A vanimar, nai tielyar nauvar laiquë arë laurië

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Thag You Very Buch

In putting together this book, we have been blessed by good luck far exceeding the usual allowance. Our warm appreciation to our long-suffering contributors for their patience in bearing with two grim-voiced and grim-faced editors; to Connie Santisteban, Hope Breeman, and the other good folks at Wiley who shepherded the book to publication; and to copyeditor Judith Antonelli for covering our tracks through the deep, dark forest. As with most of our previous collaborations, this fellowship began with a beer- and pipeweed-fueled council with series editor, Bill Irwin. We are especially grateful to Bill for encouraging our adventure in coediting not one, but two, popular culture books on Tolkien and philosophy. Two large flagons of thanks go out to Madeline and Lyndsey Karp and Greg's students in his Faith, Fantasy, and Philosophy course at King's College.

But our greatest debt is to our fairy wives, Aryn and Mia, and to our own hobbits—Dylan, Asher, and Max, to whom this book is dedicated. There are few earthly joys that can match reading Tolkien's tales of Middle-earth to one's children and seeing that spark kindle from mind to mind, like the beacons of Gondor.

INTRODUCTION

Never Laugh at Live Philosophers

Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson

In a hole in the ground there lived a man who passed a quiet, uneventful life in a community that greatly prized convention and respectability. One day, however, he left his hole and journeyed off into the Blue. His adventure, though frightening and at times painful, changed him forever. His eyes were opened, and he matured in mind and character. When he returned to his hole, his neighbors regarded him as "cracked" because they couldn't accept that there is more to life than order and predictable routine. Although he lost his reputation, he never regretted going on the adventure that enabled him to discover his true self and to experience an exciting new world.

If this sounds familiar, it should. It's Plato's (ca. 428–348 BCE) "The Allegory of the Cave," possibly the most famous there-and-back-again story ever told. Plato's tale isn't about hobbits or wizards, of course. It's a parable about a man,

shackled since birth in an underground prison, who ventures forth and discovers that the world is far larger, richer, and more beautiful than he had imagined. Plato hoped that the readers would learn a few lessons from the allegory, such as these: Be adventurous. Get out of your comfort zone. Admit your limitations and be open to new ideas and higher truths. Only by confronting challenges and taking risks can we grow and discover what we are capable of becoming. These lessons are essentially the same ones that J. R. R. Tolkien teaches in *The Hobbit*.

The Hobbit, one of the best-loved children's books of all time and the enchanting prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, raises a host of deep questions to ponder. Are adventures simply "nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things" that "make you late for dinner," or can they be exciting and potentially life changing? Should food and cheer and song be valued above hoarded gold? Was life better in preindustrial times when there was "less noise and more green"? Can we trust people "as kind as summer" to use powerful technologies responsibly, or should these technologies be carefully regulated or destroyed, lest they fall into the hands of the goblins and servants of the Necromancer?

What duties do friends have to one another? Should mercy be extended even to those who deserve to die? Was the Arkenstone really Bilbo's to give? How should Smaug's treasure have been distributed? Did Thorin leave his "beautiful golden harp" at Bag-End when he headed out into the Wild? If so, how much could we get for that on eBay? From the happy halls of Elrond's Last Homely House to Gollum's "slimy island of rock," great philosophical questions are posed for old fans and new readers.

Tolkien—all praise to his wine and ale!—was an Oxford professor of medieval English, not a professional philosopher. But as recent books such as Peter Kreeft's *The Philosophy of Tolkien*, Patrick Curry's *Defending Middle-Earth*, and our own The Lord of the Rings *and Philosophy* make clear, Tolkien was

a profoundly learned scholar who reflected deeply on the big questions. The story goes that while laboriously grading exams one fine summer day, the Oxford professor came across a blank piece of paper. After losing himself in thought for some time, Tolkien allegedly picked up his pen and wrote his famous opening, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."

Peter Jackson—may the hair on his toes never fall out!—returns to the director's chair for *The Hobbit* (2012), after taking home an Academy Award for his stellar direction of the three *Lord of the Rings* films (2001–2003). Hobbits may be small, but Jackson and New Line Cinema are going big, stretching the story into two movies, bringing back much of the cast from *The Lord of the Rings* films, and filming in 3D. After a dark and conflict-filled decade, fans of Middle-earth can finally watch Jackson's latest installment of the greatest fantasy epic of our time.

In this book, our merry band of philosophers shares Tolkien's enthusiasm for philosophical questions of "immense antiquity," but we also keep our "detachable party hoods" close at hand. Above all, this is a book written *for* Tolkien fans *by* Tolkien fans. Like other volumes in the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series, it seeks to use popular culture as a hook to teach and popularize the ideas of the great thinkers.

Some of the chapters explore the philosophy of *The Hobbit*—the key values and big-picture assumptions that provide the moral and conceptual backdrop of the story—and others use themes from the book to illustrate various philosophical ideas. In this way, we hope to both explore some of the deeper questions in *The Hobbit* and also teach some powerful philosophical ideas.

Much like hobbits, our authors "have a fund of wisdom and wise sayings that men have mostly never heard of or forgotten long ago." So pack your pipe with your best Old Toby and bring out that special bottle of Old Winyards you've been saving. It's going to be quite an adventure.

PART ONE

DISCOVER YOUR INNER TOOK

THE ADVENTUROUS HOBBIT

Gregory Bassham

> The gem cannot be polished without friction, nor man perfected without trials.
>
> —Confucius

The Hobbit is a tale of adventure. It is also a story of personal growth. At the beginning of the tale, Bilbo is a conventional, unadventurous, comfort-loving hobbit. As the story progresses, he grows in courage, wisdom, and self-confidence. *The Hobbit* is similar in this respect to *The Lord of the Rings*. Both are tales, J. R. R. Tolkien informs us, of the ennoblement of the humble.[1] Both are stories of ordinary persons—small in the eyes of the "wise" and powerful—who accomplish great things and achieve heroic stature by accepting challenges, enduring hardships, and drawing on unsuspected strengths of character and will.

What's the connection between an adventurous spirit and personal growth? How can challenge and risk—a willingness to leave our own safe and comfy hobbit-holes—make us stronger, happier, and more confident individuals? Let's see what Bilbo and the great thinkers can teach us about growth and human potential.

A Hobbit's Progress

Hobbits in general are not an adventurous folk—quite the opposite. Hobbits "love peace and quiet and good tilled earth"; have never been warlike or fought among themselves; take great delight in the simple pleasures of eating, drinking, smoking, and partying; rarely travel; and consider "queer" any hobbit who has adventures or does anything out of the ordinary.[2]

Bilbo is an unusual hobbit in this regard. His mother, the famous Belladonna Took, belonged to a clan, the Tooks, who were not only rich but also notorious for their love of adventure. One of Bilbo's uncles, Isengar, was rumored to have "gone to sea" in his youth, and another uncle, Hildifons, "went off on a journey and never returned."[3] Bilbo's remote ancestor, Bandobras "Bullroarer" Took, was famous in hobbit lore for knocking a goblin king's head off with a club. The head rolled down a rabbit hole, and thus Bullroarer simultaneously won the Battle of Green Fields and invented the game of golf.[4]

In contrast, the Bagginses, Bilbo's father's side of the family, were thoroughly respectable hobbits who never did anything unexpected or adventurous. The conflict between these two parts of Bilbo's makeup is frequently played out in *The Hobbit*.

Gandalf noticed Bilbo's adventurous Tookish side when he visited the Shire in 2941, twenty years before the events described in *The Hobbit*. The young Bilbo impressed Gandalf with his "eagerness and his bright eyes, and his love of tales, and his questions about the wide world."[5] When Gandalf returned

to the Shire two decades later, he found that Bilbo "was getting rather greedy and fat," but he was pleased to hear that Bilbo was still regarded as "queer" for doing odd things like going off for days by himself and talking with dwarves.[6] When Bilbo says good morning to Gandalf and dismisses adventures as "nasty disturbing uncomfortable things" that "make you late for dinner," Gandalf realizes that the Baggins side of Bilbo's personality is winning out.[7]

Bilbo's inner Took is rekindled, however, by the dwarves' treasure song and Gloin's slighting reference to him as "that little fellow bobbing and puffing on the mat."[8] Bilbo reluctantly agrees to join the dwarves' quest and finds himself in an adventure that proves to also be a quest for his own true self. Quite early in his perilous journey, Bilbo realizes that "adventures are not all pony-rides in May-sunshine."[9] He is constantly fearful and dependent and often thinks regretfully of his cozy hobbit-hole with the kettle just beginning to sing.

On several occasions he is saved by sheer luck. Gradually, however, his confidence and courage grow. Alone and unaided, he is able to outwit Gollum, escape from the goblins' cave, and free his companions from both the Mirkwood spiders and the Elvenking's fortress. When the Company arrives at the Lonely Mountain, it is Bilbo who discovers how to open the secret door, and only he has the courage to walk down the dark tunnel to face the terror of the dragon. "Already," we are told, "he was a very different hobbit from the one that had run out without a pocket-handkerchief from Bag-End long ago."[10]

His decision to continue walking down the tunnel when he hears the dragon's rumblings "was the bravest thing he ever did."[11] When Bilbo returns with a beautiful two-handled cup he stole from the dragon's hoard, he is acknowledged as "the real leader" in the dwarves' quest.[12] Later, when Bilbo risks his life and unselfishly gives up the Arkenstone in an effort to prevent a fratricidal war over dragon-gold, the Elvenking praises him as "more worthy to wear the armour of elf-princes than

many that have looked more comely in it" and later lauds him as "Bilbo the Magnificent."[13]

After the Battle of Five Armies, the dying Thorin Oakenshield recognizes Bilbo's growth in moral stature, remarking that there "is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure."[14] And when Bilbo recites a bittersweet homecoming poem upon his return to the Shire, Gandalf exclaims, "My dear Bilbo! Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were."[15]

In short, *The Hobbit* is an adventure tale in which an ordinary and distinctly nonheroic person is morally ennobled by confronting and overcoming challenges and dangers. But how is such a transformation possible? Let's consider what some of the world's great philosophers have said about the linkage between challenge and personal growth.

Bilbo's Growth in Wisdom

> Men shall learn wisdom, by affliction schooled.
>
> —Aeschylus

Humans can grow in various respects: physically, emotionally, spiritually, artistically, and so forth. Merry and Pippin grew physically—they became several inches taller—after drinking the Ent-draughts in Fangorn Forest. But in Bilbo's case we're talking about moral and intellectual growth. In traditional philosophical terms, Bilbo grows in both *wisdom* and *virtue* as a result of his adventures. The term "philosophy" derives from Greek roots meaning "the love of wisdom." So to help us get our bearings, let's start by asking: What is wisdom?

Not all philosophical and religious traditions conceive of wisdom in the same way. A Zen Buddhist's definition of wisdom won't be the same as that offered by a Hindu or a

Southern Baptist. But we needn't be stymied by specific theoretical disagreements. Nearly all philosophical and religious traditions agree that wisdom, whatever it is precisely, consists of deep insight about living.[16] A wise person understands what's important in life, keeps lesser things in proper perspective, and understands what's needed in order to live well and to cope with the problems of life.[17] Wisdom comes in degrees. Gandalf is wiser than Elrond, and Elrond is wiser than Bard. But however, exactly, we define wisdom, it's clear that Bilbo is wiser at the end of *The Hobbit* than he was at the beginning. How did this occur?

Philosophers have noted two important ways in which challenging experiences can make us wiser: they can *deepen our self-understanding* and they can *broaden our experiences*. With Bilbo, we can see both factors at work.

The first step toward becoming wise, Socrates (ca. 470–399 BCE) said, is to realize how little you know. "Know thyself" was his mantra. Socrates saw that people tend to have inflated views of themselves. They tend to be overconfident and imagine that they know more than they do or that they are better in some way than they really are. People who think they're already wise and good won't be motivated to pursue wisdom and goodness. So the first and most important step toward becoming wise, Socrates declared, is to engage in fearless self-examination.

We should constantly be asking ourselves the following: Do I really know this, or do I only think I do? Could I be wrong? Could I be guilty of wishful thinking? Am I living the life I want to live? Am I walking the walk I talk? What are my true talents and abilities? How can I live most meaningfully and authentically? Only in this way can we root out our self-deceptions, discover our true potential, and discern where our greatest talents and opportunities lie.

Philosophers and religious thinkers have long pointed out how one particular kind of challenging experience, pain and suffering, can deepen one's self-understanding. Pain, said

C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), can curb our pride, teach us patience, steel us against adversity, teach us not to take life's blessings for granted, and remind us that we were "made for another world."[18] Pain, he noted, is God's "megaphone to rouse a deaf world."[19] God's attitude to humans, said the Roman philosopher Seneca (ca. 4 BCE–65 CE), is that of a stern but loving father: "'Let them be harassed by toil and sorrow and losses . . . that they may acquire true strength.' . . . God hardens and exercises those he approves and loves."[20]

In *The Hobbit* we see Bilbo slowly growing in self-understanding. As the story opens, he reacts to Thorin's forebodings of danger by shrieking like "an engine coming out of a tunnel" and "kneeling on the hearth-rug, shaking like a jelly that was melting."[21] On his journey to the Lonely Mountain, he encounters many dangers and suffers greatly through cold, hunger, sleeplessness, fear, and fatigue. Slowly, he grows in self-confidence and discovers hidden strengths, including an unsuspected talent for leadership.

Bilbo achieves a deeper understanding of the conflicting sides of his makeup and realizes that he wants more out of life than simply comfort, good pipe-weed, a well-stocked cellar, and six meals a day. At the same time, he doesn't develop a swollen head and get delusions of grandeur. After all his adventures and heroic deeds, he stills thinks of himself—and gratefully so—as "only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all."[22]

There is another way in which Bilbo becomes wiser: his eyes are opened by travel and a wider range of experience. Philosopher Tom Morris points out that taking a philosophy class can be like an Outward Bound experience for the mind. Students of philosophy find themselves on an intellectual adventure in which the great philosophers serve as native guides: mapmakers of the spirit who can broaden their horizons, guide them to exciting vistas, enlarge their imaginations, warn them of potential pitfalls, and teach them essential existential survival skills.[23] Many writers have noted that travel

and adventure can also have paradigm-shifting, life-altering consequences.

The hobbits of the Shire are insular and provincial; they know and care little about the wider world of Middle-earth. Bilbo, though more adventurous than most hobbits, initially shares many of the limited and confining views of his fellows.[24] Like his hobbit friends and neighbors, he places great value on respectability, routine, comfort, and the simple bodily pleasures of eating, drinking, and smoking.

In the course of his adventures, Bilbo comes to realize that there are weightier concerns and higher values in life. He experiences heroism, self-sacrifice, ancient wisdom, and great beauty. Like the crew of the starship *Enterprise*, he encounters "new worlds and new civilizations," sees wondrous new sights, and meets peoples with very different value systems and ways of life. When he returns to the Shire, he is able to see it with new eyes and is better able to appreciate both its limitations and its unique charms.

When all is said and done, he finds that he has "lost the neighbours' respect" but has gained much of greater value.[25] By the final pages of *The Hobbit*, we find the contented and cosmopolitan Bilbo "writing poetry and visiting the elves."[26] Truly, he is not the hobbit that he was. His adventures have made him wiser.

Bilbo's Growth in Virtue

> Too often, comfort gets in the way of inner reckonings.
>
> —Lance Armstrong

Bilbo doesn't just grow intellectually, however; he also becomes a more virtuous, or ethical, person. Through his adventures he becomes more courageous, more resourceful, hardier,

less dependent, and more self-controlled. His decisions to spare Gollum's life and to replace the keys on the belt of the slumbering elf-guard suggest that he has become more compassionate.[27] His choice to give up the precious Arkenstone in an attempt to broker peace, his refusal to take more than two small chests of treasure home with him (all of which he later gives away), and his donation of the priceless *mithril* coat to the museum at Michel Delving indicate that the "rather greedy" Bilbo has grown more generous and less materialistic.[28] Philosophers have noted two ways in which challenging adventures can promote moral development, one quick and one gradual.

Sometimes big moral transformations can occur rapidly, even instantly. These major ethical changes often take place when something shocking or traumatic occurs in our lives. A loved one dies, we're involved in a nearly fatal accident, or we wake up in the gutter—and we reevaluate our lives and make up our minds to change. In many cases, as the American philosopher William James (1842–1910) noted in his classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, such transformations have a religious impetus. On Christmas Eve, Ebenezer Scrooge was a grumpy and mean-spirited old miser; on Christmas Day he was the soul of generosity and good cheer. But sudden and radical ethical changes need not be religiously motivated.

Rapid ethical makeovers are rare in Tolkien's writings, but there are some notable examples. Pippin undergoes one after his terrifying encounter with Sauron when he foolishly peers into the Seeing Stone of Orthanc.[29] Prior to this experience and Gandalf's stern rebuke, he is thoughtless and immature, constantly exposing the Fellowship to danger through his carelessness. Afterward, he is radically changed. He offers his service to Denethor, serves in Gondor's Tower Guard, saves Faramir's life, slays a troll at the Battle of the Morannon, plays a key role in the scouring of the Shire, and later serves for fifty years as Thain of the Shire.

Thorin's deathbed conversion and reconciliation with Bilbo is another example of a Scroogelike sudden transformation

(foreshadowing Boromir's repentant death in *The Fellowship of the Ring*). Throughout *The Hobbit* Thorin is depicted as proud, greedy, and pompous. After he gains possession of the treasure, Thorin's pride and greed swell, and he nearly provokes a senseless war among the Free Peoples, who should be united. By nature, dwarves "are a calculating folk with a great idea of the value of money."[30] Moreover, Thorin is suffering from "dragon-sickness," a corrupting possessiveness that afflicts all who touch a treasure that a dragon has long brooded over.[31] But even Thorin, as he lies dying, realizes "it would be a merrier world . . . if more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold."[32]

Sudden moral transformations can occur, but they are rare and often don't last for very long. A more common and sustainable path to moral growth is through *habit* and *training*. Virtue, as Aristotle (384–322 BCE) noted, is a habit, an ingrained pattern of moral response. A person is truly courageous, for example, only if he or she has a fixed tendency or disposition to act boldly in support of important values, even at great personal risk.[33] Throughout human history, character building through habit formation has been the standard method of moral education.

Athletics provides a model of how this works. Suppose you want to become a world-class long-distance runner. There's no way to achieve it except through pain, sweat, and fierce determination. Great runners have great work habits. They're not born with the habits of perseverance, commitment, self-discipline, and resiliency—they work hard to achieve them. That's why the physician-philosopher George Sheehan speaks of running as "a path to maturity, a growth process."[34] We pursue excellence by forming good habits and testing our limits.

Aristotle's great insight was to see that ethical development usually occurs the same way. To develop the virtue of self-discipline, it's not enough to desire to be self-disciplined. We need to work at it, to develop good habits. As legendary basketball coach Rick Pitino says, "Good habits create organization

and discipline in our lives. . . . They become the rock, the standard of behavior that we must stick with so that we don't go off track."[35]

We can see this process of ethical habit formation in *The Hobbit*. Bilbo's moral development takes place gradually, as he learns new things, finds himself tested, increases in self-confidence, and develops virtuous habits. As Bilbo becomes accustomed to being cold, hungry, and wet, he complains less and becomes tougher. As his comrades' spirits sag and his own remarkable good luck continues, he becomes more encouraging and hopeful—even quoting the Roman philosopher Seneca's famous saying "Where there's life there's hope" before Seneca existed![36]

As Bilbo repeatedly responds bravely and effectively in dangerous situations, his confidence grows and he develops the habit of acting courageously. As he finds himself willy-nilly forced to take the initiative, he becomes more comfortable in a leadership role and develops the habit of effective servant leadership. As he returns to the Shire, and "Eyes that fire and sword have seen/And horror in the halls of stone/Look at last on meadows green/And trees and hills they long have known," he learns true thankfulness for simple blessings.[37]

Bilbo's adventures changed him, and these changes, as we learn in *The Lord of the Rings*, were permanent. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, there is a deeply moving scene in which Bilbo, in extreme old age, volunteers to attempt to destroy the Ring of Power. At Rivendell, where Bilbo has retired, Elrond calls a Council to determine what to do with the Ring. The Council decides that the Ring must be carried into the heart of Mordor and cast into the fires of Mount Doom, where it was forged. When Elrond notes that such an apparent suicide mission "may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong," Bilbo speaks up:

> Very well, very well, Master Elrond. . . . Say no more! It is plain enough what you are pointing at. Bilbo the silly hobbit started this affair, and Bilbo had better finish it,