

# REASON PAPERS

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**Special Issue: Imagining Better: Philosophical Issues in *Harry Potter***

**Edited by Carrie-Ann Biondi**

***Part I: Metaphysics, Literature, and Self-Understanding***

- Don't Occupy Gringotts: *Harry Potter*, Social Upheaval, and the Moral Imagination —Travis Prinzi  
*Harry Potter* and the Metaphysics of Soul-Splitting —Gregory Bassham  
*Harry Potter* and Humanity: Choices, Love, and Death —Shawn E. Klein  
Kierkegaard's Mirror (of Erised) —Joel B. Hunter

***Part II: Integrating Theory and Practice for Living Well***

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Harry Gets by With a Little Help from His Friends: An Aristotelian Reading of Virtue and Friendship in *Harry Potter* —Jennifer Mogg and Kendra Tully  
Heroic Hermione: Celebrating the Love of Learning —Patrick Shade  
House-Elves, Hogwarts, and Friendship: Casting Away the Institutions which Made Voldemort's Rise Possible —Susan Peppers-Bates and Joshua Rust

***Part III: The Dark Side of the Moral Imagination***

- Voldemort Tyrannos: Plato's Tyrant in the *Republic* and the Wizarding World —Anne Collins Smith and Owen M. Smith  
"Neither Can Live While the Other Survives": The Driving Force of Revenge in *Harry Potter* —Heidi Nielson  
Spells and Hate Speech: Linguistic Violence and Vulnerability in the *Harry Potter* Series —Anna McFarlane

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## Editorial

This is the first special issue that *Reason Papers* has run in its thirty-eight-year history, and the reason for its existence can be credited to Harry Potter, “the boy who lived” (SS p. 1).<sup>1</sup> J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* saga, captured in seven novels and eight films, has left an indelible mark on the lives of millions of fans world-wide. The depth and power of her literary achievement are best captured in a memorable line from her 2008 commencement speech at Harvard University: “We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better.”<sup>2</sup> With the literary and film phenomena having reached their official completion, fans have been wondering “What’s next?”

Part of the answer to that question has been a proliferation of serious studies on their beloved series. Such studies provide fans with an opportunity not only to understand more deeply why they have been drawn to Rowling’s saga, but also to imagine more fully what they can make of themselves and their world. There are now dozens of thought-provoking books and insightful essay collections on the *Harry Potter* series, primarily from literary and theological perspectives, and the number is slowly growing. Only a few of them range over all seven volumes of the series, and only two collections are explicitly on *Harry Potter* and philosophy.<sup>3</sup> We are pleased that two of the editors of the philosophical collections—Gregory Bassham and Shawn E. Klein—have contributed new articles to the ones collected here in *Reason Papers*. The present collection does not retread topics already covered elsewhere, however, but instead offers in-depth insights on issues that have either been entirely overlooked or only tangentially addressed there.

The articles published in this special issue of *Reason Papers* had their origin in “‘The Power to Imagine Better’: The Philosophy of *Harry*

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<sup>1</sup> This special issue of *Reason Papers* has in no way been approved or sponsored by any individual or entity responsible for creating or producing the *Harry Potter* books, films, or other enterprises associated with them.

<sup>2</sup> J. K. Rowling, “The Fringe Benefits of Failure, and the Importance of Imagination,” *Harvard Magazine* (May/June 2008), 2008 Harvard Commencement Address, accessed online at: <http://harvardmagazine.com/2008/06/the-fringe-benefits-failure-the-importance-imagination>.

<sup>3</sup> *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles*, ed. Gregory Bassham (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010) and *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts*, ed. David Baggett and Shawn E. Klein (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2004).

*Potter*,<sup>4</sup> a conference organized by Carrie-Ann Biondi at Marymount Manhattan College on October 29, 2011. From all of the papers submitted in response to the conference's call-for-papers, the top ten were chosen by an interdisciplinary selection committee through a double-blind review process. Once presented at the conference, the authors revised and expanded their work in light of editorial feedback from Biondi and the many excellent questions posed by members of the conference audience.

Rowling has inspired so many to "imagine better," and this collection—suitably titled *Imagining Better: Philosophical Issues in Harry Potter*—explicitly engages the theme of "the power to imagine better" in interdisciplinary fashion. Contrary to popular belief, imagination—especially the exercise of moral imagination—is essentially practical. Rather than being an opportunity for escapism, the best fantasy literature calls us to face the human condition. When faced with adversity and even horror, what choices can we make, or should we make? Visualizing ourselves at both our worst and our best allows us to confront and explore possible choices, so that when faced with a possibility made reality, we are prepared to take the path we know is best and, as Joseph Campbell so eloquently puts it, to set out on the "heroic journey of our own lives."<sup>5</sup>

The emphasis that Rowling places on choice and the cultivation of one's character first draws our attention to how we can through literature attain better understandings of ourselves. Part I, *Metaphysics, Literature, and Self-Understanding*, explores these foundational themes in articles by Travis Prinzi, Gregory Bassham, Shawn E. Klein, and Joel Hunter.

In "Don't Occupy Gringotts: *Harry Potter*, Social Upheaval, and the Moral Imagination," Travis Prinzi explains that it should be evident enough from the volumes of academic work on the *Harry Potter* series that J. K. Rowling didn't just slap together a page-turner; she thought hard about the meanings of her tales and wove those meanings into symbol and story. Prinzi thus seeks to define the moral imagination and to show how Rowling's *Harry Potter* stories do more than lay down ethical lessons to be put into action: they get to the very soul of the human being and teach what it means to be a moral human.

In "*Harry Potter* and the Metaphysics of Soul-Splitting," Gregory Bassham discusses how the world of *Harry Potter* is a magical one in which souls can be split into pieces and fragments of souls can magically be embedded in external "dark objects" known as Horcruxes, making one immortal as long as one or more of those soul-fragments survives. This, of course, presupposes that there *are* souls, that souls can be split into parts, and

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<sup>4</sup> With the exception of "Descending from King's Cross: Platonic Structure, Aristotelian Content," a paper presented by Carrie-Ann Biondi to the Philosophy Department of King's College, Wilkes-Barre, PA, on April 12, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2004), p. 132.

that bits of souls can be encased in objects outside human bodies. All of this, as Gaffer Gamgee might say, “takes a lot o’ believing,” but suppose that we play Rowling’s fictional game and grant all of it. A variety of fascinating metaphysical puzzles then arise. Must such souls be substances? Must they be corporeal? What effect does soul-splitting have on personal identity? Bassham argues that in the Wizarding World, souls are material substances; soul-splitting creates deep and probably insuperable problems for personal identity.

Shawn E. Klein’s “Harry Potter and Humanity: Choices, Love, and Death” analyzes how the *Harry Potter* novels bring to our awareness two fundamental parts of the human condition: the importance of our choices and the inevitability of our mortality. Lord Voldemort, in his ruthless search for immortality, refuses to accept his own humanity and, with it, his mortality; in fact, he openly rejects both. Klein argues that it is this choice that makes possible both Voldemort’s irredeemable evil and his ultimate defeat. By contrast, it is Harry’s acceptance of his mortality that allows him to love and to embrace his humanity. This recognition gives Harry the power to defeat Voldemort. More than that, it makes it possible for Harry to develop into a realized, virtuous adult. In his acceptance of his mortality, “the boy who lived” is able more fully and wholly to live.

One of the many fascinating magical objects in the *Harry Potter* series is the Mirror of Erised, which reveals to the person who gazes into it the deepest desire of his heart; Erised is the word ‘desire’ spelled backwards. In “Kierkegaard’s Mirror (of Erised),” Joel B. Hunter argues that the main function of the Mirror of Erised in the *Harry Potter* series is existential. The Mirror confronts the viewer with the self’s main obstacle to rising above the aesthetic stage of life. But one must gain a sufficiently broad perspective to determine the beneficial aims of the Mirror, since it does not instruct the isolated viewer in any purpose other than the instrumental. Hunter then generalizes the hidden imperative of the Mirror to all magical techniques in *Harry Potter*, comparing them with our technological society. With guidance the Mirror becomes a means to rise above both the self that is represented in the image and the self that gazes into the Mirror. Readers of *Harry Potter* are thus encouraged to identify the Mirrors of Erised that confront them in the technological world and to appropriate Albus Dumbledore’s Kierkegaardian lesson about the importance of our free choices.

Once an individual discovers this inner power of free choice, the next step is to use one’s new-found understanding for moral and political action. Such action, however, is blind without imagining what a better way of being in the world with others would be. This is a theme developed in Part II, Integrating Theory and Practice for Living Well, in articles on ethics, friendship, education, and politics by Carrie-Ann Biondi, Jennifer Mogg and Kendra Tully, Patrick Shade, and Susan Peppers-Bates and Joshua Rust.

In “Descending from King’s Cross: Platonic Structure, Aristotelian Content,” Carrie-Ann Biondi focuses on one of the dramatic high points of the *Harry Potter* saga, which occurs in the “King’s Cross” chapter of *Deathly*

*Hallows*. In an ambiguous state of consciousness, thinking at first that he has been killed by his arch enemy, Voldemort, Harry engages his deceased mentor, Albus Dumbledore, in intense, enlightening conversation. Harry can choose whether to live and rejoin the Battle of Hogwarts or to “board a train” and go “on.” Though the former requires “heading back to pain and the fear of more loss,” and the latter would allow Harry to remain where it is “warm and light and peaceful” before going “on,” he commits to the former choice. The similarities between “Harry’s Choice” and the descent into the cave of the Philosopher-King in Plato’s *Republic* are striking. However, Biondi argues that Harry is more of an Aristotelian citizen-warrior than a Platonic Philosopher-King; he sees that his best hope of realizing his values is to live, and to fight and risk dying for a world that is worth living in.

In “Harry Gets by With a Little Help from His Friends: An Aristotelian Reading of Virtue and Friendship in *Harry Potter*,” Jennifer Mogg and Kendra Tully, taking an Aristotelian perspective, argue that while the heroic Harry Potter cannot initially be considered fully virtuous, he *becomes* so as a result of his friendship with Ron and Hermione. That is, Harry displays a predisposition for virtue early in the series—what Aristotle calls “natural virtue”—but it is not until his friendship with Ron and Hermione reconciles virtue of character and intellectual virtue in *Deathly Hallows* that it can be said that he satisfies Aristotle’s overall conception of “full virtue.” Like Aristotle, Rowling reminds us that friendship is central to the virtue of the individual and the well-being of the city.

Using William James’s insights into the blindness that our practical nature can cause in pursuing narrow purposes, Patrick Shade argues in “Heroic Hermione: Celebrating the Love of Learning” that Hermione Granger stands out as a unique character in the *Harry Potter* series due to her liberatory love of learning. Her devotion to learning helps her to transcend the limits of narrow purposes, providing Harry and Ron much needed information and insight. After characterizing the habits that constitute the love of learning, Shade draws out two significant lessons about Hermione that James and John Dewey help us to appreciate. The first is that her intellectual virtues fund her moral character, especially her commitment to the cause of “elf justice.” The second is that she integrates the benefits of theoretical and practical thinking, showing that the love of learning is both liberating and effective.

In “House-Elves, Hogwarts, and Friendship: Casting Away the Institutions which Made Voldemort’s Rise Possible,” Susan Peppers-Bates and Joshua Rust further develop the theme of “elf justice,” arguing that the *Harry Potter* series demonstrates how the power of identity politics and friendship across difference can replace the false universalism of hierarchical societies that privileges one group by rendering others deviant and invisible. After contrasting Voldemort’s “pure blood” racial politics with the seemingly progressive house model of Hogwarts, they reject the house model and separation from the Muggle World that characterize the novels before and after Harry’s triumph over Voldemort. True friendship that sees difference as a cause for celebration, as opposed to domination, would reject the old model

for a more truly egalitarian vision—where muggles and magic-folk of all sorts mingle and house-elf slavery has been abolished.

Imagining better is necessary in order to serve our primary aim of living well—a purpose of “poetry” (that is, fiction and the arts) that Aristotle understood well<sup>6</sup>—but we should not forget the function of the darker side of the imagination, namely, to explore how best to respond to those who reject the human good. Articles by Anne Collins Smith and Owen M. Smith, Heidi Nielson, and Anna McFarlane in Part III, *The Dark Side of the Moral Imagination*, remind us that there are those in the world who aim to rob us of choice and to occlude our moral imagination by deception or coercion, or by feeding narcissism and hatred.

In “Voldemort Tyrannos: Plato’s Tyrant in the *Republic* and the Wizarding World,” Anne Collins Smith and Owen M. Smith identify the numerous and striking parallels between Lord Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* series and Plato’s portrait of the tyrant in *Republic IX*. Examining a number of close parallels between the two, they demonstrate that Voldemort exhibits nearly every characteristic in Plato’s description of the tyrannical man. Nonetheless, there appears to be at least one significant disanalogy: Plato describes the tyrant as obsessed with lust, clearly spelled out in the relevant passages from the *Republic* in terms of inappropriate sexual desire. This particular component of the tyrant’s character initially appears to be missing from the portrayal of Voldemort. The apparent discrepancy may be resolved, however, by examining more closely the role of sexual desire in the Ladder of Beauty described in Plato’s *Symposium*, and recognizing that Voldemort approaches every rung of the Ladder from a distorted perspective.

In “‘Neither Can Live While the Other Survives’: The Driving Force of Revenge in *Harry Potter*,” Heidi Nielson notes that although the *Harry Potter* corpus has been analyzed in a variety of ways and from different disciplines, scholars have typically avoided discussing the subject of revenge in it. Nielson draws attention to this element in the series, arguing that revenge is, in fact, a driving force for the two central characters, Harry and Voldemort. She offers a comprehensive analysis of the *Harry Potter* corpus as an extended children’s revenge tragedy. This analysis raises questions about the role that revenge plays in human society, and how revenge can be broached with a young readership. At the heart of her article is an examination of the power of revenge both to horrify and fascinate us.

Anna McFarlane’s “Spells and Hate Speech: Linguistic Violence and Vulnerability in the *Harry Potter* Series,” explains how Rowling’s *Harry Potter* novels explore aspects of linguistic vulnerability and hate speech by reading them alongside insights discussed by Judith Butler. McFarlane argues that the novels’ complex portrayal of linguistic relationships undermines arguments which attempt to dismiss the novels as morally reductive. She

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<sup>6</sup> See Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, rev. Oxford trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), esp. chaps. 2, 4, and 6-9.

maintains that the novels suggest two ways that linguistic vulnerability can be overcome: either through an escape from language via the maternal body or through creating a new citation.

The normative dimensions of great fiction are complex, subtle, moving, and transformational for those who allow their reason and emotions to be engaged by the story and characters. Whether you are a newcomer to the *Harry Potter* saga or have read the novels and viewed the films countless times, we hope that the articles in this special issue delight and provoke you in the best possible way, as they invite us all to imagine better. Please continue to visit our website, and stay informed on upcoming issues and calls for symposia and book reviews.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> We are grateful to Arlene Bady and an anonymous donor for providing the support for a limited print run of this special issue of *Reason Papers*. Hard copies will be available in late summer 2012.

## List of Abbreviations

All references to *Harry Potter* novels appear throughout the issue in the text as parenthetical citations, citing the relevant page number(s) or chapter(s). All citations of other works appear in footnotes. The following are the standard abbreviations used for the novels:

*SS = Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone\**

*CoS = Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

*PoA = Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

*GoF = Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

*OotP = Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*

*HBP = Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*

*DH = Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

*\*PS = Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*

The just-preceding title is the original one marketed in Britain. Rowling's publishers substituted 'Sorcerer's Stone' for 'Philosopher's Stone' in the American version, reference to philosophers apparently being off-putting to an American audience. The *PS* abbreviation only appears in Anna McFarlane's article, our lone British (Scottish) contributor.

## About the Contributors

**Gregory Bassham** is Chair and Professor of Philosophy at King's College, PA. He has authored dozens of articles on philosophy of law, philosophy of religion, popular culture and philosophy, and critical thinking. He has also edited five volumes on popular culture and philosophy, including most recently *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles* (John Wiley & Sons 2010), and co-authored (with James M. Wallace, Henry Nardone, and William Irwin) *Critical Thinking: A Student's Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (McGraw-Hill 2011).

**Carrie-Ann Biondi** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Marymount Manhattan College, NY. She has published articles on Greek philosophy (especially Aristotle), political philosophy, and philosophy of education. She is also co-editor (with Fred Miller, Jr.) of *A History of the Philosophy of Law from the Ancient Greeks to the Scholastics* (Springer 2007) and Co-Editor-in-Chief (with Irfan Khawaja) of *Reason Papers: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Normative Studies*.

**Joel B. Hunter** holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy and is an Honors Faculty Fellow in the Barrett Honors College at Arizona State University. With a background in electrical engineering and environmental consulting, his primary research area focuses on the products and practices of scientific experimentation, with additional interests in science, technology, aesthetics, and imaginative literature (especially J. R. R. Tolkien and J. K. Rowling). He has published an article on time travel for the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

**Shawn E. Klein** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Rockford College, IL, and serves on the faculty of The Center for Ethics and Entrepreneurship at Rockford College. He specializes in and has presented papers on sports ethics, business ethics, political philosophy, and popular culture and philosophy. He is co-editor (with David Baggett) of *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts* (Open Court 2004).

**Anna McFarlane** holds an M.A. in English Literature and an M.Litt. in Women, Writing, and Gender. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in English at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, where she works on issues in identity politics raised by ideas of bodily and mental collectivism in a branch of modern science fiction called cyberpunk. Her research interests also extend to the fields of technology, totalitarianism, and personal and social identity.

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**Heidi Nielson** holds a B.A. in English (Creative Writing) through the Barrett Honors College at Arizona State University. She is the Founder and Managing Editor of *merj.org*, an interactive website for collaborative artists. Her passion is the arts; she plays four instruments and writes fiction. Her work has been published in *The Sparked Synapse Project* and *Lux*. She currently serves in AmeriCorps VISTA in Washington, DC, and will be attending the University of Arizona Law School in Fall 2012.

**Susan Peppers-Bates** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Stetson University, FL. She specializes in early modern philosophy, feminist philosophy, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion. She has published articles on metaphysics and popular culture and philosophy. She is also the author of *Nicolas Malebranche: Freedom in an Occasionalist World* (Continuum 2009).

**Travis Prinzi** holds an M.S. in Education from the University of Rochester and an M.A. in Theology from Northeastern Seminary. He is the founder of *TheHogsHead.org*, a blog site for serious discussions about *Harry Potter*, and is a popular speaker on the intersection of fantasy and politics, and myth and culture, in the *Harry Potter* novels. He is the author of *Harry Potter & Imagination: The Way Between Two Worlds* (Zossima 2008) and editor of *Hog's Head Conversations: Essays on Harry Potter*, vol. 1 (Zossima 2009).

**Joshua Rust** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Stetson University, FL. He specializes in philosophy of mind, twentieth-century philosophy, and ethics, and has published articles on ethics and popular culture and philosophy. He is the author of *John Searle* (Continuum 2009) and *John Searle and the Construction of Social Reality* (Continuum 2006).

**Patrick Shade** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Rhodes College, TN. He specializes in ethics, philosophy of education, and popular culture and philosophy, and has authored *Habits of Hope: A Pragmatic Theory* (Vanderbilt University Press 2001).

**Anne Collins Smith** is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Classical Studies at Stephen F. Austin State University, TX. She specializes in ancient and medieval philosophy, classical metaphysics, and natural theology, and has published articles in medieval philosophy and popular culture and philosophy. She has also contributed a chapter, “Harry Potter, Radical Feminism, and the Power of Love,” to *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy*, ed. Gregory Bassham (John Wiley & Sons 2010).

**Owen M. Smith** is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Classical Studies at Stephen F. Austin State University, TX. He specializes in philosophy of religion, Gnosticism, and ancient and medieval metaphysics, and has published articles on ancient and medieval philosophy, Catholic thought, and popular culture.

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## Part I: Metaphysics, Literature, and Self-Understanding

### Don't Occupy Gringotts: *Harry Potter*, Social Upheaval, and the Moral Imagination

Travis Prinzi  
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#### 1. Introduction

The first decade or so of the twenty-first century has seen some large-scale protest movements. From demonstrations against the Iraq War to the Tea Party's anger at large, invasive government, to the Occupy Wall Street movement's protest of financial corruption, social upheaval expressed on the streets has become a common scene.

Madeleine L'Engle believes that stories are "about survival." During the previous "century of war," L'Engle writes in *Walking on Water* that "story was in no way an evasion of life, but a way of living life creatively instead of fearfully."<sup>1</sup> Given the looming threats of international terrorism and financial collapse, it's no wonder that people are turning to stories. We tend to hold tightly to that which helps us to survive. What stories are we turning to? I will argue that the most useful stories for survival purposes are those that—like the *Harry Potter* novels—teach us to imagine better by first examining our own souls before trying to change the world.

#### 2. Moral Imagination

Russell Kirk defines moral imagination as "that power of ethical perception which strides beyond the barriers of private experience and momentary events 'especially . . . the higher form of this power exercised in poetry and art,'" and which "aspires to the apprehending of right order in the soul and right order in the commonwealth."<sup>2</sup> In other words, moral

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<sup>1</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (Colorado Springs: Shaw Books, 2001), p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> Russell Kirk, "The Moral Imagination," *The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal*, accessed online at: <http://www.kirkcenter.org/index.php/detail/the-moral->

imagination teaches us how to be truly human (“right order in the soul”) and how to live rightly with other humans (“in the commonwealth”). This imagination is found, in its highest form, in the arts.

Kirk opens a discussion on the moral imagination with this assessment of literature in 1981:

[T]he shelves are crowded with the prickly pears and the Dead Sea fruit of literary decadence. Yet no civilization rests forever content with literary boredom and literary violence. Once again, a conscience may speak to a conscience in the pages of books, and the parched rising generation may grope their way toward the springs of moral imagination.<sup>3</sup>

While there may be disagreement as to how good or bad literature was in 1981 or now, it’s not hard to recognize that there is a widespread desire to see literature—and imaginative literature in particular, such as fairy tales, fantasy, and science fiction—as either a pleasant *distraction* from the “real world,” or else as a silly hobby for nerds and obsessives. If so, it would hardly be the survival tool L’Engle believes it to be.

Kirk writes that “the end of great books is ethical—to teach us what it means to be human.”<sup>4</sup> Obviously, he is not referring to a biological description of what the human being is; he is referring to the human soul. I have written at length about the moral imagination in *Harry Potter* as it pertains to soul.<sup>5</sup> The *Harry Potter* series is the story of two souls: the pure soul of Harry, and the distorted, dehumanized soul of his nemesis, Voldemort. Comparing and contrasting these two characters is well-covered ground, so I focus in this article on two other aspects of the moral imagination: (1) the way fairy tales convey truth about “what it means to be human,” and (2) the way the ethical code of *Harry Potter* spills over into the public sphere of “the commonwealth.”

### 3. “The Higher Form”

As noted above, Kirk believes that the moral imagination is found “especially in the higher form of poetry and art.” Why are the arts the highest form of moral imagination? We should first note that Kirk is not saying that

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imagination/.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See Travis Prinzi, “The Well-Ordered Mind: How Imagination Can Make Us More Human,” in *Hog’s Head Conversations: Essays on Harry Potter*, vol. 1 (Allentown, PA: Zossima Press, 2009), pp. 103-23.

all art is, by default, morally imaginative. Certainly, his criticism of the state of literature in 1981 would suggest otherwise. But with that clarification in mind, Kirk still believes that the arts provide a better conduit for the moral imagination than do other disciplines of the mind. This is because the arts can speak in symbol and not bare scientific fact.

L'Engle was frustrated with those who believed that truth could only be found in "instructive books."<sup>6</sup> She writes, "The world of fairy tale, fantasy, myth . . . is interested not in limited laboratory proofs, but in truth."<sup>7</sup> Notice the contrast: L'Engle sees the work of scientific exploration in a laboratory as in some way different from "truth." She's not saying that scientific inquiry is misleading and false; her own blend of fantasy and science fiction in the *Time* quintet<sup>8</sup> proves the opposite. What she's saying—and what fairy-tale writers like G. K. Chesterton, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and others have been saying for generations—is that the explanation of the scientist is not *all* there is to the world. A biological description of a human being is not enough to encourage humans to live rightly with other humans, nor would it provide any guidance for doing so.

The arts have the capacity to reach the human imagination, and it is in that faculty of the mind that we engage in thought and conversation about the human soul and the way we relate to one another. Let's move from some of this vague, loftier language to an example that will help us to understand the difference between "laboratory proof" truth and the "higher truth" conveyed by the imagination. Scientific exploration can discover life-saving truth in the disciplines of biology and chemistry by research into medicine. Scientific exploration can also discover life-destroying truth in the exact same disciplines by research into methods of chemical and nuclear warfare. What do we use these disciplines for, then? It depends on our moral inclinations. If we did not have the ethical perception to grasp and believe in the value of life in the first place, how much research would go into saving lives, and how much into destroying them?

Now we begin to see why stories are not just mindless distractions from the world, but concerned with survival itself. With bombs exploding around the world and destroying life, stories are being written in which we reach out for hope in the midst of chaos. It might have been a surprise to Hollywood that the 2012 film *The Hunger Games* was so successful, but it was no surprise to those who believe, like L'Engle, that story is survival. It might just be coming true that, as Kirk notes, "the parched rising generation

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<sup>6</sup> L'Engle, *Walking on Water*, p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> "*Time* quintet" refers to L'Engle's most famous award-winning children's books: *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), *A Wind in the Door* (1973), *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (1978), *Many Waters* (1986), and *An Acceptable Time* (1989).

may grope their way toward the springs of moral imagination,” and that it’s happening now.

#### 4. Imagination: Moral, Idyllic, and Diabolic

How, then, does art help us to survive? It does so through themes, symbols, and characters that engage the imagination. Kirk calls this moral imagination “the gift and obsession of Plato and Vergil and Dante.”<sup>9</sup> Dante makes the point well, for what is the *Divine Comedy* other than a long journey through symbols of all that is evil and good, which produces a longing for the good?

The imagination, though, can be shaped for right or wrong. It can be trained to want to create more precise and effective ways to heal or more precise and effective ways to kill (and to cover it up afterward). Kirk believes that three types of imagination are present in story: the moral, the idyllic, and the diabolical. The moral imagination we have already discussed. The other two are part of the “literary decadence” he derides.

The idyllic imagination is that “which rejects old dogmas and old manners and rejoices in the notion of emancipation from duty and convention.”<sup>10</sup> At first glance, that might not seem an altogether terrible thing, for what if the old dogmas were wrong? It would not be moral, for example, to return to the “old dogmas” of white supremacy or male superiority. Because the moral imagination implies a corrective to that which is wrong in society, “old dogmas” which are immoral are indeed to be rejected. The idyllic imagination refers to such a desire for freedom from constraint that one feels no duty toward one’s own history or community. In other words, it would be like Harry’s not caring about the courageous tradition of Godric Gryffindor (the founder of the Gryffindor House to which Harry belongs at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry) or his parents (James and Lily Potter), and instead being like petty criminal Mundungus Fletcher, who simply wants to avoid conflict at all costs and to keep himself safe.

A striking example of the voice of the idyllic imagination can be seen in Aberforth Dumbledore’s plea to Harry at The Hog’s Head Inn where Aberforth is proprietor. Harry attempts to explain his need to go on and to fight Voldemort until the end because his mentor and Aberforth’s brother, Albus Dumbledore, had left him that job:

“I—it’s not easy, no,” said Harry. “But I’ve got to—”  
““Got to”? Why ‘got to’? He’s dead, isn’t he?” said Aberforth roughly. “Let it go, boy, before you follow him! Save yourself!” (*DH* p. 561, emphasis in original)

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<sup>9</sup> Kirk, “The Moral Imagination.”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Aberforth wants Harry to run away from his duty in order to save himself. Harry has learned that there are things worth dying for, and that death is not the end. He has embraced not only his family history, but also the courageous Gryffindor history—a “true Gryffindor,” indeed. The *Harry Potter* books, then, do not embrace an idyllic imagination; Harry embraces his history and his duty, and is willing to die for it.

Imagine that Harry *had* embraced the idyllic imagination and decided that his own freedom was more important than his duty. This “freedom” would have resulted in slavery for the entire world under the reign of Voldemort and a life always on the run in hiding for Harry. While setting itself up as emancipation from old, stuffy tradition, the freedom offered by the idyllic imagination is an illusion, and a harmful one. Had Harry not embraced his Gryffindor history, his mentor’s old, traditional belief in life after death, and his duty to the commonwealth, it would have meant no freedom for anyone, including himself.

The idyllic imagination can spring from selfishness, like Mundungus, or from cynicism and desperation, like Aberforth. Whatever the motivation, the Harry Potters in our stories are there to help us hope and strive for something better. Aberforth himself seems transformed by Harry’s story, as he joins the battle in the end instead of running for the hills (*DH* p. 622).

The diabolic imagination goes beyond shirking duty; it fully embraces evil. Explaining that the idyllic imagination usually leads to “disillusion and boredom,” Kirk claims that a society will then often turn to an imagination that not only casts away codes of ethical conduct, but “delights in the perverse and subhuman.”<sup>11</sup> What is the link between the two? The idyllic imagination, in rejecting tradition and community, leaves one alone and ultimately lonely. The idyllic imagination rejects connection to others, both past and present. It cares nothing for right order in the commonwealth and believes that right order in the soul is simply the gratification of one’s own desires. It is therefore reductionistic, because it does not embrace the inherent connection of one soul to another. The reductionist sees only his or her own personal satisfaction as important, because physical matter is all there is. The immediate gratification of personal desire is the motivation of the person who embraces the idyllic imagination.

The inevitable result is isolation and boredom. Humans are social creatures, and operating in isolation is contrary to the soul’s design. One cannot completely refuse to relate to other human beings, but when one has embraced one’s own personal gratification as the ultimate good, that will shape how one interacts with others. Anyone who stands in the way of the satisfaction of one’s desires becomes a problem, and those problems must be dealt with. The diabolic imagination thus rejects a large part of what it means to be human. Let us observe Voldemort as an illustration of one who sees the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

world reductionistically. The “trophies” he gathers—such as Hufflepuff’s cup and Ravenclaw’s diadem—are turned from important historical artifacts of the tradition of the Hogwarts Founders that are imbued with magical meaning, into Horcruxes, which house bits of his soul, torn because of the murders he committed to create them. Because Voldemort embraces neither the moral imagination and all of its implications for the interconnectedness of human beings, past and present, nor Dumbledore’s view that death is “the next great adventure” (SS p. 297), he fears losing what material existence he has. He thus embraces evil, destroying life to preserve his own. The distorted picture of Voldemort’s soul, especially as embodied in the Horcrux, is the Gothic symbol that Rowling uses to portray the diabolic imagination and to drive Harry toward a moral one.

The moral imagination, then, is obvious in *Harry Potter*, in that Harry embraces his history and duty by rejecting the idyllic imagination, and embraces the soul-purifying act of self-sacrificial love by rejecting the diabolic imagination. It is no surprise that *Harry Potter* is so widely read and incredibly popular in a time of social unrest, uncertainty, and fear. Harry accomplishes the defeat of evil not by being afraid of death, but by embracing it and overcoming it through love. But what does Harry’s “right order in the soul” mean for “right order in the commonwealth”?

### 5. Occupy Gringotts?

Amy H. Sturgis, writing about similarities between J. R. R. Tolkien and H. P. Lovecraft, observes that their writings both grapple with the following questions:

In the midst of societal upheaval and political and economic strife, what, if anything, is solid ground, unchanging, larger than the self? Where do we belong as individuals, or as members of a community? And what are we to make of the processes that seem to threaten the familiar, loved institutions of our civilization?<sup>12</sup>

These are the questions that Rowling, L’Engle, and many others have attempted to answer through story. Notice that just like Kirk and L’Engle, Sturgis’s questions have both an individual and a societal focus. It’s not just personal comfort that is threatened, but our institutions, our whole society, our civilization.

How does the moral imagination work in society? Rowling says, in her 2008 commencement speech at Harvard University:

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<sup>12</sup> Amy H. Sturgis, “New Shoggoth Chic: Why H. P. Lovecraft Now?” *The Worlds of Amy H. Sturgis*, accessed online at: [http://www.amyhsturgis.com/?page\\_id=510](http://www.amyhsturgis.com/?page_id=510).

Unlike any other creature on this planet, humans can learn and understand, without having experienced. They can think themselves into other people's places. Of course, this is a power, like my brand of fictional magic, that is morally neutral. One might use such an ability to manipulate, or control, just as much as to understand or sympathise. And many prefer not to exercise their imaginations at all. They choose to remain comfortably within the bounds of their own experience, never troubling to wonder how it would feel to have been born other than they are. They can refuse to hear screams or to peer inside cages; they can close their minds and hearts to any suffering that does not touch them personally; they can refuse to know.<sup>13</sup>

You see many uses of the imagination in Rowling's explanation—some moral, and some not. Voldemort is an obvious example of one who uses the imagination to manipulate and control. His imagination is not very big, of course, but he does know how to imagine what will make others afraid. He also knows how to flatter. The Dursleys—Harry's cruel aunt, uncle, and cousin with whom he lives after being orphaned—are a clear example of those who “refuse to know,” who “prefer not to exercise their imaginations at all.”

The negative examples of Voldemort and the Dursleys aside, does *Harry Potter* offer any moral imagination that would encourage us to aspire to right order in the commonwealth as well as right order in the soul? At the end of the series, most of the social injustices are still firmly in place. There's been no revolution by the enslaved house-elves, apart from their participation in the Battle of Hogwarts. No laws have changed to make the world more just for muggle-borns (those born of non-magical parents). Nothing has changed in the status of those extremely intelligent beings that the Wizarding World has deemed only to have “near-human intelligence,” such as centaurs. Still, rays of hope shine at the end of the saga, and interesting insight into *how* to engage in imagining and working for a better commonwealth are offered. A brief look at five responses to social injustice will give us a glimpse of Rowling's magic potion for right order in the commonwealth.

***a. Accepting the norm: Ron's response to house-elves***

Ron Weasley, one of Harry's best friends, is simply incredulous at Hermione Granger's crusade against house-elf enslavement. Why? Because Ron believes that the house-elves actually *like* being enslaved (*GoF* p. 125). And on first glance, it seems that Ron is right. The elves are simply appalled

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<sup>13</sup> J. K. Rowling, “The Fringe Benefits of Failure, and the Importance of Imagination,” *Harvard Magazine* (May/June 2008), 2008 Harvard Commencement Address, accessed online at: <http://harvardmagazine.com/2008/06/the-fringe-benefits-failure-the-importance-imagination>.

at Hermione's attempt to free them. Apart from Dobby, they really don't seem to want to be free (*GoF* pp. 376-80). But Dobby, of course, is the first courageous elf standing up for freedom, in what we hope will be a long line of brave elves to follow. Rowling's house-elves' love of enslavement is a commentary on the damage that can be done to an entire group of people by taking away their freedom for extremely long periods of time. The house-elves have come to believe what the Wizarding World has been telling them for centuries, perhaps millennia: that their rightful place is bound in service to wizards, who are far superior to them. Ron accepts the Wizarding World's norms as though they reflect reality and does not question, until near the end of the series, the Wizarding World's narrative about house-elves that they like being slaves.

Ron's position results in no work toward right order in the commonwealth; he is sorely lacking in moral imagination on this point. He fits Rowling's description of those who "refuse to know," at least when it comes to house-elves. In fact, he's embraced an idyllic imagination, because he feels no responsibility to consider the plight of his magical brethren, and he does so because it's to his advantage to do so. If the house-elves were not enslaved, all that work at Hogwarts would have to be done by paid help—which would probably mean taxes or tuition. This is not a happy thought for a poor family like Ron's. Thankfully, we see transformation in Ron by the end of *Deathly Hallows*, when he recalls that the house-elves are in the kitchen during the Battle of Hogwarts: "I mean we should tell them to get out. . . . We can't order them to die for us" (*DH* p. 625).

***b. Putting it off until later: Harry's response to Griphook***

While Harry, Ron, and their best friend, Hermione, are discussing the problem of breaking into Gringotts Bank with the goblin Griphook, so that they can acquire and destroy one of Voldemort's Horcruxes hidden there in a vault, the conversation quickly turns into one concerning wizard-goblin relations. Ron takes a similar position with regard to the goblins as he does about the house-elves—he takes the Wizarding World's narrative about them at face value. As Ron and Griphook argue, Harry tries to bypass the whole conversation by arguing that all of this conflict between goblins and wizards is beside the point that they need to focus on defeating Voldemort right now. But this is the position of someone who is entirely unaware of how connected right order in the commonwealth is to avoiding the rule of tyrants: "As the Dark Lord becomes ever more powerful," Griphook protests, "your race is set still more firmly above mine" (*DH* p. 488). Harry wants to delay the discussion of the wrongly ordered commonwealth of the Wizarding World until there is more time to talk about it. Griphook rightly points out that the rule of Voldemort and the problems between wizards and goblins are intimately connected.

Harry's position is also lacking in moral imagination, because he has not taken the time to put himself in the place of others in the fight against Voldemort. He fails to see that the problem of Voldemort's rise is not just the

result of disorder in one person's soul, but disorder in the Wizarding World's commonwealth.

**c. Political crusade: Hermione's S.P.E.W.**

Hermione's Society for the Protection of Elfish Welfare (S.P.E.W.) is the most surprising part of Rowling's political commentary, because its attempt to free the elves is thoroughly mocked, and, it appears, rightly so (e.g., *GoF* pp. 224-25, 238-39, 366-67). Hermione's political crusade is rebuffed in one way or another by her friends, Hogwarts, Dumbledore, and the house-elves themselves. Indeed, in a twist of irony, the only free elf, Dobby, is the one who has thwarted her plan to free house-elves by surprise by leaving clothes for them to pick up (since passing clothing to a house-elf sets him free). The other elves will not clean Gryffindor tower, where she has placed the hats she has knitted, but Dobby significantly increases his wardrobe (*OotP* p. 385).

Why is Hermione's political crusade mocked? Because it lacks moral imagination. It is a crusade born not out of her identification with the plight of the elves, but of her own sense of right and wrong, divorced from the house-elves' actual lived experience.

**d. Slow change through freedom: Dumbledore and the Hogwarts elves**

As the wise and experienced Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore does something a little different. He lets the house-elves make their own free choices. Most of them, of course, choose to serve at Hogwarts. But if Dumbledore's interaction with Dobby is any indication, Dumbledore does not hold them to all of the rules of house-elf slavery. Dobby is allowed pay, vacations, and may disrespect Dumbledore all he likes (*GoF* pp. 379-80). (Of course, he doesn't, but he's free to.) While it initially seems horrifying that our beloved headmaster would be blind to the house-elves' plight, we find out by the end of *Order of the Phoenix* that he is nothing of the sort. He explains to Harry—something Harry later forgets—that the oppression of magical brethren by the Wizarding World set the stage for Voldemort. Even the “good guys,” like Harry's godfather, Sirius Black, can mistreat house-elves and play a part in allowing Voldemort's rise (*OotP* pp. 829-34). As long as injustice is tolerated and codified in the Ministry of Magic's laws and in the Wizarding World's culture, an atmosphere will exist that can foster the rise of the Dark Arts.

Dumbledore has a moral imagination. He is able to place himself, imaginatively, in the position of the house-elves and ask himself, “What would I want if I were in this situation?” The answer, it seems, is freedom to make their own choices. Through the influence of Dobby and his sacrificial death to save Harry Potter and his friends from death at Malfoy Manor (*DH* pp. 474-76), we can hope that other house-elves will start to long for freedom, to reject slavery, and to choose to be whatever they want to be.

***e. Imaginative identification: Hermione, the “Mudblood”***

Hermione moves beyond her crusade for house-elf justice and takes us one step further in the imagination toward aspiring for right order in the commonwealth. In the aforementioned conversation with Griphook, Hermione is the one who ends the argument. She calls *herself* a “Mudblood” (*DH* p. 489), which is an epithet for one who is descended from muggles. She even says she’s proud of it. In other words, quite apart from being on a political crusade, Hermione herself has now embraced her position as the member of an oppressed group within the Wizarding World structure. She has identified with Griphook, embraced her status in the unjust power hierarchy, and so tied herself to the fates of other oppressed groups. Hermione has fully embraced the moral imagination. She is no longer just the young teenager who found a political cause to be self-righteous about. She is also intimately involved in bettering the world from imagination to action.

**6. Conclusion**

While being an exciting and fascinating story, *Harry Potter* embraces a challenging moral imagination for our time of fear and social upheaval. It is, as L’Engle says, a story that helps us to survive. It is also a story that teaches its readers to imagine better, but it does so by pointing first to the soul, and then to the commonwealth. In short, Dumbledore, Harry, Hermione, and many others in the story might offer the following bit of advice for us: Before taking to the street to Occupy Gringotts (or Wall Street), we should first occupy our own souls.

# *Harry Potter* and the Metaphysics of Soul-Splitting

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## 1. Introduction

The world of *Harry Potter* is a magical one in which souls can be split into pieces and fragments of souls can be magically embedded in external “dark objects” (Horcruxes), making one immortal as long as one or more of these soul-fragments survives. This, of course, presupposes that there *are* souls, that souls are things that can be split into parts, and that bits of one's soul can be encased in objects outside the human body. All of this, as Gaffer Gamgee might say, “takes a lot o' believing,” but suppose we play J. K. Rowling's fictional game and grant it. A variety of fascinating metaphysical puzzles then arise. Must such souls be substances? Must they be corporeal? What effect does soul-splitting have on personal identity? I'll argue that in the world of *Harry Potter* souls are substances, that they are material substances, and that soul-splitting creates deep and probably insuperable problems for personal identity.

## 2. Are Souls Substances?

Souls in Rowling's fictional world can exist separately from bodies and in fact can survive “untouched” (*DH* p. 104) even if their host-bodies are destroyed. The converse is also true: Persons (or at least their bodies) can survive—though only as empty shells, with no memories or a sense of self (*PoA* p. 247)—even if their souls are destroyed by a Dementor's Kiss. This strongly suggests a dualist conception of mind and body. Dualism is roughly the view that mind is distinct from, and irreducible to, the body. There are two major forms of dualism: substance-dualism and property-dualism.<sup>1</sup> Substance-dualism holds that souls or minds are substances—that is, independently existing things or entities in which properties inhere. Plato and Rene Descartes (as standardly interpreted) are substance-dualists in this sense.<sup>2</sup> Property-

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<sup>1</sup> For an accessible discussion of the distinction, see J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 232-38.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 73c-84a; Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in

dualists hold that mental and physical properties are essentially distinct, but deny that the soul or mind is a “thing” that exists or can exist separately from the body. Instead, mental phenomena such as thoughts and feelings are simply properties, capacities, or characteristics of bodies (or brains). On this view, thoughts and other mental states are nonphysical qualities, but qualities that are produced by, and wholly dependent upon, physical states of the body or brain.

Rowling’s world does seem to presuppose some sort of dualism. Souls are distinct from bodies since they can continue to exist even if their associated bodies are completely destroyed. Moreover, souls appear to be substances in Rowling’s world. Souls aren’t simply properties of bodies, as property-dualists claim, because they can survive “untouched” when one’s body is dead and buried. Thus, Rowling’s world presupposes substance-dualism. Historically, most substance-dualists have claimed that souls are purely spiritual, *immaterial* substances. Plato, Descartes, and Thomas Aquinas all held this view.<sup>3</sup> Some substance-dualists, however, have held that souls are composed of matter, though a different and more ethereal kind of matter than that of the body. For instance, the early Church father, Tertullian, following the Greek atomists and Stoics, held that souls, though distinct from the body and capable of existing apart from it in an afterlife, are corporeal.<sup>4</sup> Are souls *material* substances in Rowling’s world?

### 3. Are Souls Corporeal?

Souls in Rowling’s world can be “split,” “torn,” and “mutilated,” and “bits” of soul can be physically separated from other parts of the soul and intentionally encased in magical containers (or can split off unintentionally and latch on to something nearby, as happens when Voldemort’s killing curse rebounds off the infant Harry, fracturing Voldemort’s damaged soul and making Harry a Horcrux of sorts). If such terms are used literally, then souls in Rowling’s fictional world are clearly corporeal. Only material things can be “torn” or split into “bits.” Other passages also suggest that souls in the *Potter* books are physical or composed of some sort of matter. Memories are described as wispy, silvery-blue substances that can leak out from people’s heads and be captured in flasks and magical basins. Soul-fragments are annihilated when their material containers are destroyed (*DH* pp. 104, 708). Souls can be destroyed by means of a magico-physical process, a Dementor’s

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*Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: The Modern Library, 1958), Meditation VI, p. 236.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 73c-84a; Descartes, *Meditations*, p. 236; Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith: Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. James F. Anderson (Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1955), Book 2, chaps. 50, 55, and 79.

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *On the Soul*, in *Tertullian: Apologetical Works*, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, et al. (Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 1950), pp. 185-96.

Kiss. When wizards die and their souls leave their bodies, they can leave physical imprints of themselves in the form of ethereal, but not wholly immaterial, ghosts. (Consider the splash that Moaning Myrtle makes when she dives into a toilet [*OotP* p. 861].) A bit of soul encased in a Horcrux can flit in and out of its container when enticed by someone who has become “too fond of or dependent upon the Horcrux” (*DH* p. 105). Harry’s soul is rendered immortal—so long as Voldemort lives—by being “tethered” to the enchanted blood flowing in Voldemort’s veins (*DH* p. 709). In the limbo-like King’s Cross Station in *Deathly Hallows*, Harry awakens to find himself embodied in a physical space, sees a physical embodiment of Voldemort’s damaged soul in the guise of a flayed-looking child, and is given the option of “board[ing] a train” to move “on” to whatever afterlife awaits (*DH* pp. 705-22). Finally, the fragment of Voldemort’s soul implanted in the diary-Horcrux is able to assume bodily form (albeit “blurred” and “misted”) as the sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle and to perform various physical acts, such as speaking and wielding a wand (*CoS* pp. 307-22). All of this, though perhaps explicable in other terms, seems to make most sense on the assumption that souls are composed of a special “spiritualized” or “ethereal” form of matter.

The major difficulty for this interpretation is Hermione Granger’s statement to Ron Weasley about the soul’s ability to survive destruction of the body: “Look, if I picked up a sword right now, Ron, and ran you through with it, I wouldn’t damage your soul at all. . . . [W]hatever happens to your body, your soul will survive, untouched” (*DH* p. 104). This implies that if your body is nuked, blown to smithereens, sucked into a black hole, or otherwise totally destroyed, your soul will survive undamaged. But if the soul is made of matter, how could this be? Wouldn’t nukes and black holes pretty much destroy anything made of matter?

The answer, I suggest, is No. Because of its spiritualized nature (and/or special magical protection) souls cannot be damaged or destroyed in Rowling’s world by any purely physical process. In this respect, souls are like Horcruxes, which can only be destroyed through powerful magical means, such as Basilisk fangs, magical swords, or Fiendfyre (though not by the Avada Kedavra curse, as is demonstrated by Sirius Black’s having “gone on” [*OotP* p. 861]).<sup>5</sup> We’ve seen that souls and soul-fragments *can* be destroyed through magical means (the Dementor’s Kiss, destruction of a Horcrux). Souls can also be damaged and healed through certain *moral acts*. For example, acts of murder “rip the soul apart” (*HBP* p. 498), and mutilated souls can be healed by means of deep and painful remorse (*DH* p. 103). So Hermione’s statement

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<sup>5</sup> Do the appearances of Harry’s parents, Lily and James Potter, (and others) resulting from using the Resurrection Stone (*DH* p. 699) and the *Priori Incantatem* spell (*GoF* p. 667) likewise show that souls cannot be destroyed by the Avada Kedavra curse? Not directly. As Dumbledore explains, “no spell can reawaken the dead” (*GoF* p. 697). What Harry encounters are mere shadows or echoes of once-living persons, not their still-living souls.

is consistent with my view that souls in Potter's world are not immaterial, but are composed of a special form of matter.

#### 4. Puzzles of Personal Identity

Finally, we turn to puzzles of personal identity. If souls can be split and bits of soul placed in external objects, deep problems arise for determining personal identity. If part of my soul is *here*, and other parts are *there*, where am *I*? In a world of soul-splitting, what makes you *you*, and what is it for the *same* person to exist at different times? There are three leading theories of personal identity—the body theory, the memory theory, and the soul theory—and none of them seems to work in the world of *Harry Potter*.

The body theory claims, roughly, that personal identity is a matter of having the same body from one time to the next. Person P1 is the same person as P2 just in case P2 has the same body as P1 (or at least *enough* of the same body to preserve what is essential to P1). The body theory doesn't require that a person have exactly the same parts from one time to the next. People's bodies change all the time, and it may be that I now have none of the same molecules or cells that made up my body when I was a day-old infant. It's enough, according to the body theory, that body parts are replaced gradually over time and essential parts of the body are preserved. I could get an artificial leg or a heart transplant and still remain the same person. But if my head gets chopped off or somebody destroys my brain and replaces it with somebody else's brain, then I no longer exist.

The body theory fits well with our everyday experience, but runs into problems when we think about science-fictiony sorts of cases. Suppose I wake up one morning and find myself with a cockroach's body (as in Franz Kafka's famous example).<sup>6</sup> Different body, but same *me*, right? Or imagine there's a "body switch." I wake up one morning in your body and you wake up in mine (as in John Locke's Prince-and-the-Cobbler case).<sup>7</sup> Wouldn't that still be me? Or suppose a mad scientist removes half my brain and puts it in a cloned body that looks exactly like my old one. Suppose further that all of my memories and personality features are preserved in that half-brain. According to most defenders of the body theory, I'm still alive, because the body parts that are essential to me—my half-brain with my memories and personality traits—have been preserved. But now imagine that the mad scientist takes the *other* half of my brain, which also has all of my memories and personality features, and transplants it into another cloned body. Now there are two people (Smith and Jones, let's call them) who look exactly alike and have all

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<sup>6</sup> Franz Kafka, "Metamorphosis," accessed online at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5200/5200-h/5200-h.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II.27.15, p. 340.

of the same psychological characteristics. They can't both be me; they are different people who exist in different places and have different life-experiences. So which, if either, is me?

These are big problems for the body theory, but they aren't problems in Rowling's world, because in that world *being the same person* is not a matter of *having the same body*. Voldemort doesn't die when he is "ripped" from his body by his own rebounding killing curse, despite the fact that his body is destroyed and he becomes "less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost" (*GoF* p. 653). Professor Cuthbert Binns remains Professor Binns even when he (or his soul-imprint) becomes a ghost. In Rowling's world the death of one's body is not the death of one's self. As Albus Dumbledore says, bodily death in the Wizarding World is "but the next great adventure" (*SS* p. 297).

All of this, you might say, shows that what's really crucial to personal identity is *psychological continuity*, that is, having (pretty much) the same memories and personality features from one time to the next. On this view, Voldemort survives the death of his body because his memories and personality survive intact. Likewise, the postmortem Dumbledore that Harry encounters in the limbo-like King's Cross Station (*DH* p. 707) is still Dumbledore because the requisite psychological continuity is preserved. By contrast, when the dementors suck out the soul of Barty Crouch, Jr. in *Goblet of Fire* (p. 703), thereby destroying all memories and sense of self, what remains is merely an empty shell, not Crouch himself. This is what's known as the memory (or personality or psychological continuity) theory of personal identity.

Unhappily, the memory theory runs into serious problems of its own. I remember nothing from when I was three-years-old, yet intuitively I am still the same Greg Bassham. Likewise, I have no memories of happenings at 3:00 a.m. last night, when I was in a Heineken-induced state of oblivion. A bottle of Heineken is a noble thing, but it is not a death potion that can cause one to cease to exist and then return to life. And what about cases of amnesia? A mad scientist tells you he'll wipe out all of your memories and then torture you. Would it make sense to say, "Go ahead, dirtbag. It won't be *me* you'll be torturing because all of my memories will be gone"? Even deeper problems arise when we consider "fission cases" in which two or more persons each have the relevant identity-preserving memories and psychological characteristics. Suppose the Star Trek transporter goes haywire and beams two of you down to Vulcan (simultaneously destroying your original body). Both beamed persons look exactly alike and have exactly the same memories and personalities. According to the memory theory, *both* are you, which is impossible since they are separate individuals at different locations with different experiences and life-trajectories.

Luckily, Rowling's world isn't committed to the bogus memory theory of personal identity. When Hermione radically modifies her parents' memories to make them think they're Wendell and Monica Wilkins (*DH* p. 96), there's no suggestion that her parents have died or ceased to exist (later to

be brought back to life once Voldemort is defeated). They're still alive, still the same persons, but with heads now full of false memories. And the reason they remain the same persons is presumably because they *have the same souls*.

There's little doubt, I think, that in Rowling's world *same self* means *having the same soul*. This is the soul theory of personal identity, and it fits with everything we're told about souls, selves, and survival in the *Potter* books.

There is one vexing problem, however. Souls can be split in Potter's world, creating the sorts of pesky fission problems that bedevil the memory and body theories of personal identity. If souls remain whole and undamaged, there's no problem with identity. As long as my soul survives, I survive. But suppose my soul gets split in half. Then all sorts of difficulties arise. At a minimum, the simple equation—"same soul, same person"—needs to be modified. Can you survive if only part of your soul survives? If so, how large a part—90%? More than 50%? Even less? Suppose you've created so many Horcruxes that only 20% of your original soul remains intact. Is that still you? Would it matter if one of your Horcruxes (the Big Enchilada) contains 30% of your original soul (the largest fragment)? Would that 30% actually be you? Does it matter if the 20% soul remains in its original body, whereas the 30% soul is encased in a Dick Cheney bobblehead doll? And what happens in the case of ties? Your original body is damaged beyond repair, so you split your soul and place 50% in one cloned body (Smedley) and 50% in another cloned body (Sturdley). Suppose the two bodies and two halves of the soul are identical in all respects and carry all of your former memories, personality traits, etc. Which, if either, is you?

Hard questions also arise about the status of one's separated soul-bits. Rowling calls them "parts," "pieces," "bits," "fragments" of an original soul that is now "torn" or "mutilated." But what makes the separated soul-fragment a "part" of something rather than an entity in its own right? If an amoeba splits into two, there are two amoebas, not one divided into two spatially separated parts. If a water-droplet breaks into two, there are two droplets, not one. So why shouldn't we say that when a Horcrux is created, two persons exist rather than one? A "person," as most philosophers define the notion, is a conscious, rational, self-aware being capable of choice and relatively high-level cognition.<sup>8</sup> By this definition, the Tom Riddle soul-fragment in the diary-Horcrux would seem to be a person. He thinks, speaks, acts, and plans. There doesn't seem to be a shared consciousness or even much if any communication between the diary soul-fragment and Voldemort's original soul. It is, apparently, an independent being, with its own thoughts and experiences. The fact that scattered soul-fragments can be reunited by a process of deep and painful remorse (*DH* p. 103) does not imply that the

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Joel Feinberg, "Abortion," accessed online at: <http://www.ditext.com/feinberg/abortion.html>.

fragments are merely “parts” of some still-existing whole. The fact that two brain-hemispheres can be reunited to form one unitary person does not show that Smith and Jones were not different persons when the separated hemispheres were housed in their identical cloned bodies.

One possible solution for Rowling would be to adopt what philosophers call a “closest continuer” theory of personal identity.<sup>9</sup> As long as *enough* of my soul survives (however much that is) and *no one else exists* who is a better candidate to be me, personal identity is preserved. Rowling could then say that Voldemort’s identity is clear. Voldemort is the person Harry kills in the final climactic duel of the series, since that Voldemort is the closest continuer to the Voldemort who was ripped from his body when he tried to kill the infant Harry many years before. That person is the real Voldemort because it contains (or is) the “master soul” that has existed continuously since Voldemort’s birth, that generated the various soul-fragments, that alone has the power to reunite them, and presumably is the “largest” part of Voldemort’s soul, with the greatest powers and abilities. For all of these reasons, it is the closest continuer to Voldemort’s earlier self, and thus *is* Voldemort, the other bits being either mere “parts” of a larger but spatially separated whole, or separate “persons” in their own right that hived off from Voldemort’s master soul and share many similarities with him.

Closest continuer theories strike many philosophers as non-starters, because it’s hard to see how personal identity (seemingly a *necessary* relationship) could depend upon something *extrinsic* and *contingent* like whether I have a competitor living (let’s say) unbeknownst to me in Kokomo. (Who knows, maybe last night God secretly split my soul, gave me a new but identical-looking body, and implanted the other half of my soul in the Kokomo chap whose body looks just the same.) Such theories also imply, bizarrely, that you will survive if one half of your soul is preserved, but you will die if both halves are.<sup>10</sup> If you care about your continued survival, you shouldn’t care whether a mad wizard-scientist kills your entire soul (by means of his dementor sidekick) or merely splits your soul in two and plants the halves in two identical bodies cloned from yours. Either way, you’re equally dead. Bizarre, but some version of the closest continuer theory may be the best Rowling can do. As for me, gimme that old-time religion in which souls are immaterial, incorruptible, and indivisible (even by God).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For a classic defense of this view, see Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 29-47.

<sup>10</sup> Eric T. Olson, “Personal Identity,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed online at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-personal/>.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith: Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 2, chaps. 50, 55, and 79.



# Harry Potter and Humanity: Choices, Love, and Death

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## 1. Introduction

In this article, I analyze how the *Harry Potter* novels bring to awareness two fundamental aspects of the human condition: the importance of one's choices and the inevitability of one's mortality. These are highlighted through the contrast of the characters of Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort.

We first meet Harry on his eleventh birthday; he's a child about to enter puberty. We watch as he grows, and bear witness to the hardships he faces and his struggles to make the right choices in difficult circumstances. We leave Harry as an adult, with children of his own, having achieved maturity through his appreciation of his humanity.

We also learn how Tom Riddle becomes Lord Voldemort. Tom, like Harry, is an orphan who struggles against difficult circumstances. Tom, though, makes very different choices. One of the most significant choices Tom makes, at the root of his immorality, is his refusal to accept his mortality.

## 2. "It Is Our Choices"

Over and over again in the novels it is made clear that it is a person's choices and actions that are the defining elements of his moral character. It is not our ancestry, social roles, or wealth that makes us who we are. It is, as Albus Dumbledore tells Harry in *Chamber of Secrets*, "our choices . . . that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (*CoS* p. 333).

The key action before the first book of the series begins is Lily Potter's choice to protect her son at the cost of her own life. Later, Hermione Granger makes the heroic choice to challenge the racism behind the slavery of the house-elves. Neville Longbottom chooses not to step aside so that Harry, Ron, and Hermione can leave their dormitory to go looking for the Sorcerer's Stone, and Neville chooses in *Deathly Hallows* to fight on at Hogwarts even after the Death Eaters take over.

The choices made in the novels are not all for the good. Peter Pettigrew makes the choice to betray his friends and thus forever casts his lot with the forces of evil. We are told that Tom's mother, Merope Gaunt Riddle, chooses her own death instead of staying alive to care for her son. Draco

Malfoy chooses to accept Voldemort's assignment and becomes a Death Eater himself.

Again, Tom Riddle's youthful choices are what lead to the creation of Lord Voldemort. Tom is an orphan just like Harry. Tom chooses to vent his frustration and anger at his situation on others. He tells Dumbledore, when they first meet at Tom's orphanage, "I can make bad things happen to people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to" (*HBP* p. 271).

Harry's situation is a little better than Tom's. He lives in a house in a comfortable suburban neighborhood, while Tom lives in an orphanage run by a drunkard. Still, Harry is hardly treated well by the Dursleys: he is confined to the space under the stairs, denied the comforts and love they lavish on their son Dudley, and treated like a pariah. Harry lashes out at times; at the beginning of *Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry makes the glass of a snake's cage disappear, endangering Dudley (*SS* p. 35). But Harry doesn't realize what he is doing or even that he is doing it. Tom, though, knows that he is making things move around, and that he can cause pain (*HBP* p. 271). Tom doesn't understand *why* he can do these things, but he is aware of his power and can control it. He already chooses at a young age to cause pain to others.

Tom could have gone to Hogwarts and chosen to live a life of virtue rather than vice. This is, after all, Dumbledore's hope and promise of what Hogwarts might provide for Tom. He does become an excellent student, winning awards for magical merit and service to the school (*CoS* p. 234), and he is a prefect and a head boy. Yet he still chooses the path that leads him to become Lord Voldemort.

Harry could have chosen Slytherin House during the Sorting Ceremony and befriended Draco and his crew—as Draco tries to do when he and Harry first meet. Such a choice might have led to Harry's eventually joining the Death Eaters as Draco does. However, Harry chooses otherwise, which makes all of the difference.

In "Choices vs. Abilities," Gregory Bassham breaks down the contrast of choices with abilities explicitly made by Dumbledore in *Chamber of Secrets* (*CoS* p. 333).<sup>1</sup> Dumbledore's point is that the choices one makes generally reveal more about one's moral character than do one's abilities. Choices tell us so much about character because they depend in large part *on* character. Not all choices, of course, are like this. Some choices are trivial, for example, choosing between chocolate or vanilla ice cream. Bassham notes several senses of choices, but focuses on what he calls "motive-choice."<sup>2</sup> This sense of choice incorporates the internal decision, the physical act following

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Bassham, "Choices vs. Abilities: Dumbledore on Self-Understanding," in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles*, ed. Gregory Bassham (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), pp. 157-71.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

from this decision, and the appropriate motive for the decision and act.<sup>3</sup> It is this conception of choice that most clearly reveals one's character, because motive choices "tell us not only what choice we have made (mentally), but also what motivated us to make the choice and whether we had the strength and consistency of character to act on the choice."<sup>4</sup>

Abilities, however, typically do not tell us much about one's moral character precisely because they "can be used wisely or unwisely, ethically or unethically."<sup>5</sup> For example, the ability to drive a car quickly can be used to race someone to the emergency room or as the getaway car for a bank robbery. The important thing about one's abilities and capacities is how one chooses to use them. Bassham notes that abilities that can only be acquired by employing virtues, like self-discipline and industriousness, can tell us about these aspects of the person's moral character.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, abilities acquired through means that are evil or involve vices can also reveal these character failings. But even here, the development of these abilities, either the virtuous-abilities or vicious-abilities, rests on a prior choice to acquire them.

One of the leitmotifs of the *Harry Potter* series is the similarity between Harry and Voldemort. Much about their lives is parallel. Both are brought up as orphans cut off from the Wizarding World. Both are poorly treated by their guardians and made out to be pariahs. Both come to Hogwarts with the hopes of finding a true home—and both are happiest at Hogwarts. Both are intelligent and gifted wizards capable of performing advanced magic at a young age. Their abilities are remarkably similar. The two are similar enough that many times throughout the series Harry expresses a great fear that he will end up like Voldemort.

These parallels highlight the priority of choices over abilities, circumstances, and environment. The influencing factors of their lives—upbringing, natural ability, and life-circumstances—are in rough ways kept constant. So what marks the difference that draws one to a virtuous life and the other to wickedness? Their choices. Harry and Voldemort make very different choices about how to make use of their abilities, how to deal with the challenges of their upbringings, and ultimately about what kind of life to live. These circumstances do not determine their choices; each is capable of choosing differently, but does not. This, however, only changes the question of why Harry and Voldemort end up in such different places into the question of why they make the choices that they make. By analyzing their respective

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 164-65.

acceptance and rejection of mortality, we can understand why Harry and Tom choose such different paths.

### 3. “The Last Enemy that Shall Be Destroyed Is Death”

Voldemort trusts no one. He loves no one. He doesn’t appear even to have any desires, save one: immortality. Everything that Voldemort is about—his power lust, his obsession with killing Harry—is instrumental to his one goal of cheating death. It is in this context of Voldemort’s refusal to accept his own mortality that we can begin to understand his evil.

Voldemort is obsessed with conquering death. He seeks the Sorcerer’s Stone to bring himself back to power, but also to give him everlasting life. Voldemort’s followers are called the Death Eaters. In an interview, J. K. Rowling tells readers that Voldemort “regards death itself as ignominious. He thinks that it’s a shameful human weakness.”<sup>7</sup> Death and its avoidance even seem to be a part of Voldemort’s name, which appears similar to French phrases that mean something like “Flight of Death” or “Flight from Death.”<sup>8</sup>

This obsession with immortality shows up early, when a young Tom Riddle first meets Dumbledore. Tom claims that his own mother could not have been magical because if she were, she would not have died. From the very moment that he discovers that he is a wizard, Tom sees magic as a means of avoiding death. As Dumbledore tells Harry, “Tom Riddle was doing all he could to find out how to make himself immortal” (*HBP* p. 499).

Later at Hogwarts, when Tom finds out about Horcruxes—devices that can store parts of one’s soul and secure immortality—he becomes so excited that his emotion frightens the professor who tells him about this kind of magic. The Horcruxes, we learn, are made by splitting the soul, and this splitting can only occur after “a supreme act of evil . . . Murder” (*HBP* p. 498). Given this knowledge and the desire to use it, Voldemort’s goal and the means of achieving it necessarily become evil.

The tragic paradox of Voldemort is that he sacrifices his life for immortality. He gives up his humanity, including his capacity to love, for a chance at an empty everlasting existence. So long as one does not accept the reality of one’s mortality, it is difficult, if not impossible, to embrace life and the choices and actions that life requires. Without the possibility of death, it doesn’t matter what you do; nothing can ultimately affect you one way or the other. Pain and suffering indicate danger. But if nothing, no harm or injury

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<sup>7</sup> Melissa Anelli and Emerson Spartz, “The Leaky Cauldron and MuggleNet Interview Joanne Kathleen Rowling: Part Two,” *Accio Quote!*, accessed online at: [http://www.accio-quote.org/articles/2005/0705-tlc\\_mugglenet-anelli-2.htm](http://www.accio-quote.org/articles/2005/0705-tlc_mugglenet-anelli-2.htm).

<sup>8</sup> *The Harry Potter Lexicon*, accessed online at: <http://www.hp-lexicon.org/wizards/voldemort.html>.

done to you, can pose a *mortal* danger to you, can anything in the world really pose *any* danger to you?

Ayn Rand puts this point more forcefully. An immortal being, she argues, can have no goals, purposes, or values.<sup>9</sup> Nothing that happens can negatively or positively affect it, so there is no action (or inaction) that it must perform (or avoid). Values only exist, Rand argues, because a living organism's existence is conditional; it has to act in certain ways, successfully, in order to maintain and extend its existence. An organism is benefited by achieving its values. Failure to achieve its values is a danger, ultimately a mortal danger, to the organism. However, if its existence is not at stake, there is no good or bad, benefit or danger, for it.

Without recognizing the reality of death, one cannot truly understand the reality of life. Discussing the ethics of life and death in the film genre of Westerns, Peter French remarks "that the temporality of life constitutes its most important feature."<sup>10</sup> The hero of the Western, in accepting this fact, also "recognizes exactly that as the value of human life."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, if people ignore the reality of human mortality, "they devalue life and living, and that is to diminish their own value as persons."<sup>12</sup> Our choices and actions—our morality—are based on this fundamental recognition: we are alive and we will die.<sup>13</sup> This is the most basic truth of the human condition and foundation for morality.

It is this recognition that we do not have an eternity which gives meaning and urgency to the things we do. Every decision matters; every decision has consequences that affect ourselves and others. We recognize that we have to act, but moreover, that we have to act with care and thought. When one makes moral choices, one reinforces one's moral character and further develops that character. But, when one fails to be moral, even in small ways, one causes harm to oneself and to those around one. An important part of being moral is recognizing this fact: our choices and actions, no matter how small or seemingly trivial, have real consequences. We have to do the right thing now because, given the nature of life, failure to do so opens us up to harmful, even fatal, consequences. Rand argues further that in order to

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<sup>9</sup> Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Peter French, *Cowboy Metaphysics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>13</sup> Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," p. 16.

achieve real happiness, one has to embrace life and pursue the values that reason requires for a human life.<sup>14</sup>

Since he does not acknowledge his human mortality, Voldemort rejects the foundation of values and so he cannot identify the rational values required for life. This is the root of his evil: without knowledge of real values, he is not able consistently to pursue and achieve the values required by life. So, in order to maintain his existence, he has to seek power and control over others, whether Quirinus Quirrell, Pettigrew, or the Wizarding World as a whole, to acquire what he needs for life. This manner of existence cuts him off from the possibility of real human happiness and life.

Voldemort is, however, not the only one who seeks to conquer death. Nicholas Flamel and his wife, Perenelle, made the Sorcerer's Stone and use the Elixir of Life to live for over six centuries. Dumbledore, in his pursuit of the Deathly Hallows, tries to conquer death. If my thesis is correct, then why aren't Flamel and Dumbledore evil?

In Dumbledore's case, his pursuit of the Deathly Hallows leads to much harm, including the death of his sister, Ariana (*DH* p. 717). Furthermore, the pursuit ultimately helps to destroy Dumbledore, when he becomes fatally cursed upon trying to use the Resurrection Stone that is set in Marvolo Gaunt's ring-turned-Horcrux. So, while Dumbledore is not evil, his desire to conquer death results in real harm, to himself and others.

The Sorcerer's Stone gives the Flamels more money and life, but, according to Dumbledore, they come to recognize the trouble it has helped to cause. As part of his account to Harry about why the Flamels gave up the Stone, Dumbledore tells Harry that "the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing" (*SS* p. 297). We do not get much information about the Flamels and how they used the Stone, other than for more life and money. As friends of Dumbledore and given their agreement to destroy the Stone, there is little reason to suspect that the Flamels used the Stone for evil purposes. They sought to extend their lives, but seeing the trouble the Stone has caused just by its existence, they agree to destroy it and prepare themselves for death. They never reject their mortality; they just postpone it for a while. This suggests that the Flamels do not see immortality as an end in itself. Dumbledore also does not seek immortality as an end in itself. The attempt to use the Resurrection Stone was a means of bringing back his family and of absolving himself of guilt for what happened to his sister (*DH* pp. 719-20).

The cases of the Flamels and Dumbledore indicate an important distinction. There is a difference between seeking immortality and seeking life-extension. In seeking more life, a person is not rejecting his mortality or humanity. Implicitly, he must acknowledge his mortality in order to avoid the harms that might bring about his demise and to achieve the values that extend his life. In seeking immortality as an end, however, one is seeking more than

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

just more life. One is looking for a way to make one's demise impossible. This is why one's humanity is rejected in the pursuit of immortality.

#### 4. "He Does Not Love"

Our mortality gives us a reason to love. Each of us is a unique and separate individual: a single, unrepeatable, and finite point in time and space. Love is a way of experiencing the connection between two such points, of providing a union of two separate individuals. Love is also, importantly, a way to experience oneself, to understand, through the eyes of someone else, the reality of one's existence as a unique and singular person.<sup>15</sup> The recognition of our own demise gives us powerful reasons to make and experience these exalting connections while we can. It is, in part, the fact that these points go out of existence, never to be repeated or duplicated, that makes love so powerful and precious.

This connection is part of what Aristotle means by the claim that a friend is a "second self": the love of another reveals one's own nature.<sup>16</sup> Friendship itself, on Aristotle's view, is a kind of virtue; indeed, complete, full friendship is only possible between virtuous individuals. Moreover, friendship between morally good individuals is essential for a good person's happiness and flourishing.<sup>17</sup> Aristotle offers several reasons for the importance of friendship for the good life. One reason is that a good friend, by example, can provide moral guidance and improvement, and this is certainly evident in the *Harry Potter* series.<sup>18</sup> Another reason is that the good person wishes to experience goodness in the world. While he can experience his own goodness in some ways, it is the goodness of his friends that he can perceive best of all.<sup>19</sup> His love for his friend is based, in part, on the shared virtue of his friend, and it is through his friend that he can most directly experience his own goodness and virtue.

Conversely, Aristotle tells us that wicked individuals do not want to spend time by themselves.<sup>20</sup> They do not like themselves and seek out the

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<sup>15</sup> Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Romantic Love* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), esp. chap. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1962), IX.4.1166a30-34, p. 253.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.9.1170b14-19, p. 267.

<sup>18</sup> For more on Aristotle's view of friendship in relation to Harry Potter, see Harald Thorsrud, "Voldemort's Agents, Malfoy's Cronies, and Hagrid's Chums: Friendship in Harry Potter," in *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts*, ed. David Baggett and Shawn E. Klein (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2004), pp. 38-48.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX.9.1169b28-1170a3, pp. 264-65.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.4.1166b6-26, pp. 254-55.

company of others to forget themselves. Such pseudo-friendships do not serve to improve the person or to provide him with a more direct awareness of himself. In fact, the motivation seems to be to hide from the knowledge of what one truly is. This is, in part, why Aristotle argues that bad individuals cannot form true friendships. A true friendship would reveal to the bad person his wickedness and be too unpleasant for most people to endure.

In order to be able to love, one must accept who one is; the love of another reveals one's humanity to one's self. The experience of love, then, becomes a threat to one's rejection of mortality. To be able to love and to accept love, one has to embrace one's humanity—and with it one's mortality. To reject the reality of death is to reject the reality of life and love. In refusing to accept one's mortality, one is refusing to accept the reality of one's humanity. Dumbledore suggests this link, when he tells Harry, "[Voldemort] fears the dead. He does not love" (*DH* p. 721).

Voldemort rejects love as a power and so ignores it—at his own peril. He fails to understand it and continually underestimates it. As Dumbledore tells Harry, if he didn't reject love and the power it holds, then "he could not be Lord Voldemort, and might never have murdered at all" (*DH* p. 710).

Embracing our humanity is not just the recognition that we die, but that we can love, demonstrate honor, and have integrity—in brief, that we can live well. In the classical myths, humans are often defined by the fact that they are the only creatures who know they will die. Animals also die, of course, but they do not know it. The gods are immortal and supremely powerful, yet they are petty and childish. Only humans are conscious of their own mortality, and it is this knowledge that makes human nobility possible.

##### **5. "I've Known It for Years"**

Throughout the series, Harry has a growing awareness and acceptance of the danger he faces and of its likely outcome. He realizes that the only way to end Voldemort's reign of terror is to kill him and that this might very well lead to Harry's own death. Yet, he accepts the challenge. He tells Dumbledore's brother, Aberforth, "I'm going to keep going until I succeed—or I die. Don't think I don't know how this might end. I've known it for years" (*DH* pp. 568-69).

Dumbledore tells Harry that he is "the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die" (*DH* pp. 720-21). Voldemort seeks mastery of death in vain through denial and defiance—and, as such, can never truly master it. Harry, though, accepts, even embraces, his own mortality (*DH* p. 698). This choice gives him the capacity to do the things he needs to do in order to defeat Voldemort.

Through the Pensieve, Harry discovers in the memories of Severus Snape that he must die in order to destroy Voldemort. He is understandably filled with dread, but does not run or escape. He accepts the "incontrovertible truth, which was that he must die. *I must die*" (*DH* p. 693).

And so he goes to Voldemort and allows Voldemort to attack him. But, as we know, Harry is “the boy who lives” (*SS* p. 1). He not only survives the attack, but also makes it possible for Voldemort to be destroyed. At King’s Cross, we find out that Voldemort’s killing curse does not kill Harry; it kills the remnant of Voldemort’s soul hidden in Harry. Dumbledore tells Harry, “Your soul is whole, and completely your own” (*DH* p. 708). In accepting his own mortality, Harry has achieved not only mastery over Voldemort, but, more importantly, his own complete individuation. His soul is completely his own; he is a separate and individual being. He is a whole person in his own right, ready and willing to take on the mantle of adulthood and all of its responsibilities.

With this recognition and acceptance of his humanity, Harry becomes more powerful than Voldemort. In the final battle between Harry and Voldemort, Harry is strong and confident. He is an adult. Voldemort, by contrast, seems weak and frightened; he is like a child—much like the gods of classical myth—screaming and grasping at straws to try to get his way.

## 6. Conclusion

Voldemort, in his ruthless, futile quest for immortality, openly rejects his own humanity. This prevents him from ever really understanding what life is about and what makes it so precious. It blocks him from appreciating the power of love and its fundamental role in human life. It is this failure to recognize and accept his humanity that makes his irredeemable evil possible, and ultimately, is what leads to his defeat.

And it is Harry’s acceptance of his mortality that allows him to embrace his humanity and to love. It is this recognition that gives Harry the power to defeat Voldemort. More than that, it makes it possible for Harry to develop into a realized, virtuous adult. In his acceptance of his mortality, “the boy who lived” is able more fully and wholly to live.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> An earlier version of this article was given at a 2008 Tufts University colloquium, “Why Take Harry Seriously.” A much revised and updated version was given at a 2011 Marymount Manhattan College conference, “‘The Power to Imagine Better’: The Philosophy of *Harry Potter*.” I want to thank the attendees of these conferences for their questions and suggestions. I especially wish to thank Carrie-Ann Biondi for her comments and feedback.



# Kierkegaard's Mirror (of Erised)

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## 1. Introduction

The Mirror of Erised appears twice in the *Harry Potter* series, both times in *Sorcerer's Stone*. This evocative magical object is one of J. K. Rowling's many delightful creations in the imagined world she has authored. It has been the subject of literary and philosophical analysis, particularly with respect to epistemology<sup>1</sup> and the philosophy and psychology of desire.<sup>2</sup> In this article I will present and defend an existentialist interpretation of the Mirror of Erised. The Mirror, I argue, symbolizes the human predicament of existential despair, and within the *Harry Potter* series functions as an instrument of existential diagnosis and catalyst for the birth of genuine subjectivity. The Mirror confronts the viewer with the self's strongest point of attachment to the aesthetic stage of life and therefore with the chief obstacle to be overcome in the task of attaining true selfhood.

No magical object (which I hasten to equate with a technological device) can of itself impart any other imperative than its own use. One must gain a sufficiently broad perspective to determine good aims. However, the existential dimension of the Mirror of Erised is concealed by its technological character in the empirical dimension. "What does it do?" and "How does it do it?" are the evasive questions of fact that, in virtue of the object's captivating power, defer the important questions of value.

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<sup>1</sup> Shawn E. Klein, "The Mirror of Erised: Why We Should Heed Dumbledore's Warning," in *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts*, ed. David Baggett and Shawn E. Klein (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2004), pp. 92-104.

<sup>2</sup> David Lay Williams and Alan J. Kellner, "Dumbledore, Plato, and the Lust for Power," in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles*, ed. Gregory Bassham (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), pp. 128-40; David Jones, "Interpret Your Findings Correctly," in *Hog's Head Conversations: Essays on Harry Potter, Volume 1*, ed. Travis Prinzi (Allentown, PA: Zossima Press, 2009), pp. 189-204; Taija Piipo, "Is Desire Beneficial or Harmful in the Harry Potter Series?" in *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*, ed. Elizabeth E. Heilman, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 65-82.

The Mirror of Erised is a dangerous device for one living in the aesthetic sphere of life, because its lessons cannot be learned from a vantage point *within* the aesthetic sphere. The self gazes upon an image of one enjoying the “deepest, most desperate desire of [one’s] heart” (SS p. 213). An ontological no-man’s land of virtual interiority and exteriority is created. The subject becomes an onlooker to a self than which none better can be conceived, that is, the highest aesthetic self one envisions. But the subject is not (yet?) that highest self nor is the objective self in the Mirror the actual self; neither self possesses genuine selfhood. The exterior subject presented in the Mirror is not a project resulting from decisive choice. The interior subject facing the Mirror and contemplating the fully happy self therein is evading the task of becoming an individual, even the individual he most desires to be. The viewer is paralyzed before the desired viewer-to-be, smitten with the image of the fully happy self.

With guidance, however, the Mirror becomes a means of leaping beyond and transcending the false self that is represented in the image as well as the false self that gazes into the Mirror. Both selves must be annulled to leap into the authentic selfhood of the ethical self. As others have shown,<sup>3</sup> one of the key themes in *Sorcerer’s Stone* is Harry’s wrestling with desire. The Mirror provides space for contemplation of his desire. Rowling prepares Harry for self-transcendence, but it is important to point out that this will be achieved not by extirpating desire but by transforming desire. Self-transcendence is not a move into an impersonal reality of no-self, but a transcendence of the false self characterized by selfish desires to an authentic self characterized by selfless desires. Since the Mirror enthralls the viewer by depicting the aesthetic self enjoying his or her greatest imaginable pleasure, the transformation begins by denying the pursuit of pleasure—sensual, emotional, or intellectual—as the highest aim of one’s desires. Achieving authentic selfhood requires a decisive act to judge one’s self in the aesthetic sphere to be false. Though the Mirror’s purpose is ambiguous, a means that can both cure and wither, if handled properly it is an aid, a propaedeutic lesson for the initiatory act of self-judgment.

## 2. Kierkegaard’s Spheres of Life

Soren Kierkegaard’s aesthetic sphere of life is the lowest of the three existential stages in his account: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Each sphere of life can be chosen voluntarily, but the aesthetic sphere is the default mode of existence. The aesthetic sphere is an entire world, and the dweller in this world adopts an aesthetic posture in life. That posture can be found across a wide spectrum: from uncouth to sophisticated, from Homer Simpson to Charles Bukowski to *The Most Interesting Man in the World*,

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<sup>3</sup> See Klein, “The Mirror of Erised,” and Piipo, “Is Desire Beneficial or Harmful in the Harry Potter Series?”; see also Colin Manlove, “The Literary Value of the *Harry Potter* Books,” in *Hog’s Head Conversations*, ed. Prinzi, pp. 1-21.

from the underclass to the aristocratic moneyed class. The unifying principle of the aesthetic sphere is hedonism. One's chief aim in life, whether unconsciously or consciously, is the pursuit of the pleasures of body or mind. Eventually, one finds that the preferred source of the pleasures becomes unreliable. Perhaps physical pleasures eventually fail to stimulate or to interest the aesthete. This leads to the condition famously described in "Rotation of Crops" in *Either/Or*: boredom.<sup>4</sup> The aesthete then seeks new forms of stimulation or diversion within the aesthetic sphere in order to cure the boredom. But the aesthetic sphere of life is oriented toward the external, pleasures coarse and fine, and these are subject to the caprices of contingency and fate. Glue or opium, Thunderbird or Dom Perignon, Air Jordans or stiletto heels with diamonds on their soles—the power of their gratifications rise and ebb beyond the control of the aesthete. If the hedonist finds herself unsatisfied by the coarser pleasures of the flesh, avoiding dissipation or addiction, the pursuit of pleasure becomes more sophisticated and efforts more byzantine in order to stave off the despair that no more meaningful life is available beyond that of the aesthetic life.

While the aesthetic sphere of life is a world of captivity to dissatisfaction and boredom, Kierkegaard's ethical sphere of life is the world of freedom. To enter this world one must will the extinction of one's old, sick, false self in order to gain the genuine selfhood of responsibility to an ethical code. The "leap" into the ethical sphere requires the commitment to self-perfection, the "I," and the commitment to other people, the "Thou." The false self that one denies is that collage of social roles one inhabits. These roles are imposed by society, and their rules and conventions entail a loss of freedom. It is one's will to moral commitment that unifies these fragmentary roles and moves one from the false self of scattered images we indwell in our various social roles. One loses the false, aesthetic self and gains ethical selfhood. The self takes on a definite form by one's passionate commitment to the ethical code and the practice of self-judgment. The individual attains this higher life by first judging oneself guilty of narcissism in the leap out of the aesthetic sphere and then holding oneself responsible in every future choice.

The ethical sphere of life requires an unrelenting self-scrutiny which can lead to ethical despair. For Kierkegaard, the solution to this despair is the leap into the religious sphere of life. The religious sphere is the world of faith. Kierkegaard describes this sphere through the famous analysis in *Fear and Trembling* of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah.<sup>5</sup> Through the voice of his pseudonymous Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard explores the

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<sup>4</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part I*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 281-300.

<sup>5</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

possibility and implications of transcending the ethical sphere of life. Through Johannes, Kierkegaard finds Abraham incomprehensible: “Abraham I cannot understand.”<sup>6</sup> He cannot comprehend him as a moral exemplar, for he finds Abraham’s willingness to murder his own son at the behest of a divine report to be absurd and repellent. Abraham is incomprehensible because of his certainty. He appears to transcend the religious paradox of divine reports<sup>7</sup> without effort. For example, once Abraham hears and agrees to obey the command to sacrifice his son Isaac, he tells his servants, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you” (Genesis 22:5). Abraham’s act is thus a “double movement”: first, of infinite resignation in accepting the loss of his only son by sacrificing him on an altar by his own hand; second, of faith in virtue of his inexplicable belief that he will nevertheless gain his son. He is able utterly to be committed to killing his son Isaac (only by the intervention of the angel of the Lord does Abraham desist) while simultaneously confident that “we will come back.” The leap of faith is irrational; one renounces rational order, the world, society and its demands, even familial love. One loses one’s very self and status as a moral agent, and gains the status of a “knight of faith.” Kierkegaard describes the existential meaning of the first movement of the act of faith in *Fear and Trembling*:

Infinite resignation is that shirt mentioned in an old legend. The thread is spun with tears, [the cloth] bleached with tears; the shirt is sewn in tears—but then it also gives protection better than iron or steel. The defect in the legend is that a third person can work up this linen. The secret in life is that each person must sew it himself . . . .<sup>8</sup>

We can broaden the application of Kierkegaard’s claim: faith is required in becoming an ethical self, responsible to an ethical code. One must choose voluntarily the sphere of existence in which to dwell; social identities underdetermine selfhood.

Harry’s task is to ascend from the aesthetic sphere of life to the ethical sphere of life. He must struggle against those desires that prevent him from beginning his transformation into a selfless individual. The Mirror of Erised confronts him with his greatest obstacle: his desire to know and be embraced by his parents, his desire to experience the love of his family. The image in the Mirror is a projection of Harry’s slaking the thirst produced by his deepest desire. The Mirror, of its own accord, does not reveal to him that

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 37 and 112.

<sup>7</sup> See Josiah Royce, *The Sources of Religious Insight* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1912), pp. 3-34.

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 45 (footnote omitted).

this desire cannot be satisfied. It not only shows him his greatest obstacle, but in virtue of its power to do so is itself a part of that obstacle. Only by transforming his desires from the aesthetic sphere to the ethical sphere can Harry overcome this obstacle and become responsible for who he is and will become.

### 3. The Magical-Technological Imperative

Harry is ensnared by the powers of and the effects produced by the Mirror of Erised. But like Harry, we too are drawn irresistibly to our own Mirrors of Erised. The technological world is full of such Mirrors. How can we be awakened to this fact and become responsible to seek more than the pleasure bestowed by our Mirror? Let us first consider the claim that magic in the *Harry Potter* saga and technology in our world are equivalent.<sup>9</sup>

The following maxim has been attributed to science fiction writer Larry Niven: “Any sufficiently rigorously defined magic is indistinguishable from technology.” (You may recognize this as an inversion of Arthur C. Clarke’s third “law of prediction.”) If a set of magical techniques or body of magical knowledge is “rigorously defined,” then it is, equivalently, a rational system of knowledge. The magical rules that J. K. Rowling has devised in the *Harry Potter* series are a rational, cause-and-effect system obeying mechanistic laws. Therefore, magic in *Harry Potter* participates in the same logic as modern science and technology.

Technology, according to Jacques Ellul, is the totality, the systematic unity, of all rationalized techniques.<sup>10</sup> A technology is a rational method of efficient and effective action. Technology makes demands on our resources, energy, attention, intellect, and desires. Technological devices don’t exist without a network of social forces and institutions developing, building, and propagating them. What powers does technology bestow? If we attend to the message broadcast by marketers and merchants of the latest schemes, styles, and gadgets, what are the recurrent themes? Technology will satisfy my desires. It will enhance my experiences. It will improve my quality of life. It will relieve my boredom. It will transform my life and society for the better. It is our greatest hope for advancing the cause of human progress. Technology can save us from harm, restlessness, sadness, wastefulness, ruin,

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<sup>9</sup> For further elaboration of this equivalence, see Joel B. Hunter, “Technological Anarchism: The Meaning of Magic in Harry Potter,” in *Harry Potter for Nerds: Essays for Fans, Academics, and Lit Geeks*, ed. Travis Prinzi (Oklahoma City, OK: Unlocking Press, 2011), pp. 105-34. See also Nicholas Sheltroun, “Harry Potter’s World as a Morality Tale of Technology and Media,” in *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*, ed. Heilman, pp. 52-64.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. xxv and 13-21.

and meaninglessness. This makes the Mirror of Erised the ultimate personally customized, instantly gratifying satisfaction machine.

Technology acquires its irresistible power to mold individuals and society when individuals and communities cede their personal autonomy to defer always to the one best means of controlling and coordinating their choices, actions, and environment. Consider a relatively harmless example. I want some spending money for a night on the town. I go to the ATM to withdraw the money. There may be other techniques available for me to accomplish my end. I find the ATM not just a convenient tool for getting cash, but the *rational* method because it is the most efficient and effective one.<sup>11</sup> What makes the ATM the technological technique is not the sophisticated electronic and mechanical construction and automatic operation of the device, but rather, that it is the means of efficient and effective action to accomplish the desired operational aim. Note that before the ATM was available, the technique for withdrawing cash was by making a request for it from another person, a teller at a bank. This, too, is a technology in the sense I am using the term. A technology is the best means available at a given level of development in society to satisfy a desire. Why would I choose any other means? For by definition it will be less efficient or less effective, or both. We can distinguish cultural techniques of a natural scale and developed from natural human abilities from modern technology by examining the social effects of the technique. Does the technique isolate people from each other? Does it promote social polarization or splintering into specialties? Does the acceleration of techniques, their complexity, their power, and so on, enforce social change at a rate that rules out cultural precedents for norms and behavior?<sup>12</sup> Answers in the affirmative to any of these questions indicate that the technique serves principally to impose the demands of “artificial operational objectives” on the individual.<sup>13</sup> The individual is not free or independent of these techniques.

Magic in *Harry Potter* is not only a set of favored or culturally defined techniques, but is technological in this strict sense. Wizards have systematized magic into a compendium of practical and theoretical knowledge. Magical technique is universal in scope and absolute in its applicability. Magical technique is rational when natural techniques of indigenous variety, spontaneous or impulsive creation, or provincial scope are discarded for the specific technique determined institutionally to be the one best means to the desired end. The one best means is sought and applied to

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that I am indirectly criticizing those conceptions of rationality that divorce means from ends; according to such conceptions, the measure of rationality is not at all affected by moral considerations, but only those of power and economy.

<sup>12</sup> Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Perennial, Harper & Row, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Sacacas, “Technique, Perception, and Friendship,” accessed online at: <http://thefrailestthing.com/2011/02/08/technique-perception-and-friendship/>.

every possible field of inquiry and activity: commerce, government, education, communication, entertainment, health, and so on. Wizards and witches who rely on magic to satisfy their needs and urges, for protection, to relieve boredom or anguish, to distract them from the people and activity of the actual world, and comply without resistance with its recommendations, are living in a technologically saturated arrangement of Kierkegaard's aesthetic sphere.

It is the bewitching success of magic in *Harry Potter* and technology in our world, their irresistible expediency, that impels one to the inevitable conclusion that because X *can* be done it *ought* to be done and it *will* be done. This is the logic of the technological imperative taken to its natural conclusion. To refuse magic's and technology's effectiveness and efficiency would be irrational. But as Henry David Thoreau foresaw in machine technology's eschatological promises: "Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end."<sup>14</sup> Whither shall I go for guidance to know what ought to *be* my desire? By what light can we choose or reject what is technically achievable? Without a genuine alternative, a different imperative and hope for a less externally determined destiny, how are we to imagine or conceive improved ends to accompany ever more powerful means?

#### 4. Harry and the Mirror of Erised

Eleven-year-old Harry Potter seeks his true identity. For Christmas he receives an anonymous gift, an Invisibility Cloak that had belonged to his father. During his first use of the cloak, he narrowly escapes being caught sneaking into the Library's Restricted Section ("Use it well," indeed [SS p. 202]). He evades his pursuers and in the nick of time discovers a door standing ajar. He slips into the room and soon discovers a huge mirror with the inscription: "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsI" (SS p. 207), that is, in reverse, "I show not your face but your heart's desire." But Harry is too shocked and then smitten by what the mirror reveals to worry about the riddle. He quickly works out that, for the first time, he's looking at his parents and extended family in the glass, and they appear as if they are there in the room with him.

Rowling has masterfully prepared us to ache as deeply as Harry in this scene. And she wastes no time showing the alluring danger of the Mirror. Harry has important tasks before him that the delights of the Mirror would derail: "Harry couldn't eat. He had seen his parents and would be seeing them again tonight. He had almost forgotten about Flamel. It didn't seem very important anymore. Who cared what the three-headed dog was guarding? What did it matter if Snape stole it, really?" (SS pp. 209-10). Harry shares his

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<sup>14</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2000 [1854]), p. 49.

discovery with Ron Weasley who sees a quite different, but no less appealing, picture of himself in the glass. Later, he and Harry quarrel over rights to occupy themselves with the Mirror. On the third night, Ron shows the moral awareness to worry about the Mirror's addictive power and resolves to deny himself its pleasures. He advises Harry not to go back to the Mirror, warning, "I've just got a bad feeling about it" (*SS* p. 212). But neither the vague worries of his friend nor the risk of being caught breaking school rules will deter Harry: "Harry only had one thought in his head, which was to get back in front of the mirror, and Ron wasn't going to stop him" (*SS* p. 212). With the powers of the Invisibility Cloak protecting him, he easily makes his way back to the room with the Mirror. Rowling writes:

And there were his mother and father smiling at him again, and one of his grandfathers nodding happily. Harry sank down to sit on the floor in front of the mirror. There was nothing to stop him from staying here all night with his family. Nothing at all. (*SS* p. 212)

Nothing—except that Dumbledore is waiting for him this time. Harry, startled into the actual world, offers the excuse, "I—I didn't see you, sir" (*SS* p. 212).

The wise headmaster, always ready to help Harry emerge from his narrow perspective, gently and indirectly reminds him that he has not heeded the advice of the note that accompanied his Invisibility Cloak: "Strange how nearsighted being invisible can make you" (*SS* p. 213). Here, Dumbledore also hints that he aims to help Harry gain sufficient moral vision so that Harry can see things in their true proportion and relation. Dumbledore asks Harry whether he has figured out what the Mirror does. Harry surmises, "It shows us what we want . . . whatever we want" (*SS* p. 213). Dumbledore replies, "Yes and no." According to Dumbledore, the Mirror "shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts." He warns that the Mirror "will give us neither knowledge [n]or truth." Nevertheless, "Men have wasted away before it . . . not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible." He advises Harry to learn this lesson, because "[i]t does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live" (*SS* p. 213-14).

The Mirror of Erised discloses the identity the viewer yearns for. It detects the objects most deeply loved—wishes, fears, inclinations—all that of the viewer's aesthetic life which feels unfulfilled, stunted, discontent, languishing—and translates these into an image representing the desire whose satisfaction (so it is imagined) would relieve one of the burdens of imperfection and the miseries of affliction and incompleteness. This image is then supremely alluring and supremely treacherous.

The Mirror of Erised bestows a great yet dreadful gift: it shows us the reality of our inner life, what we crave as our highest good. If we interpret correctly the image it projects to us, we can acquire a deeper understanding of our true identity, a much more valuable gift than the pleasurable feeling we enjoy while gazing into it. But this true identity of our self may be painful to face. Though Harry desperately aches to know his parents more intimately

than through second-hand reports and an old photograph, the Mirror's bringing the Potter family together again is a fantasy. Harry must endure the pain of their physical absence, if he is to awaken to the task of self-understanding, raising himself from the aesthetic to the ethical life. He must make a commitment to live morally, to decide to be held to an ethical code, and not to dwell on the non-self of dreams. The task is not to get rid of the Mirror, but to transcend it.

We are in a similar predicament to Harry's. We are drawn to those objects that delight us with ourselves. We find it difficult to will the extinction of that pastiche of false selves mediated to the world by our computer. We lose ourselves in Pascalian *divertissement*. We hide our true condition and our captivity from ourselves. In this age we are present to that network of computing devices called the World Wide Web. This is another social role we inhabit. But in the material means of our connection to it, it simultaneously reflects back to us the identity we have transferred to its powers of determination. The aesthetic sphere of life is reduced to those experiences accessible through a screen and a set of speakers. In spite of the diminution, however, and the frequent report that new depths of boredom are reached therein, this mediated aesthetic sphere is declared to be a world of infinite possibilities. Muggle Mirrors of Erised are no less captivating than the magical one discovered by Harry Potter.

As long as our wishes, desires, perception, and judgment are determined by the possibilities which the Mirror extends to us, we live in self-imposed servitude to it. We must first become conscious that our perceptions of the images in the Mirror are not free, and then understand both the properties of the Mirror and the barriers of the aesthetic sphere of life that block us from the freedom of self-defined choices. The Mirror suspends one's future indefinitely. It conceals from the entranced viewer that the future does not exist. The viewer is unconscious of deferring her creation of herself through choices and decisive action. A wise guide can encourage the nascent self-to-be to overcome the dread, the fear of freedom and responsibility to act toward the project of self-creation. Harry has the help of Dumbledore to understand what he must do in order to leap from the aesthetic stage, but the decision to be an authentic, ethical self must be his own.

The technological imperative of the Mirror insists that the viewer become absorbed with the vision of the self he most desires and linger over its implied promise of permanent satisfaction. From the point of view of the ethical person, this immersion in a sensuous experience, the fragmentation of the self in an ontological no-man's land of virtual interiority and exteriority, is narcissistic. The Mirror invites the viewer to valorize the possible world it shows over the actual world in which the Mirror and viewer are situated. To transcend the vision given by the Mirror, the viewer must act from a conviction that the Mirror induces him to defer: to exercise commitment and accept responsibility for the self one is and pursue a higher selfhood. It is a tool that reveals the aesthetic life of the viewer, but in its solipsistic operation, it fails to reveal one's social obligations and communal existence. The Mirror

confronts the viewer with his or her lack of selfhood. How is this alienated person to get one? By choosing. “Choose thyself”—extirpate the old aesthetic self and lose oneself—leap, commit to hold oneself responsible to an ethical code. Harry isn’t fully aware that he is doing this under Dumbledore’s advice and warning about the Mirror, but in the final chapter of *Sorcerer’s Stone*, he proves that he has entered the ethical sphere and begun the project of true selfhood when the Mirror works for him in his showdown with Quirrell-Voldemort. Only if Harry had committed to live in the ethical sphere would the Mirror have delivered the Stone into his possession.

Harry proves that he has learned the lesson of resisting the magical-technological imperative commanded by the Mirror of Erised. His desire is to find the Stone in order to thwart the progress of evil, not to use the Stone for the power it bestows to its owner. “You see,” Dumbledore explains, “only one who wanted to *find* the Stone—find it, but not use it—would be able to get it, otherwise they’d just see themselves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life” (SS p. 300). It is the use of the magical object that is put into question and qualified. Its technological imperative no longer commands Harry’s moral vision. Harry has attained the wisdom offered in his earlier encounter with the Mirror of Erised under Dumbledore’s guidance. His desire is not for control of the power-bestowing magical object, but for the higher ends of defying evil and protecting his friends. But neither magical technique nor technology suggest such ends of their own accord, because their “artificial operational objectives” impose their own self-augmenting and self-justifying demands absolutely opposed to conditions like “find . . . , but not use.” It is up to us to interrogate the technique so as to discover whether it may be used as an instrument of conviviality rather than captivity.

## 5. Conclusion

It is easy for us to be enthralled by what can be done and fail to ask what is worth doing. The technological imperative demands our strict compliance, and the technological system often elicits our “Gloria!” and “Hosanna!” in view of its power and promise. But to pose the question of worthy ends requires that the ethical life is a live option, and to deliberate over and will particular ends and commitments requires freedom—even if only provisional and temporary—from the aesthetic life. Our aesthetic life operates in the technological milieu and its attendant demands on our attention, desires, values, and aims. So if we are to gain the wisdom of young Harry Potter, we must ask: *What is the Mirror of Erised into which we are gazing?*

The Mirror of Erised brings the viewer up against a representation of the self that embodies the decisive barrier that must be overcome to enter the ethical stage of life. To remain paralyzed in front of the Mirror, unwilling to leap beyond that barrier, perhaps obsessed with the self the Mirror presents, is to wither and die existentially. One remains outside of one’s life, a spectator, with no friendship, no love, no passionate commitment to any person,

community, or task. Those who waste away in front of the Mirror are stuck in a twilight zone of actual and possible selves, alienated from genuine ethical selfhood.

Harry chooses the self that he wills to be by renouncing the call and false promise of the Mirror. If he had not, he would have remained a splintered, false self, the sum total of the social roles and identities imposed upon him, both real and fabricated: orphan child of Lily and James Potter, despised nephew of Vernon and Petunia Dursley, the Boy Who Lived, the Quidditch hero, inmate at St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys. Voldemort literally splinters his soul into the Horcruxes, but Harry also exists as a splintered self—his personae are not a unity and he has not yet lived out the individual ethical life he has chosen to become. Unless Harry freely chooses his ethical commitment, thereby attaining an authentic selfhood, he lives existentially the kind of life that Voldemort lives empirically.

The viewer stands before the Mirror of Erised in an external introversion. The Mirror is like Kierkegaard's "false door" behind which one supposes is the true self one wishes to have. But the existential inertness of the enjoyment of the Mirror's vision of oneself occasions wanting in despair to be the self the viewer refuses to be: "The false door of which we spoke then, and which had nothing behind it, is now a real door though kept carefully closed, and behind it the self sits, as it were, keeping watch on itself, preoccupied or filling time with not wanting to be itself."<sup>15</sup> The viewer is enraptured by the desired self and is not willing for the reflection to disappear, because that would negate the desired self. It is an irresolvable dilemma of existential despair: stay in front of the Mirror unable and unwilling to live and bring into the world one's desired self; leave the Mirror and the desired self evaporates. In either case, the dilemma can only be resolved with a death: either one wastes away in front of the Mirror in a living death or one nullifies the attachment to the aesthetic life *in excelsis*. It is the latter death, a phoenix-like transcendence to a new sphere of life, that is the condition for authentic selfhood, for it requires a decisive act to judge one's self in the aesthetic sphere to be false. The Mirror suspends indefinitely the self yet to be. Thus, the self proves to be an act and not an object, when one wills to choose for oneself what and who one will be in relation to one's self and others. This is the existential meaning of Dumbledore's assurance to Harry in the denouement to *Chamber of Secrets*, that "it is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (*CoS* p. 333).

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<sup>15</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hanny (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 94.



## Part II: Integrating Theory and Practice for Living Well

### Descending from King's Cross: Platonic Structure, Aristotelian Content

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#### 1. Introduction

One of the dramatic high points of the *Harry Potter* saga occurs in the “King’s Cross” chapter of *Deathly Hallows*. Thinking at first that he has been killed by an Avada Kedavra curse hurled by his arch enemy, Voldemort, Harry finds himself in an ambiguous state of consciousness and believes that he is engaged in an intense, enlightening conversation with his mentor, the deceased Albus Dumbledore.<sup>1</sup> Harry can choose whether to live and rejoin the Battle of Hogwarts or to “board a train” and go “on,” presumably to the afterlife (or at the very least to death) (*DH* p. 722). Even though the former option requires “heading back to pain and the fear of more loss” and the latter would allow Harry to remain (at least for the time being) where it is “warm and light and peaceful,” he commits to the former option, which I refer to as “Harry’s Choice” (*DH* p. 722).

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<sup>1</sup> There is great debate over the metaphysical status of Harry’s experience in the “King’s Cross” chapter: Is Harry delving into his own psyche to put together the pieces based on information he already has, or is he really conversing with Dumbledore in a kind of limbo, or is something else going on? Settling this debate, however, is not necessary for the thesis advanced in this article. For this debate, see, e.g., John Granger with Gregory Bassham, “Just in Your Head? J. K. Rowling on Separating Reality from Illusion,” in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles*, ed. Gregory Bassham (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), pp. 185-97; Travis Prinzi, *Harry Potter and Imagination: The Way between Two Worlds* (Allentown, PA: Zossima Press, 2009), pp. 35-41; John Granger, *The Deathly Hallows Lectures* (Allentown, PA: Zossima Press, 2008), pp. 172-83; and “A Stoic Looks at *Deathly Hallows*: A Note from Prof. Edmund Kern of Lawrence University,” *Hogwarts Professor*, November 13, 2007, accessed online at: <http://www.hogwartsprofessor.com/a-stoic-looks-at-deathly-hallows-a-note-from-prof-edmund-kern-of-lawrence-university/>.

The parallels between “Harry’s Choice” and the descent of Plato’s Philosopher-King from the realm of the Forms are striking. However, as I argue below, Harry is less a Platonic Philosopher-King than an exemplar of Aristotelian virtue—a *phronimos*, or practically wise moral agent, and a citizen-soldier in the mold of *Nicomachean Ethics* III.8-9 and *Politics* VII.14-15. He sees, I argue, that his best hope of realizing his ultimate values is to live, and to fight and (again) risk dying for a world that’s worth living in.

## 2. Platonic Structure

Some scholars have found Platonic themes in the *Harry Potter* saga,<sup>2</sup> but there has yet to be a full-scale analysis of the whole of Harry’s Hero’s Journey<sup>3</sup> in relation to Plato’s famous Cave Allegory in the *Republic*.<sup>4</sup> A thorough analysis would take me too far afield for the purposes of this article, but a broad sketch should suffice to show that there is textual evidence to support a Platonic reading of sorts. Although I argue in the next section that these parallels are not sufficient to make Harry a Platonic hero, they do provide important insight into Harry’s educational journey under Dumbledore’s mentorship in an environment that is hostile to Harry’s situation and quest.

### a. *The cave*

In order to ascend somewhere, one must first have a point of departure at a place of lower elevation. Plato’s Allegory of the Cave depicts, in allegorical fashion, an ascent from ignorance to the highest sort of knowledge. Its point of departure is an underground cave in which people, who are imprisoned by chains, are made to view shadowy images on a wall manipulated by others behind them, who pass solid objects before a fire (*Rep.* 514a-515b). While the imagery is strange, Socrates assures his interlocutors that the prisoners in the Cave are “like us” in believing, falsely, that the shadows with which we are familiar represent reality (*Rep.* 515a and c).

The “cave” from which Harry ascends in *Deathly Hallows*<sup>5</sup> is the increasingly treacherous Wizarding World, in which the media, controlled by

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., David Lay Williams and Alan J. Kellner, “Dumbledore, Plato, and the Lust for Power,” in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy*, ed. Bassham, pp. 128-40; Michael W. Austin, “Why Harry and Socrates Decide to Die,” in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy*, ed. Bassham, pp. 258-70; and Anne Collins Smith and Owen M. Smith, “Voldemort Tyrannos: Plato’s Tyrant in the *Republic* and the Wizarding World,” in this collection, pp. 125-36.

<sup>3</sup> My discussion of the Hero’s Journey is informed by Joseph Campbell’s analysis in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992); hereafter, *Rep.* All in-text citations are to this translation.

<sup>5</sup> Harry most clearly undergoes a Hero’s Journey in *Sorcerer’s Stone*, *Chamber of*

the Ministry of Magic, spreads lies about him, and Voldemort's Death Eater henchmen are ordered to oppress all non-pureblood wizards and to capture Harry so that Voldemort can kill him. Most of the Wizarding World's inhabitants are too terrified to acknowledge these facts, for doing so would mean acceptance of the unwelcome reality of Voldemort's return and the need to face the fact that they have been deceived and manipulated by the government that they entrusted to protect them. They would rather stay in their fetters in the "cave," even if some are killed as a result of their ostrich-like behavior. The Muggle World is no longer safe for Harry, either. Since he can no longer call home the Dursleys' house in Little Whinging—thereby severing his official connection with his aunt, Petunia (Evans) Dursley—he no longer enjoys the "blood-protection" that his mother, Lily (Evans) Potter, had created for him when she gave up her life to shield him as an infant from Voldemort's killing curse (*DH* pp. 33-35, 99, and 207-10).

***b. The ascent from the cave***

In the *Republic*, Socrates explores what would happen if one of the cave-dwellers were freed from his bonds, turned around, and made to face the proximate cause of the shadows, namely, physical objects and the puppet-masters in charge of creating shadows with them (*Rep.* 515c-e). This would certainly be a disorienting and uncomfortable experience, as the freed prisoner adjusted his eyes and discovered the deception under which he had been living. Furthermore, what "if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough, steep path, and didn't let him go until he had dragged him into the sunlight, wouldn't he be pained and irritated at being treated this way?" (*Rep.* 515e). This second forcible turning away from the shadows by what Socrates calls a "founder" (*Rep.* 519c) would be even more shocking than the first. The difficult ascent requires not only confronting the proximate cause of shadows, but also leaving the cave altogether to face the reality that lies outside of the world in which one grew up. The founder's role here is to drag the initially unsuspecting and unwilling pupil far enough out of the shadows so that his whole body is "turned around from darkness to light" (*Rep.* 518c); at that point, only the pupil can take the next step of "seeing" the Truth.

Since neither the Muggle World nor the Wizarding World offers Harry safety, his "ascent from the cave" ironically requires him to "go underground" by hiding out at Twelve Grimmauld Place and then travelling for months, hidden behind spells and enchantments, with his best friends

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*Secrets*, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, and *Deathly Hallows*, and less so in *Goblet of Fire*, *Order of the Phoenix*, and *Half-Blood Prince* with the deaths of Cedric Diggory, Sirius Black, and Albus Dumbledore, respectively, marring the standard resolution found in the other four. I focus here on analyzing Harry's ascent in *Deathly Hallows* for the obvious reasons that it has the most significant climax and provides the ultimate resolution.

Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley.<sup>6</sup> This ascent also requires him simultaneously to “go within” himself in order to figure out how to fulfill the mission that Dumbledore left for him, and to make the right choices once he has acquired the relevant knowledge. These “outer” and “inner” aspects of the Hero’s Journey are both metaphorical forms of “ascent.”

The “ascent” is paved by Dumbledore’s tutelage of Harry over the course of the previous novels, especially *Order of the Phoenix* and *Half-Blood Prince*, in which he teaches Harry (nearly) everything he knows about Voldemort and Horcruxes.<sup>7</sup> This journey is further enabled by Dumbledore’s leaving in his will four objects to Harry, Hermione, and Ron: to Harry he leaves the first snitch that Harry has ever caught (with the cryptic inscription “I open at the close”) and the Sword of Gryffindor, to Hermione he leaves an original version of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, and to Ron he leaves a deluminator (*DH* pp. 123-35). A crucial part of the ascent concerns each of the trio’s discovering the significance that these puzzling objects have both for gaining individual self-knowledge and for Harry’s larger quest to defeat Voldemort (*DH* pp. 132-35). None of the three asks for these tasks: all three at times question the quest as well as their mentor, and all three often find the ascent excruciatingly onerous and emotionally painful as they confront their own limitations and experience devastating personal losses.

**c. In the realm of the Forms?**

Once the freed prisoner in Plato’s Cave Allegory has properly been educated by the founder—that is, dragged out into the sunlight, and acclimated to his surroundings—his soul is gradually able to “see” the highest level of reality, namely, the Forms of the Good, the Just, and the Fine. Platonic Forms are eternal, unchanging, non-physical essences that comprise the highest level of reality and in some way cause all other things to exist

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<sup>6</sup> In many ways, this seven-book journey is as much about the trio as it is about Harry, but this article focuses almost exclusively on Harry’s particular Hero’s Journey with special focus on choices that he must make alone. The mind/body/spirit triptych represented by Hermione/Ron/Harry can be analyzed as aspects of a single person developing over time to create a whole person. Similarly, it can be analyzed in terms of how friends with different strengths help one another to grow over time. For an analysis of the latter sort, see Jennifer Mogg and Kendra Tully, “Harry Gets by with a Little Help from His Friends: An Aristotelian Reading of Virtue and Friendship in *Harry Potter*,” in this collection, pp. 77-88.

<sup>7</sup> Horcruxes are objects in which Voldemort encases bits of his soul, and they can only be created through Dark Magic by committing murder. As Professor Horace Slughorn explains to the teenaged Tom Riddle (Voldemort’s given name that he rejects upon reaching adulthood), once one encases in an object a bit of one’s soul that has been ripped apart through murder, “even if one’s body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged” (*HBP* p. 497). Voldemort knowingly creates six Horcruxes.

(*Rep.* 516a-519b). Those few who have come to grasp the Forms think that they have “settled while still alive in the Faraway Isles of the Blessed” and feel joy at having experienced such intellectual bliss (*Rep.* 519c).

As noted above, as part of the mentoring process, Dumbledore had instructed Harry in *nearly* everything he knew about Voldemort and Horcruxes. He holds back some crucial information, though, until Harry is ready to receive it at the latest stage of the ascent. This last bit of posthumous mentoring—via Harry’s viewing Professor Severus Snape’s memories in the Pensieve—lets Harry know that there is a part of Voldemort’s soul that, unbeknownst to Voldemort, came apart from Voldemort when he murdered Lily Potter, and became attached to Harry the night that Voldemort first tried to kill Harry (as an infant). Dumbledore explains to Snape that “while that fragment of soul, unmissed by Voldemort, remains attached to and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die,” and that Voldemort must be the one to kill Harry in order to detach it (*DH* p. 686). This is no less than the knowledge that in order to defeat Voldemort once and for all, Harry must allow Voldemort to kill *him*: “Finally, the truth” (*DH* p. 691). Dumbledore has taken Harry as far as it is possible for a mentor to take his pupil. It is no longer possible for Harry squarely to avoid facing his own mortality. Given that Harry is committed to defeating Voldemort, he is committed to the means necessary to achieve that end, namely, facing his own death: “Like rain on a cold window, these thoughts pattered against the hard surface of the incontrovertible truth, which was that he must die. *I must die*. It must end” (*DH* p. 693).

An unarmed Harry therefore walks into the Forbidden Forest to face Voldemort, who seizes the opportunity to fire the Avada Kedavra curse at him yet again, a move which thrusts them both into an ambiguous state of consciousness. The rest of the knowledge that Harry needs to complete his quest can only be attained through his own understanding—once “turned around” fully toward “the light” in “King’s Cross” after allowing Voldemort to try to kill him. Indeed, Harry comes to “see” many truths in this place that is “warm and light and peaceful” (*DH* p. 722), giving it affinities with the realm of the Forms in Plato’s Cave Allegory.

***d. Descent back into the cave***

Once the Platonic founder has compelled those of “the best natures . . . to make the ascent and see the good,” his job is but half finished, for he “mustn’t allow them” to stay in the sunlit realm of the Forms, but instead to “compel them to guard and care for the others” back in the cave (*Rep.* 519c-d and 520a). Contrary to Glaucon’s objection that this would render the Philosopher-Kings “an injustice by making them live a worse life when they could live a better one,” Socrates argues that this compulsion is not unjust, because the purpose of the law in the ideal city is not “to make any one class in the city outstandingly happy,” but to create different kinds of individuals suited to certain tasks—rulers, soldiers, and producers—“not in order to allow them to turn in whatever direction they want, but to make use of them to bind

the city together” (*Rep.* 519d-e and 520a). The ones who have had their metal tested and emerge as the “gold-souled” Philosopher-Kings-to-be are the ones best suited to rule. Since they have seen the Good in the realm of the Forms where they prefer to remain in contemplation, they would rule reluctantly but well in the light of knowledge as ones “who are awake rather than dreaming” (*Rep.* 520c). Hence, “[a] city whose prospective rulers are least eager to rule must of necessity be most free from civil war, whereas a city with the opposite kind of rulers”—those who want power and wealth rather than Truth and the Good—would lead to the city’s ruin (*Rep.* 520d).

When Harry suggests during their King’s Cross conversation that Dumbledore would have been a good Minister of Magic, Dumbledore rejects this suggestion in what is perhaps his most Platonic comment in the saga: “I am not so sure. I had proven, as a very young man, that power was my weakness and my temptation. It is a curious thing, Harry, but perhaps those who are best suited to power are those who have never sought it. . . . like you” (*DH* p. 718). Once Harry has taken in various aspects of the Truth, he sits silently with Dumbledore for some time until the “realization of what would happen next settled gradually over” him and he half-questioningly says, “I’ve got to go back, haven’t I?” (*DH* p. 722). The stage is now set for “Harry’s Choice”: remain here and go “on” to death, or live and continue fighting. After a final exchange with Dumbledore, Harry sighs and “descends” from King’s Cross to rejoin the Battle of Hogwarts, knowing that he can do some good with the knowledge he has gotten at the apex of his journey. Few will fully understand him upon his return to “the cave”—Hermione and Ron will, perhaps—but that is a cost that he will have to incur. And so end the parallels between Harry’s Hero’s Journey and Plato’s Cave Allegory.

### 3. Aristotelian Content

One might think that with all of the striking parallels between Harry’s Hero’s Journey and the educational ascent undertaken by the candidate for Plato’s Philosopher-King, it should be obvious that Harry is a Platonic hero of sorts. However, I argue that though these parallels exist and provide some insight into Harry’s educational journey, they operate primarily at the level of narrative *structure*. When it comes to the *content* of the values that motivate Harry in his Hero’s Journey and, specifically, in “Harry’s Choice,” as well as the kind of person he is and becomes through his journey, Harry is much more of an Aristotelian *phronimos* and brave citizen-soldier than a Platonic Philosopher-King. I establish this below by examining three facts in the light of Aristotelian moral theory: (1) Harry’s distinctive manifestation of the virtue of courage, (2) his development of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) at the end stage of his Hero’s Journey, and (3) the ultimate value he places on embodied living.

#### a. Aristotelian virtue

An explanation of Aristotelian *eudaimonia* (flourishing or happiness) and virtue provides a necessary background for a discussion of Harry’s

courage, practical wisdom, and value structure.<sup>8</sup> Aristotle argues in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that *eudaimonia* is the highest human good, since it is complete, self-sufficient, and most choiceworthy—all of the features needed for something to be considered of ultimate and inherent value (*NE* I.7.1097a15-b24).<sup>9</sup> Simply stating that the human good is *eudaimonia* is much too broad, though, to be of any use. So Aristotle turns to what is known as his “function argument” to provide us with more guidance in the realm of ethics. His approach to discovering the good for any natural being is teleological, that is, he determines the highest purpose or end (*telos*) of any being by studying what beings of that kind strive toward and what helps them flourish as the kind of thing they are. This teleological methodology is used to determine the human good and to develop a virtue ethics that will help humans to achieve this good.

What *eudaimonia* amounts to depends on “the special function of a human being” (*NE* I.7.1098a1) that distinguishes it from other kinds of living beings such as plants and animals. Unlike these other organisms, humans have a rational faculty, so that our function ends up being “activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason” (*NE* I.7.1097b25-1098a8). The next step in the argument moves us from the human function to the human good. What it means for humans to strive for *eudaimonia* by actively using the reasoning part of their soul is explained through the example of a harpist: A harpist’s function is to play the harp, and a good harpist’s function is to play the harp well according to the virtues of harp playing. In like manner, the human function is actively to use the reasoning part of the soul, and a good human being’s function is to do this well, that is, according to the virtues of the part of the soul that involves reason. Hence, “the human good proves to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue” (*NE* I.7.1098a8-17).

In order to fill out this “sketch of the good” (*NE* I.7.1098a22), Aristotle turns to an examination of virtue, which he discusses in relation to the human soul. He thinks that human beings, like all animate beings, have a certain type of soul that defines their nature, and claims that there are three parts of the human soul: (1) a rational part, (2) a nonrational part that responds to reason (the appetitive part), and (3) a nonrational part that does not respond to reason (the vegetative part) (*NE* I.13.1102a29-b26).<sup>10</sup> Since

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<sup>8</sup> Much of the rest of Section 3a is adapted from my “Aristotle’s Moral Expert: The *Phronimos*,” in *Ethics Expertise: History, Contemporary Perspectives, and Applications*, ed. Lisa Rasmussen, Philosophy & Medicine Series (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2005), pp. 39-53, esp. pp. 40-43 and 46-48. My views on certain aspects of Aristotle’s account of *phronesis* have changed since 2005, so there are some departures from my previous exposition.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999); hereafter, *NE*. All in-text citations are to this translation.

<sup>10</sup> At least he *initially* divides the human soul into three parts. As we’ll see below, he

the third part does not respond to reason, and is therefore outside of our control, it cannot exemplify virtue. Since the first part *is* rational, and the second part responds to reason, both exemplify their own unique form of virtue. The first part exemplifies the virtues of thought, or “intellectual virtue,” for example, *episteme*, or scientific knowledge. The second part exemplifies the virtues of character, or “moral virtue,” which arise through the proper relationship between the rational and appetitive parts of the soul—the rational part ruling, and the appetitive part properly responsive to rational rule, as for example, generosity or courage (*NE* I.13.1102a5-1103a10).

Moral virtue, as defined by Aristotle, has four features. The first is that it is a mean, not a mathematical mean or an average, but a virtuous intermediate state that avoids the vicious extremes of excess and deficiency in feelings and actions. For example, courage is a mean between rashness (excessive confidence in the face of a threat) and cowardice (deficient confidence in the face of a threat). It is not easy to hit upon this mean state—“it is hard work to be excellent” (*NE* II.9.1109a25)—because one must, for example, be courageous by standing firm, despite one’s fear, “against the right things and fear[ing] the right things, for the right end, in the right way, at the right time” (*NE* III.7.1115b16-18).

Moral virtue’s second feature is its relativity to an individual. Not to be confused with ethical relativism, the relativity of a mean is an objectively good human action that can only be specified in a context in relation to objective features of the agent and his circumstances. (Ethical relativism maintains that there is no universal objective human good but only subjective moral standards created by different cultures.) For example, courage is a virtue for all humans, but the requirements of courage for the demi-god warrior Hercules would be rashness for the average man on the street, since the average man possesses neither Hercules’s great strength nor his battle experience. What is courageous for the average man may accordingly be somewhat cowardly for Hercules. Thus, what counts as a courageous action will depend on objective features of an individual performing the action in a certain context (*NE* II.6.1106a27-b28).

The third feature of moral virtue is that it involves decision. An individual needs to make a decision, upon sufficient deliberation, as to which action should be performed in a given circumstance. This will help ensure not only that he performs the right action, but also that he does so virtuously. On this conception, it is the combination of right action and healthy state of character that makes one *be* virtuous rather than merely perform a virtuous action: “[A]ctions are called just or temperate when they are the sort that a just or temperate person would do. But the just and temperate person is not the one who [merely] does these actions, but the one who does them in the right way” (*NE* II.4.1105b6-9). Doing “them in the right way” requires three

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later divides it into four parts, when he moves to a more detailed discussion of intellectual virtues.

conditions: “First, [the agent] must know [that he is doing virtuous actions]; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and, third, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state” (*NE* II.4.1105a32-35).

It’s important to highlight here that moral virtue can only be acquired through habituation, which is necessary for creating in us a “firm and unchanging state” of character. Habituation, in turn, takes time, because “a youth . . . lacks experience of the actions in life, [and] since he tends to follow his feelings, his study will be futile and useless” (*NE* I.3.1095a2-5). This lengthy process of habituation helps someone to get the appetitive part of his soul in line with the rational part, so that he consistently performs the action that hits the mean and puts himself into a virtuous state. Crucially, this is “the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well” (*NE* II.6.1106a23-24).

The fourth and most elusive feature of moral virtue is that an individual must use his reason to discover the correct moral principles and how to apply them in various situations. Thus moral virtue requires some modicum of intellectual virtue. Aristotle states in his summary definition of moral virtue that virtuous action “is defined by reference to reason, that is to say, to the reason by reference to which the [*phronimos*] would define it” (*NE* II.7.1107a2-3). One could either rely upon moral advice from a *phronimos* or undertake the difficult task of developing *phronesis* oneself. The latter is ideal (though difficult to attain) in that in doing so one would be a *fully* good or temperate person (i.e., one who knows the good himself, feels the right emotions, and does the right action) (*NE* III.4.1113a32-34).<sup>11</sup> Although not ideal, the former is still worthy and requires some virtue, as we can see in Aristotle’s endorsement of the words of Hesiod: “He who grasps everything is best of all; he is noble also who listens to one who has spoken well; but he who neither grasps it himself nor takes to heart what he hears from another is a useless man” (*NE* I.4.1096b10-12). (It is precisely this intersection of moral virtue and practical wisdom in the temperate person that, I shall argue below, informs “Harry’s Choice.”)

In order to understand what *phronesis* is and how to attain it, Aristotle further subdivides the rational part of the soul into two subparts, thus giving the soul a total of four parts: (a) the scientific part, which studies eternal things and manifests *sophia* (theoretical wisdom), and (b) the rationally calculating part, which studies and deliberates about those things that can be otherwise, and manifests *phronesis* (*NE* VI.1.1139a5-15). The one who possesses *phronesis*, the *phronimos*, is the morally wise person who uses

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<sup>11</sup> Temperance is contrasted with three other conditions: (1) continence (one knows the good, has conflicting appetites, but acts rightly), (2) incontinence (one knows the good, has conflicting appetites, and acts wrongly based on bad appetites), and (3) intemperance (one does not know the good, has bad appetites, and does bad things) (see, e.g., *NE* I.13.1102b14-28 and 1110b25-1111a1).

reason to deliberate about things that can be otherwise. Since human action can be otherwise and there is a truth about what is good for humans, *phronesis* “is a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being” (*NE* VI.5.1140b5-7). Insofar as one contemplates eternal things, one is not engaged in moral reasoning.<sup>12</sup> It is true that the fruits of *sophia* can be of use in moral reasoning, since understanding the essences of things—from human nature to the properties of falling objects—is crucial when planning our actions. We need to know the potentialities and limitations of the relevant objects, so that we are clear about the options open to us prior to deliberating about which one is best. However, our *practical* need for *sophia* is fairly limited. *Phronesis*, called by Aristotle the “eye of the soul” (*NE* VI.12.1144a30), is thus one of the virtues of the rational part of the soul (and so is an intellectual virtue), the one by which one can discover what morally ought to be done.

Two things crucial to developing *phronesis* are experience and the possession of a good moral character (*NE* VI.12.1144a30). The young can memorize moral claims and parrot them back, but since moral knowledge is supposed to be practical, parroting doesn’t indicate the possession of moral knowledge: a person does not have *phronesis* “simply by knowing; he must also act on his knowledge” when appropriate circumstances arise (*NE* VII.10.1152a8-9). In order both to acquire and to act on one’s moral knowledge, one must have sufficient and relevant life experience. Aristotle explains that *phronesis* “is concerned with particulars as well as universals, and particulars become known from experience, but a young person lacks experience, since some length of time is needed to produce it” (*NE* VI.8.1142a13-16); the morally wise “see correctly because experience has given them their eye” (*NE* VI.11.1143b12-14).

The possession of good moral character seems to play a greater role than experience in acquiring *phronesis*. One can gather all sorts of experience, but if one lacks a good character, one can never become a *phronimos*. Aristotle claims that the “[best good] is apparent only to the good person; for vice perverts us and produces false views about the principles of action. Evidently, then, we cannot [have *phronesis*] without being good” (*NE* VI.12.1144a35-b1), and “we cannot be fully good without [*phronesis*]” (*NE* VI.13.1144b32). Though this has the ring of circularity to it, one needs to keep in mind that Aristotle’s account of ethics is a developmental one: moral virtue gradually works with *phronesis* to turn partial virtue into full virtue and *eudaimonia*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Even if it’s the case that one must possess *phronesis* in order to develop *sophia* (so that being a *sophos* entails being a *phronimos*), one can possess *phronesis* without possessing much in the way of *sophia*—which I think is the case with Harry, or so I shall argue.

<sup>13</sup> Since Aristotle regards the *polis* (city) as providing a necessary context for individuals to strive toward *eudaimonia*—“since a human being is a naturally political

Aristotle's subdivision of the rational part of the soul into two parts, each with a different kind of intellectual virtue, allows for a morally ideal person markedly different from the one that emerges from Plato's account of the human soul. According to Plato, the human soul is divided into three parts: rational, spirited, and appetitive (*Rep.* 435c-441b). Plato's morally ideal person is the Philosopher-King, who gains moral knowledge through the rational part of the soul by contemplating the Forms, especially the Form of the Good (*Rep.* 473d-511c). Of the four Platonic virtues—wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice—wisdom (*sophia*) is the preeminent Platonic virtue, both necessary and sufficient for moral knowledge. Thus Plato has no analogue to Aristotle's *phronimos*—the fully virtuous agent who neither rules a city nor spends his life theorizing about a non-natural dimension. (The importance of this contrast will become clear in Section 3c below, where I argue that Harry is more like an Aristotelian *phronimos* than a Platonic Philosopher-King.)

### ***b. Harry's courage***

As Harry is preparing to walk to what he believes to be his death, his mother, whom he conjures forth by the Resurrection Stone, says to him, "You've been so brave" (*DH* p. 699). Time and time again, from Harry's willingness to risk death at the end of *Sorcerer's Stone* in order to keep the Stone from falling into Voldemort's clutches, to his willingness to face death at the end of *Deathly Hallows* in order to thwart Voldemort's tyrannical rule, we see Harry manifest the distinctive Gryffindorian trait of courage. He does not, though, arrive on the scene fully formed as a citizen-soldier. Over the course of the saga, we see his courage develop from what Aristotle would call "natural virtue" (*NE* VI.13.1144b16-17), which sometimes veers into rashness when his "hot head . . . dominate[s his] good heart" (*DH* p. 720), into the fully cultivated virtue of courage.<sup>14</sup> Harry steadily progresses up the moral ladder under the mentorship of Dumbledore, himself a *phronimos*.

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[animal]" (*NE* I.7.1097b11)—the *phronimos* can serve as a moral expert at the level of both politics and an individual life. Hence, while *phronesis* "concerned with the individual himself seems most of all to be counted as" *phronesis*, Aristotle also describes law as "reason that proceeds from a sort of [*phronesis*] and understanding" (*NE* VI.8.1141b30-31 and X.9.1180a22).

<sup>14</sup> For discussion of how Harry moves from natural to full virtue, especially by mastering his impulsiveness through his friendship with Hermione and Ron, see Mogg and Tully, "Harry Gets by with a Little Help from His Friends: An Aristotelian Reading of Virtue and Friendship in *Harry Potter*." For an illuminating discussion of how Aristotle accounts for the way human children, unlike non-human animals, can move from natural virtue to full virtue by means of the integration of *phronesis* with moral virtue, see James G. Lennox, "Aristotle on the Biological Roots of Virtue: The Natural History of Natural Virtue," in *Biology and the Foundations of Ethics*, ed. Jane Maienschein and Michael Ruse (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 10-31.

While Harry possesses many other virtues, it's important to underscore the striking similarities between his courage and the supremely brave soldier Aristotle discusses in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Hence someone is called fully brave if he is intrepid in facing a fine death and the immediate dangers that bring death. And this is above all true of the dangers of war. (*NE* III.6.1115a33-35)

[T]he brave person will find death and wounds painful, and suffer them unwillingly, but he will endure them because that is fine or because failure is shameful. Indeed, the truer it is that he has every virtue and the happier he is, the more pain he will feel at the prospect of death. For this sort of person, more than anyone, finds it worthwhile to be alive, and he knows he is being deprived of the greatest goods, and this is painful. But he is no less brave for all that; presumably, indeed, he is all the braver, because he chooses what is fine in war at the cost of these goods. (*NE* III.10.1117b8-15)

Aristotle singles out warfare as the place where the highest form of courage is to be found. Presumably, this is because war provides the occasion for a soldier to fight for the preservation of that which makes a happy life possible. Aristotle remarks, "while it is satisfactory to acquire and preserve the good even for an individual, it is finer and more divine to acquire and preserve it for a people and for cities" (*NE* I.2.1094b9-11).

Harry's participation as an emerging leader in the war against Voldemort and the Death Eaters reveals him to be much like the brave soldier Aristotle praises. Courage is part of Harry's character from the time we are introduced to him at age eleven. However, Harry's courage makes a significant transformation from natural toward full virtue—and also moves toward brave leadership—in *Order of the Phoenix*. He resists Defense Against the Dark Arts Teacher turned Hogwarts High Inquisitor, Dolores Umbridge, in numerous ways. One vivid example occurs when Harry contradicts Umbridge in the classroom so as to tell the truth about Voldemort's return to full physical form and subsequent murder of Cedric Diggory<sup>15</sup>—an act which earns him a sadistic series of detentions in which he is forced to write "I must not tell lies" for hours on end with a quill that painfully etches the words onto parchment in his own blood, simultaneously cutting the words into the back of his hand. An even more dangerous form of resistance to Umbridge's rule is when Harry agrees, at Hermione's urging, to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts in a practical rather than a merely theoretical fashion to the newly formed Dumbledore's Army (D.A.). The

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<sup>15</sup> At the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament in *Goblet of Fire*.

D.A. is an underground student organization that mimics the adult-only Order of the Phoenix resistance group in preparation for outright warfare with Voldemort and his followers (*OotP* pp. 244-46, 266-72, and 325-99 *passim*).

We then see Harry's courage and leadership vision fortified toward the end of *Half-Blood Prince*, when Dumbledore tells him that though either Harry or Voldemort is "prophecied" to die at the hands of the other, Harry has a choice about whether to enter into such a showdown. When Harry realizes that he in fact can choose,

[h]e thought of his mother, his father, and Sirius. He thought of Cedric Diggory. He thought of all of the terrible deeds he knew Lord Voldemort had done. A flame seemed to leap inside his chest, searing his throat. "I'd want him finished," said Harry quietly, "And I'd want to do it." . . . It was, he thought, the difference between being dragged into the arena to face a battle to the death and walking into the arena with your head held high. . . . [T]here was all the difference in the world. (*HBP* p. 512)

What is especially significant about this moment is that Harry experiences for the first time in a deep way a sense of agency about his life trajectory and the unusual circumstances in which he finds himself. Harry knows that as long as Voldemort lives, he can have no peace; Voldemort intends to pursue and kill him, and is willing to murder Harry's loved ones as a ploy to lure Harry into a position of vulnerability. Though constrained by these facts, Harry realizes that he can choose which option to pursue out of those that remain. Acting out of choice and deliberation is one of Aristotle's requirements for performing truly virtuous actions.

The ante is upped significantly in *Deathly Hallows*, and Harry's displays of bravery likewise increase in magnitude and confidence born of increased understanding. He repeatedly places himself in danger in order to carry out the mission that Dumbledore left him, knowing that he could die at any time but striving mightily to live because, as he firmly tells Mrs. Weasley, "It's got to be me" (*DH* p. 88).<sup>16</sup> As "The Chosen One," Harry must defeat Voldemort; no one else in the world is properly situated to accomplish this task. It's not until Harry finally obtains the truth about why he had been protected and mentored (as explained above in Section 2c), that he must directly face death:

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<sup>16</sup> There are striking verbal parallels between Harry's insistence on facing Voldemort ("I'd want him finished," "And I'd want to do it," "It's got to be me") and the "competition" for virtue of Aristotle's brave soldier when he chooses to perform the fine action over gaining or keeping "contested goods" such as money, honors, and even life: "he awards *himself* what is finest and best of all" and "achiev[es] the fine *for himself*" (*NE* IX.8.1168b30 and 1169a21, emphases mine). I thank Irfan Khawaja for pointing out these parallels.

Harry understood at last that he was not supposed to survive. His job was to walk calmly into Death's welcoming arms. . . . He felt his heart pounding fiercely in his chest. How strange that in his dread of death, it pumped all the harder, valiantly keeping him alive. . . . This cold-blooded walk to his own destruction would require a different kind of bravery. . . . Slowly . . . he sat up, and as he did so he felt more alive and more aware of his own living body than ever before. . . . [His] death would not be a calamity, but another blow against Voldemort. And Dumbledore had known that Harry would not duck out, that he would keep going to the end, even though it was *his* end. . . . It was not, after all, so easy to die. Every second he breathed, the smell of the grass, the cool air on his face, was so precious . . . and Harry thought inexplicably of Ginny, and her blazing look, and the feel of her lips on his—Voldemort had raised his wand. . . . Harry looked back into the red eyes, and wanted it to happen now, quickly, while he could still stand, before he lost control, before he betrayed fear—He saw the mouth move and a flash of green light, and everything was gone. (*DH* pp. 691-704)

Here, we see Harry most strikingly and fully like Aristotle's brave soldier. He feels fear at the right thing—death—which Aristotle describes as “most frightening of all, since it is a boundary, and when someone is dead nothing beyond it seems either good or bad for him any more” (*NE* III.6.1115a26-27). And yet he is willing to endure the walk to his death,<sup>17</sup> to appreciate the beauty of life, and to face Voldemort's killing curse with the memory of his beloved, Ginny Weasley, in his mind and on his lips. He clearly is pained at what he is losing, but confronts death in order to win the war against evil. To the best of his knowledge, he cannot have the things he values by staying alive; given that he has become a sort of Horcrux, Harry's life is itself the impediment to realizing his values in his own life. The only hope for the survival of what he values—his loved ones and the restoration of a more just society—is for Harry to allow Voldemort to destroy the Horcrux that Harry has become, and as a result Harry himself.

When Harry realizes in the “King's Cross” chapter that he is not dead and in fact can make the choice to live rather than die, we see him face another opportunity for bravery. He considers that while “[l]eaving this place would not be nearly as hard as walking into the forest had been,” returning to the Battle of Hogwarts would not be easy, for “he knew that he was heading back to pain and the fear of more loss” (*DH* p. 722). “Harry's Choice,” now that the Horcrux has been blasted from him by Voldemort's killing curse, is *to*

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<sup>17</sup> Albeit accompanied by those conjured with the Resurrection Stone: his parents (Lily and James Potter), his godfather (Sirius Black), and the father of his godson Teddy (Remus Lupin).

*live*—for another chance to finish off Voldemort at last, perhaps to “ensure that fewer souls are maimed, fewer families are torn apart” (*DH* p. 722), perhaps to live long enough to start a family of his own and to have a career fighting for the good. This, too, is an example of Aristotelian courage.

In fact, Harry lives to accomplish all of these things. In *Order of the Phoenix*, we find that Harry considers studying to become an Auror (*OotP* p. 662), which is a rigorously trained member of a small, elite group dedicated to investigating Dark Arts criminal activity and apprehending practitioners of the Dark Arts. Although we do not find out in the “Epilogue” of *Deathly Hallows* whether Harry accomplishes this career goal, J. K. Rowling reveals in a 2007 interview that “[a]s for his occupation, Harry, along with Ron, is working at the Auror Department at the Ministry of Magic. After all these [nineteen] years, Harry is now the department head.”<sup>18</sup>

However, the point is not merely that Harry exemplifies the Aristotelian virtue of courage—Philosopher-Kings fight and face danger, too—but that he exemplifies Aristotle’s conception of human flourishing to a higher degree than he does Plato’s picture of the Philosopher-King. For unlike the Philosopher-King, who is obliged to rule for the good of the city *rather* than himself, Harry shows courage for the good of others *and* for his own benefit.

Some have argued that Harry could have become a Philosopher-King, a possibility implicitly suggested in an article by David Lay Williams and Alan J. Kellner. They claim that “Rowling resurrects Plato’s character-ometer with Harry’s Invisibility Cloak” and that “Harry’s indifference to the lure of power, it turns out, is the very quality that both Plato and Dumbledore celebrate as conducive to wise and just statecraft.”<sup>19</sup> It’s true that in his conversation with Harry at “King’s Cross,” Dumbledore regards Harry as “the worthy possessor of the Hallows” and “the true master of death,” because Harry could be trusted to use the Deathly Hallows—the Invisibility Cloak, the Resurrection Stone, and the Elder Wand—for good rather than evil ends (*DH* p. 720). However, Harry quickly does away with two of the three Deathly Hallows after using each only once for very specific purposes—the Resurrection Stone and the Elder Wand—and keeps only the Invisibility Cloak he inherited from his father and has used well (*DH* pp. 748-49). The suggestion seems to be that Harry, like Dumbledore, knows that he has found the Resurrection Stone to be his personal temptation in order to be reunited with his dead family (*DH* p. 414). Hence, Harry is not wholly indifferent to the lure of power, but has the wisdom for his *own* good to stay away from the

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<sup>18</sup> Jen Brown, “Finished Potter? Rowling Tells What Happens Next,” *msnbc.com*, July 26, 2007, accessed online at: [http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/19959323/ns/today-wild\\_about\\_harry/t/finished-potter-rowling-tells-what-happens-next/](http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/19959323/ns/today-wild_about_harry/t/finished-potter-rowling-tells-what-happens-next/).

<sup>19</sup> Williams and Kellner, “Dumbledore, Plato, and the Lust for Power,” in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy*, ed. Bassham, pp. 138 and 139.

sort of power that might affect his better judgment. And he explicitly rejects the Elder Wand “as more trouble than it’s worth,” noting that he has “had enough trouble for a lifetime” (*DH* p. 749). This motive flatly contradicts Socrates’s defense to Glaucon of the obligations of the Philosopher-King. Harry is not only content to be an Auror/soldier in the fight for the good, but refuses to sacrifice his happiness for a larger political crusade. Once again, in doing so, he capitalizes on his bravery and broomstick-riding skill as a Seeker for his *own* good.

**c. *Developing phronesis***

Although Harry achieves a significant degree of wisdom and acts by means of his own reason at the climax of his Hero’s Journey, it is difficult to maintain that his journey has much if anything to do with apprehending Platonic Forms. If anyone in the series possesses *sophia*—the Aristotelian virtue that comes closest to Platonic contemplation of eternal things—that would be Hermione with her metaphysical understanding of time, soul, Horcruxes, etc. Harry never shows any interest in investigating these topics, and at best relies on Hermione’s *sophia* when occasion demands it and Hermione offers him the fruits of her theoretical studies. The one metaphysical topic in which he does have an interest—death—remains opaque to Harry. Neither leaning dangerously close to the Veil of Death in the Department of Mysteries (*OotP* pp. 773-75) nor asking the ghost Nearly Headless Nick what it is like to be dead (*OotP* pp. 859-62) provides Harry with any clue as to the nature of death. Even the “conversations” that Harry has with his loved ones via the Resurrection Stone and with Dumbledore at King’s Cross are ambiguous experiences that yield only beliefs—not knowledge about death—namely, that dying by Avada Kedavra doesn’t hurt “at all” and that one goes “on” (*DH* pp. 699 and 722).

Harry’s peak acquisition of wisdom, which extends from chapters twenty-four through thirty-six of *Deathly Hallows* and culminates in his experience at “King’s Cross,” yields him practical moral insight of an Aristotelian nature—*phronesis*, not *sophia*. It should not be surprising that Harry reaches this point so late in his Hero’s Journey, for it is only in *Deathly Hallows* that Harry turns seventeen, the Wizarding World’s age of adulthood. We can at last see Harry’s transformation into full virtue and convincing leadership by examining his development of practical wisdom during three key moments of the end stage of his journey: (1) choosing to destroy Horcruxes rather than to acquire all three of the Deathly Hallows, (2) allowing himself to be killed by Voldemort, and (3) returning to the Battle of Hogwarts.

*1. Horcruxes not hallows.* While Harry is “underground” with Ron and Hermione, he realizes that Voldemort is frantically pursuing the Elder Wand, thinking that he needs it to kill Harry at last. This realization sets Harry in pursuit of the Elder Wand before Voldemort can get to it. However, the pursuit pulls Harry away from the task set for him by Dumbledore to find and destroy Horcruxes, and it begins to have deleterious effects on him: “The idea of the Deathly Hallows had taken possession of him . . . : the wand, the

stone, and the Cloak, if he could just possess them all”; “desire for the Elder Wand, the Deathstick, unbeatable, invincible, swallowed him once more”; “the fiercer the longing for the Hallows burned inside him, the less joyful it made him”; “Harry’s belief in and longing for the Hallows consumed him so much that he felt quite isolated from the other two” (*DH* pp. 434-35). Pursuit of the Deathly Hallows renders Harry a slave to the desire to possess them, precipitates misery, and causes him to feel alienated from his best friends who are risking their lives to support his quest to defeat Voldemort.

This misdirected pursuit comes to a tragic and instructive halt when Dobby the elf is murdered by Death Eater Bellatrix Lestrange during his daring rescue of Harry and his friends from Malfoy Manor. As a fitting tribute to Dobby’s noble death, Harry chooses to dig his grave by hand instead of using magic, during which time “understanding blossomed in the darkness. . . . He felt as though he had been slapped awake again” (*DH* p. 479). When confronted with his next major choice—“Horcruxes or Hallows?” (*DH* p. 484), Harry chooses Horcruxes—that is, to resume the mission to seek and destroy them. The understanding Harry reaches while digging Dobby’s grave is a moment of *phronesis*; he realizes that the key to defeating Voldemort lies in destroying the Horcruxes that will keep Voldemort alive so long as they exist. Even though “[t]he enormity of his decision not to race Voldemort to the wand still scared Harry,” who “could not remember ever before, choosing *not* to act” (*DH* p. 502), he knows that it is a fool’s errand to think that possessing the Elder Wand will defeat Voldemort.

One might argue that the singular detail of Harry’s “choosing *not* to act” is strikingly Socratic rather than Aristotelian, especially given that Harry has so often struggled with the distinction between bravery and rashness. In the *Apology*, Socrates claims to pay heed to “a divine sign” whose “voice . . . turns [him] away from something [he is] about to do, but it never encourages [him] to do anything.”<sup>20</sup> And it might seem as though Harry has received a similar “sign.” It is clear from the textual context of *Deathly Hallows*, however, that Harry is not having a mystical revelation of what ought to be done, which is how Socrates understood his divine sign. Instead, Harry empirically pieces together and instantaneously comprehends the issues that resolve his Horcruxes-versus-Hallows quandary.

2. *I must die.* Harry’s next significant moment of practical wisdom occurs during a scene already discussed at some length above in Sections 2c and 3b, namely, at the end of viewing Snape’s memories in “The Prince’s Tale” and the beginning of what he thought was his final walk in “The Forest Again.” This is the realization that because Harry’s scar makes him the final Horcrux, he must let himself be killed by Voldemort. With only sixty-one pages left of a saga that exceeds 4,100 pages, Harry the Seeker is at last on the cusp of full understanding: “[t]he long game has ended, the Snitch had been

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<sup>20</sup> See Plato, *Apology*, in *Plato: Five Dialogues*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1981), 31d.

caught, it was time to leave the air” (*DH* p. 698). This understanding, which “was coming so fast it seemed to have bypassed thought,” is what enables Harry at last to open the snitch by pressing it to his mouth and saying, “I am about to die.” This action reveals to him the Resurrection Stone that Dumbledore had hidden inside it (*DH* p. 698). While Harry is coming to grips with the fact of his mortality, this moment is most crucially about what *choice* to make in light of the relevant knowledge, and (being an object of deliberation) is an example of *phronesis*. Harry conjoins specific moral knowledge gained by means of this intellectual virtue with his moral virtue of courage, which decisively transforms him into an extraordinary character.<sup>21</sup>

3. “*Harry’s choice.*” The third significant moment of practical wisdom that Harry experiences, allowing him to make the next morally right choice, occurs at the end of “King’s Cross.” As remarked above, Harry is confronted with the choice either to “let’s say, board a train” and go “on” to die, or to live. He does not know what might be involved in going “on,” but he does know what it’s like to be alive. “Harry’s Choice” is to live—with all of the risks of loss, pain, grief, and heartache that such a choice involves, but also with all of the good that he can yet achieve in his life. Harry is able at long last to let go of his overwhelming grief and irrational longing to be reunited with the dead, realizing after summoning them with the Resurrection Stone that they will always be with him in spirit while he is alive. This frees him to focus on living and working to achieve his good during whatever time he has remaining. Thus Harry does not descend from a realm of Platonic Forms ready to take the helm of state as a newly minted Philosopher-King, but instead emerges from “King’s Cross” as someone re-committed to his own life, with a road now open for the possibility of happiness. He has become the “true master of death” (*DH* p. 720) by accepting his own mortality, retaining his moral integrity, and letting go of the loss of others.

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<sup>21</sup> Some might argue that one of the attractions of Harry Potter is that he is Everyman, an Ordinary Hero who can rise to the challenge when unusual circumstances require him to do so. Rowling has allowed the audience to feel close to Harry by telling the saga from his perspective and creating well-drawn characters in a highly detailed universe. While the audience can connect with his hard-luck circumstances and confrontation of various obstacles, many of them faced by ordinary teenagers—unpopularity, dealing with unpleasant teachers, angst over dating, etc.—as Dumbledore repeatedly says, Harry is no ordinary person. For example, while explaining at the end of *Order of the Phoenix* why he had not been fully candid with Harry, Dumbledore says, “Once again you acquitted yourself beyond my wildest dreams” and “you had proved you were exceptional” (*OotP* pp. 838 and 839), and in the “King’s Cross” scene, he tells Harry, “I have known for some time now, that you are the better man” (*DH* p. 713). Harry has become the kind of person at the end of his Hero’s Journey who qualifies as a relatively rare Aristotelian *phronimos*. I thank Greg Bassham for pressing this issue.

*d. Valuing embodied living*

The last reason why Harry is best seen as an Aristotelian moral agent has to do with the fact that by the end of the saga he fully embraces embodied human living as his highest value. We do not see him yearn to return to “King’s Cross” or wish that he could be with the dead, like Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedo*.<sup>22</sup> In the “Epilogue,” we see him achieve his values, which is to marry Ginny, have an intact family of his own (with three children: James, Albus Severus, and Lily), be surrounded by his best friends Hermione and Ron (who are now married to each other with families of their own), and happily employed in the job of his choice. It is for the love of these specific people and for the preservation of a society where such relationships and everything Harry values are possible, that he is willing to face death in the final, post-Horcrux showdown with Voldemort. Moral reality exists *here*—in this world—with all of its embodied complexity. We could call what Harry attains *eudaimonia*, and it is a hard-won, durable achievement. It is also a far cry from the austere life of the Philosopher-King and the guardian-soldiers envisioned by Socrates, who live communally, own no property, and share women and children in common (*Rep.* 415a-417b). Harry risks his life to achieve a very un-Platonic sort of life.

One might raise a puzzle here about whether Harry—or any brave citizen-soldier—can be said to value embodied living when he is willing to embrace what he thinks is certain, or near certain, death. In other words, how could one’s death contribute to one’s *eudaimonia*, when *eudaimonia* requires that one be alive to achieve it? “Giving up one’s life for self-benefit” does sound paradoxical, and unless resolved in some way, would undermine the claim that “Harry’s Choice” is ultimately about choosing to live—as an Aristotelian moral agent at that.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> In the *Phaedo*, we see the most extreme version of a *disembodied* ideal articulated by Socrates: “[T]rue philosophers believe . . . as long as we have a body and our soul is fused with such an evil we shall never adequately attain what we desire, which we affirm to be the truth. . . . [I]f we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body . . . . [W]e shall, only then, when we are dead, attain that which we desire”; Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Plato: Five Dialogues*, trans. Grube, 66b-e.

<sup>23</sup> A related challenge comes from those who interpret Harry as engaging in Christian self-sacrifice. It would be foolish to deny that Rowling intended to put Christian symbolism in the series, especially in *Deathly Hallows*, but I think that the text much more clearly shows that Harry’s actual motivation resonates with Aristotelian virtue ethics. He does not give up all that he loves in order to save humanity (and is pointedly not depicted as dying in the name of virtue or for the sins of others). Instead, Harry is willing to die because he knows that it would be impossible to achieve his values while living as a Horcrux. For a persuasive defense of Harry as an Aristotelian “heroic valuer” against the view that he is best understood as the embodiment of Christian self-sacrificial love, see Ari Armstrong, *Values of Harry Potter*, expanded ed. (Denver, CO: Ember Publishing, 2011), chaps. 4 and 5. I did not read Armstrong’s book until right before this article’s publication, but our conclusions are in sympathy and our independently developed arguments overlap, mostly in relation to material I discuss in

Some have tried to solve this puzzle by appealing to a conception of altruistic self-sacrifice for the common good. One form of this argument is pursued by Michael W. Austin, who likens Harry's willingness to die to Socrates's willingness to die, both of which manifest a "commitment to the common good, *rather than* to mere self-interest."<sup>24</sup> He continues:

Voldemort put self above all else, and his existence is not something we envy . . . . Harry, however, in his unselfishness, devotion to his friends, and loyalty to the good of all, lives a rationally desirable and morally good existence. The lesson here is that we live best when we live for a cause greater than ourselves. . . . Those who, like Voldemort, put self above all else end up worse off than those who often put the common good above the self. The best life is the moral life.<sup>25</sup>

While Austin is right to note that Voldemort's manner of living is not to be envied, his argument creates more puzzles than it solves. On the one hand, he praises Harry for a choice that leads to "the best life" *for* Harry, a life that realizes Harry's good, and includes the good of his friends and fellow citizens. On the other hand, he praises Harry for sacrificing his *self*, a description that implies that Harry *relinquishes* the goods connected with that self. It is unclear how Harry can realize the best life *for* himself if he sacrifices the good *of* that self. It is also unclear why devotion to other selves should necessarily require the loss of one's own.

One source of the problem with Austin's argument lies with a false alternative: "put self above all else" or "put the common good above the self." This presupposes that the two are at odds with one another—a conflict that, from an Aristotelian perspective, misconceives the self and its relation to others. Aristotle does not pit self against others; instead, their genuine interests as good "self-lovers" harmonize. His account of the morality of self-love emerges in his discussion of character friendship. He explains that the best person "is of one mind with himself, and desires the same things in his whole soul. He wishes and does [good things] for his own sake . . . . Moreover, he wishes himself to live and to be preserved. And he wishes this for his rational part more than for any other part. For being is a good for the good person" (*NE* IX.4.1166a14-20). The person who loves his life as an integrated, principled, rational being "most of all is a self-lover," as contrasted with the bad "self-lover who is reproached" for only grasping at material

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Sections 3b and 3d. I thank Bill Irwin for pressing this point.

<sup>24</sup> Austin, "Why Harry and Socrates Decide to Die," in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy*, ed. Bassham, p. 266 (italics added).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

goods to “gratify [his] appetites and in general [his] feelings and the nonrational part of the soul” (*NE* IX.8.1169a4 and 1168b20-21). Genuine self-lovers are actually a benefit to the societies in which they live:

And when everyone strains to achieve what is fine and concentrates on the finest actions, everything that is right will be done for the common good, and *each person individually will receive the greatest of goods*, since that is the character of virtue. And so the good person must be a self-lover, since *he will both help himself* and benefit others by doing fine actions. (*NE* IX.8.1169a9-13, italics added)

In this striking discussion of self-love and friendship, Aristotle circles back to the human good as discussed in his function argument: individuals need to cultivate actively the virtues proper to a rational being. That is the kind of life worth living, and it can only be sustained through coordinated social and political structures that make possible and protect what one values. If someone is supremely qualified to protect the social system that makes his own *eudaimonia* possible—as Harry certainly, and even uniquely, is—then *for his own sake* and the sake of all he values, he should fight and even risk death. This is not a case of self-sacrifice.<sup>26</sup> As Ayn Rand explains, “‘sacrifice’ is the surrender of a greater value for the sake of a lesser one.”<sup>27</sup> Fighting evil is a greater value than acquiescing in its victory over one. If Harry didn’t stand up and fight for his highest values when he knew he had the best chance of succeeding, then he would be sacrificing all that makes his life worthwhile, which would be contrary to his genuine self-interest.

A second source of the problem, related to the first, is Austin’s failure to make qualitative distinctions between *kinds* of self. There is a sense in which Harry puts “self above others,” but the result is benign (as when he

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<sup>26</sup> Terence Irwin explains that Aristotle articulates his view of the brave soldier “in noncompetitive terms,” since the “virtuous self-lover” never overreaches to get “contested goods.” This non-competitiveness is likely what leads Irwin to comment further that “[t]he good form of self-love is unselfish, because it rests on a true view of the self”; see Irwin, “Notes,” in *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Irwin, p. 295. Irwin operates here with a common understanding of “unselfish” as giving up material goods, but as he himself admits, virtuous actions *do* serve one’s own interest. Aristotle repeatedly says that by doing courageous actions, the brave soldier awards *himself* and achieves *for himself* what is best, which may not be selfish in the competitive sense, but is perfectly selfish in the higher sense based on what both Aristotle and Irwin describe as “a true view of the self.” Irwin seems to concede this, somewhat inconsistently, when he says that “the virtuous friend never ‘sacrifices himself’, if that implies sacrifice of his own interests to another’s”; see *ibid.*, p. 297. But if a virtuous person *never* sacrifices himself, it is unclear why we must call his actions “unselfish.”

<sup>27</sup> Ayn Rand, “The Ethics of Emergencies,” in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 44.

rejects the Elder Wand, so that he can have a more private life), because Harry embodies the benign virtues of Aristotle's good "self-lover." When Voldemort puts "self above others," by contrast, the result is malign, but that is because Voldemort's self is disordered in just the way Aristotle describes the soul of the bad "self-lover." Such a person does not value his own genuine interests, or rational self; he cannot make common cause with the virtuous and so tramples on them as mere means to gratify his base desires.

Yet another source of the problem with Austin's argument lies with not distinguishing between Harry in his Horcrux and post-Horcrux conditions. The argument above about maintaining one's moral integrity, even by risking death for what one values, pertains to Harry's *post*-Horcrux condition when he makes his choice to live, *not* to go to his death. Harry-as-Horcrux chooses to go to what he thinks is certain death *because* he knows that he is a Horcrux. In such a condition, he cannot live a life proper to a human being; he would be hunted down like an animal by Voldemort and the Death Eaters, who would destroy in the process everything he values. Harry-as-Horcrux is not engaging in self-sacrifice when he decides to walk into the Forbidden Forest, for he is not giving up a higher value for a lower one. The higher value is the tranquility that comes from defending his *human* identity against Voldemort; the lower value is acquiescence in life as a Horcrux. Without the possibility of attaining happiness, Harry-as-Horcrux chooses to give up an increasingly miserable existence for a chance that what he values can exist. In a sense, it is a last stand for what he values while he is still alive to appreciate it, knowing that failure to act is merely acquiescence in self-deception.

#### 4. Conclusion

Platonic structure aside, a strong case can be made that Harry's tale is essentially an Aristotelian one. His heroic journey—and especially "Harry's Choice" at the end of "King's Cross"—illustrate for us what is required for achieving the ultimate value of living well in the world, namely, courage in the face of adversity, practical wisdom, a willingness to fight and die for one's values when necessary, and the fortitude to choose life over death when living isn't easy. Though we realize at the end of the saga that post-Voldemort existence is not perfect, it's no wonder that in a world where Harry—"the boy who lived"—risked it all for the sake of happiness, Rowling's closing words are: "All was well" (*DH* p. 759).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented to the Philosophy Department of King's College, PA, on April 12, 2012, and I would like to thank members of that audience—especially Greg Bassham and Bill Irwin—for their thought-provoking questions. I also deeply appreciate substantial feedback provided by Adrienne Baxter Bell and Irfan Khawaja.

Harry Gets by With a Little Help from His Friends:  
An Aristotelian Reading of Virtue and Friendship in  
*Harry Potter*

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**1. Introduction**

There is little doubt that Harry Potter is a heroic figure, but can he be considered virtuous? From an Aristotelian perspective, the answer to this question is not as obvious as the casual reader might think. While Harry displays a predisposition for virtue in the *Harry Potter* series, acting with an eye toward protecting those he cares for, he often acts on impulse without considering the potential consequences. Ultimately, friendship allows Harry to overcome this character flaw and to realize his promise for a virtuous life. J. K. Rowling, like Aristotle, reminds her readers that friendship is central to the virtue of the individual and the well-being of the city.

The argument developed here begins in Section 2 by providing an account of Aristotle's understanding of practical judgment. For Aristotle, practical judgment brings together and puts to work both the virtues of character and intellectual virtues. The second part of the argument in Section 3 illustrates that, at least initially, Harry does not satisfy the criteria of Aristotelian practical judgment. Despite this, as illustrated in Section 4, Harry does demonstrate a predisposition to virtue. According to Aristotle's philosophy, this suggests that, under the right conditions, Harry has the potential to develop virtue. Section 5 identifies the critical role of complete friendship in the cultivation of virtue. Finally, Section 6 makes the case that Harry, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger are "complete friends" in Aristotle's sense, and that this friendship is central both to the development of their virtue (and in turn their happiness) and the happiness of the city.

## 2. Aristotle's Practical Judgment

Throughout the *Harry Potter* series, many of Harry's actions achieve positive outcomes. That said, he initially fails to meet Aristotle's criteria for virtue. According to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, virtue deals not simply with the end result of actions, but also the means by which one reaches the end result and the reasons for which the actions are taken (1105b6-9).<sup>1</sup> One essential factor in Aristotelian virtue is choice (1105a33). Aristotle would deny that choice comes from impulse, desire, or wishing, since choices are rational decisions that involve neither pleasure nor pain (1111b12-17). In addition, one does not choose just the end, but also the means to reach an end (1111b24-30). For Aristotle, it does not matter merely that the end is achieved, but also *how* it is achieved. Choice involves "reason and thinking things through," so in order to discover how to go about reaching the end, deliberation accompanies choice (1112a17, 1112b15-16). According to Aristotle, the "thing chosen is what is decided out of the deliberation" (1113a5). In life situations, there is always a choice, but the correct choice is sometimes not so apparent. Deliberation, for Aristotle, is set in opposition to impulse: "one ought to be quick to do what has been deliberated, but to deliberate slowly" (1142b1-2 and 4-5). In addition, one does not deliberate about unchangeable or fortuitous aspects of life, but only "about things that are up to us and are matters of action" (1112a32). Aristotle considers correct deliberation to be a virtue, which he labels practical judgment.

For deliberation to qualify as a virtue, however, it must be "skilled deliberation," which requires a "sort of rightness" of reason (1142b8). In order to achieve this skilled deliberation, practical judgment requires knowledge of both universals and particulars (1141b14-16). A person's knowledge of universals comes about from wisdom, which "involves a demonstration of things the sources of which are incapable of being otherwise" (1140a35-36). Understanding of particulars, however, "become[s] known by experience" (1142b16-17). Experience is necessary because it teaches one how to apply knowledge in particular circumstances. Wisdom and experience, then, are the bases of skilled deliberation, which in turn informs virtuous actions (1141b7-8).

Wisdom and experience demonstrate two key components of the Aristotelian soul: virtue of intellect and virtue of character. Thinking pertains to reason and is "a result of teaching," while character is developed as "a consequence of habit" (1103a14-15). Virtue of intellect is the "knowing part," corresponding to wisdom and universals, and virtue of character is the "calculating part," corresponding to experience and particulars. The two go hand in hand because "the work of a human being is accomplished as a result of [intellectual virtue] and of virtue of character, since virtue [of character] makes the end on which one sets one's sights right and practical judgment makes the things related to it right" (1144a7-9). In order for an action to be

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<sup>1</sup> Parenthetical references to Aristotle are from *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2002).

virtuous, one must focus on the end and the means by which one reaches it. Practical judgment reconciles the two parts of the soul to direct action for the good of the city. Overall, “practical judgment is a truth-disclosing active condition involving reason about human goods that governs action” (1140b21-22).

According to Aristotle, “happiness appears to be something complete and self-sufficient, and is, therefore, the end of actions” (1097b20). To achieve true happiness, the individual must constantly “be-at-work” in the effort to attain and maintain virtue. The foundation for the active condition is habituation, which is central to the cultivation of virtue. As he says, “we become just by doing things that are just, temperate by doing things that are temperate, and courageous by doing things that are courageous” (1103b1-3). This virtuous behavior ultimately is encouraged through the “master art” of politics. Politics “lays down the law about what one ought to do and from what one ought to refrain” (1094b4) and, as part of the education of the populace, requires

one to do the deeds of a courageous person, such as not to leave one’s assigned place or run away or throw down one’s arms, and the deeds of a temperate person, such as not to commit adultery or be wildly extravagant, and those of a gentle person, such as not to hit people or slander them, and similarly with the things that are in accord with the other virtues and vices, commanding the one sort and forbidding the other. (1129b20-27)

Aristotle’s formulation of practical judgment effectively merges the idea of happiness for the individual with that of the city. In the end, the good of the individual cannot be separated from that of the city (1142a9-10). Thus, the highest end of action is the good of the city, since the ends of these actions “appear to be greater, at least, and more complete both to achieve and preserve” (1094b8-12).

### **3. Harry and the Problem of Impulsiveness**

When difficult situations arise, instead of deliberating well, Harry tends to act impulsively, thus suggesting that, at least initially, he fails to meet Aristotle’s understanding of the highest virtue: practical judgment. One early example of Harry’s propensity to act on impulse is his acceptance of Draco Malfoy’s challenge to a wizard’s duel in *Sorcerer’s Stone*. Earlier that same day Harry had narrowly escaped expulsion and, as a result, “felt he was pushing his luck, breaking another school rule” (SS p. 155). And in fact it is not Harry, but Ron, who originally accepts the challenge on Harry’s behalf. In spite of his reservations, and Hermione’s warning of the possible consequences both to himself and Gryffindor House (SS p. 155), Harry allows Malfoy to goad him into it. Malfoy is able to do so, in part, by tapping into Harry’s insecurities. Harry is particularly sensitive to the fact that he grew up in the Muggle World and fears that, as a result, he will be the “worst in the

class” (SS p. 100). When Malfoy challenges his knowledge of the Wizarding World by asking, “What’s the matter? Never heard of a wizard’s duel before?” (SS p. 153), he hits Harry at his weakest point, undermining Harry’s ability to act on his deliberation. While contemplating the wisdom of the duel, “Malfoy’s sneering face kept looming up,” propelling Harry to action. He simply cannot pass up his “big chance to beat Malfoy face-to-face” (SS p. 155). Aristotle establishes that virtuous action must be the result of skilled deliberation (1139a31-33). In this example, Harry’s reason suggests that sneaking out of the dorm is not a good idea and, as Hermione had warned, the duel turns out to be a trap. Not only are the kids nearly caught by Argus Filch, the Hogwarts caretaker, they are nearly killed by Fluffy, the three-headed dog. In this instance, it is not that Harry’s reason fails him, but that he experiences an inability to act properly as a result of that reason.

Another example of Harry’s tendency to act on impulse occurs in *Chamber of Secrets*, when Harry decides to take the flying car with Ron to Hogwarts. After they fail to get to the train that transports them to Hogwarts, Harry accepts Ron’s argument that underage wizards are allowed to use magic in emergency situations and that surely this qualifies as an emergency (*CoS* p. 69). While flying, Harry thinks nothing of consequences, only that flying in a car “was surely the only way to travel” (*CoS* p. 71), and envisions “Fred’s and George’s jealous faces when [he and Ron] landed smoothly and spectacularly on the sweeping lawn in front of Hogwarts castle” (*CoS* pp. 71-72). With this action, Harry does not deliberate poorly, but rather fails to deliberate at all. According to Aristotle, “choice is involved with reason and thinking things through” (1112a18-19). When asked by Professor Minerva McGonagall after he arrives at Hogwarts by flying car, “Why didn’t you send us a letter by owl? I believe *you* have an owl,” Harry responds, “I—I didn’t think” (*CoS* p. 80). Harry looks back on the event and realizes, “[n]ow she said it, that seemed the obvious thing to have done” (*CoS* p. 80). Making a decision without regard for deliberation, Harry shows that, for the time being, he is unable to make an Aristotelian choice.

Harry’s lack of practical judgment reaches a climax in *Order of the Phoenix* with his decision to go to the Department of Mysteries to save his godfather, Sirius Black. Throughout the latter half of the book, Harry is instructed by Headmaster Albus Dumbledore to learn Occlumency (*OotP* p. 519), the goal of which is to block Voldemort from his mind. Those he trusts and respects repeatedly urge him to take the lessons seriously. Before fleeing from the Ministry of Magic, Dumbledore urges Harry to “study Occlumency as hard as [he] can,” asking him to “practice it particularly every night before sleeping so that [he] can close [his] mind to bad dreams” (*OotP* p. 622). Later, after a particularly bad fight with Severus Snape, Remus Lupin and Sirius both urge Harry to continue with his lessons, with Lupin saying, “there is nothing so important as you learning Occlumency! . . . Do you understand me? Nothing!” (*OotP* p. 672). The importance of blocking his mind is made clear to Harry in his lessons with Snape. While the mind connection with Voldemort has been useful in the past, the incident with Ron’s father, Arthur

Weasley, makes Voldemort aware of the connection (*OotP* p. 532). There is reason to fear that the process might work in reverse, allowing Voldemort to use it against Harry and the Order (*OotP* p. 533).

Earlier in the novel, Harry had been willing to leave his friends and the only home he had ever known in order to protect his friends and the Order (*OotP* pp. 492-96). However, in spite of the fact that he has been warned that Voldemort might use the connection between them against the Order, Harry seems unwilling to learn Occlumency. In one of their lessons, Snape accuses Harry of not practicing, saying that the connection makes Harry feel important (*OotP* p. 591). While the criticism seems harsh, it is true that Harry fails to practice (*OotP* p. 638) and that he is consumed with curiosity about his dreams (*OotP* p. 577). Ultimately, the fear of the connection is justified. Voldemort plants an image in Harry's mind of Sirius being tortured in the Ministry (*OotP* pp. 726-28). Harry's first impulse is to warn a member of the Order, but he quickly comes to the conclusion that there is no one left at Hogwarts from the Order, since Dumbledore, Rubeus Hagrid, and McGonagall have all been run out of the school by Dolores Umbridge and Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge (*OotP* p. 730). His next impulse is to rescue Sirius himself, completely overlooking the fact that Snape is both a member of the Order and still present at Hogwarts.

Hermione initially pulls Harry back from this impulsive act, arguing that Harry's vision is unlikely and urging him to verify it before he acts (*OotP* pp. 732-34). Harry is able to contact the Blacks' house-elf, Kreacher, through Umbridge's fire, who claims that Sirius is gone and will not return from the Ministry (*OotP* p. 741). While on the surface this might be considered solid evidence, Harry's previous experience with house-elves more generally, and Kreacher specifically, should have made him realize that Kreacher is not a reliable source. Harry's experience with Dobby, who was able to leave the Malfoys' house to warn Harry about the Chamber of Secrets, makes him wary about Kreacher's disappearance over the Christmas holidays (*OotP* p. 504) as well as his improved attitude when he reappears (*OotP* p. 516). Ignoring all that he had learned from lessons and personal experience, Harry takes Kreacher at his word, and with the aid of five classmates, rushes off to the Ministry to save Sirius.

As could be predicted, when he arrives, it turns out to be a trap. As Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy taunt him, Harry realizes his mistake (*OotP* pp. 781-82). By failing to deliberate, he potentially "le[ads] his friends to their deaths for no reason at all" (*OotP* p. 782). Perhaps more damning by Aristotle's understanding of virtue, Harry also puts the city at risk. Harry's presence in the Department of Mysteries makes it possible for Voldemort to acquire the prophecy, the dreaded weapon he has been after the entire novel. In fact, had it not been for the arrival of the Order, Harry would have given the prophecy to Lucius Malfoy on the slight chance that it would spare his friends' lives (*OotP* p. 801). Harry's willingness to hand the prophecy over to save the lives of his friends is in itself problematic, when it comes to Aristotle's definition of practical judgment. Not only is it likely that he and

his friends would be killed once he handed over the prophecy, he also does not yet seem to understand that sometimes sacrifice is necessary for the good of the city, a lesson Sirius tries to impart earlier in the novel, when he tells Harry that “some things are worth dying for” (*OotP* p. 477). Ultimately, unlike in earlier examples, Harry’s inability to deliberate in this circumstance has disastrous consequences. Not only does Harry compromise the safety of the city, his actions culminate in Sirius’s death at the hands of Bellatrix (*OotP* p. 806).

#### 4. Harry’s Predisposition to Virtue

Although Harry does not demonstrate Aristotelian virtue in the early books of the series, this does not necessarily mean that he lacks the potential to develop it. Aristotle claims that some individuals are predisposed to virtue from birth (1144b6-9). Early in the *Harry Potter* series, given his age and recent introduction to the magical world, Harry lacks experience and impulse control, as the young often do (1095a4-6). For Aristotle, in order to obtain full virtue, experience is necessary. He argues that deliberation “has to do with particulars, which become well known by experience” and that “the young are not experienced, since it is length of time that produces experience” (1142a15-18). One can be predisposed to virtue, but without experience one is incapable of good deliberation and, consequently, of choice. In addition, a human being must be at work in order to develop virtue; he or she cannot become virtuous without action (1099a3-9). As stated above in Section 2, repetition of correct action leads one to possess virtue (1103b1-3).

With this in mind, Harry’s actions suggest a natural predisposition to virtue. The first instance when Harry displays this predisposition is in *Sorcerer’s Stone*, when Ron and Harry save Hermione from a troll. Earlier that same day, Ron had made a rude comment about Hermione, which she overhears (*SS* p. 172). Ron and Harry learn from Parvati Patil that Hermione spends the rest of the day crying in the girl’s bathroom, but after an awkward moment, the boys put Hermione out of their minds (*SS* p. 172). After learning about the troll, Harry and Ron pause on their way up to the Gryffindor Common Room and decide to find Hermione (*SS* p. 173). After mistakenly locking Hermione in the bathroom with the troll and hearing her scream, Ron and Harry rush to her rescue: “It was the last thing they wanted to do, but what choice did they have?” (*SS* p. 175). The fact is, they had many other choices. The two could have gone to find a teacher or a prefect. Professor McGonagall rightly asks them, “What on earth were you thinking of?” (*SS* p. 177). They are only first-year students, after all, with very little magical education to prepare them to fight a “full-grown mountain troll” (*SS* p. 178). Harry and Ron lack proper deliberation in this action, but their rash decision does save Hermione’s life, forming a friendship between the three characters that lasts throughout the book series.

Another early example of Harry’s predisposition to virtue can be drawn from Harry’s decision to pursue the Sorcerer’s Stone. Throughout the course of the novel, Harry gathers much information about the Stone’s

powers, origins, and whereabouts. Somewhat by chance, Harry, Ron, and Hermione learn that the Sorcerer's Stone was made by Nicolas Flamel and that it has the power to give immortality to its owner (*SS* pp. 219-20). They learn from Hagrid that the stone is being kept in the school and guarded by the three-headed dog, Fluffy, who, if one "jus' play[s] him a bit o' music" will "go straight off ter sleep" (*SS* pp. 192-93 and 266). While serving detention in the Forbidden Forest, Harry encounters someone whom he learns to be Voldemort, and Firenze, a centaur, guides Harry to the conclusion that Voldemort is after the Sorcerer's Stone (*SS* pp. 258-59). Learning this piece of information gives Harry the greatest motivation for protecting the Stone. Although Harry acquires important information, he fails to use it properly on account of his lack of deliberation. When Harry, Ron, and Hermione learn that Dumbledore has left the school, they first try to consult McGonagall. After Harry's feeble attempt to persuade McGonagall to help him, he settles into a game plan, saying to Ron and Hermione, "Right, here's what we've got to do" (*SS* p. 269). Not once does he stop to think of any alternatives or the danger he would be putting Ron and Hermione in by entering the third-floor corridor. Furthermore, although Harry knows about Fluffy, he is not sure what other enchantments or creatures protect the Stone. Harry pursues the Stone with good intent and information, but his lack of deliberation still renders his action non-virtuous.

A later example of Harry's predisposition to virtue is illustrated through his use, at Hermione's suggestion, of Polyjuice Potion in *Chamber of Secrets*. Harry is motivated by a desire to benefit others. Harry, Ron, and Hermione have cause to suspect Malfoy of wanting to harm muggle-borns (*CoS* p. 139) and reason to believe that the Malfoy family "could easily be Slytherin's descendants" (*CoS* p. 158). In taking the Polyjuice Potion, the trio hopes to get Malfoy to confirm that he is the heir of Slytherin (*CoS* p. 158). Harry and the others hope that, with this information, they can stop Malfoy from hurting others. Unfortunately, Harry, along with Ron and Hermione, fail to deliberate about the bigger picture (a rare example of Hermione's falling short when it comes to deliberation). Although it takes a month to make the potion (*CoS* p. 166), they never think of searching for the location of the Slytherin Common Room before the night they need to go there (*CoS* pp. 217-18), nor do they know the password (*CoS* p. 221). This is particularly problematic given that they are limited to one hour, after which the effects of the potion wear off (*CoS* p. 224). That said, while their deliberation ultimately proves faulty, their goal is to work for the advantage of the city.

Harry similarly illustrates a failure to deliberate, combined with a natural desire to help others, in his decision to enter the Chamber of Secrets. Over the course of the novel, Harry gathers useful information regarding the Chamber, including the location of the entrance as well as the fact that the monster is a basilisk (*CoS* p. 292). Once he and Ron, with the help of Hermione, gather this information, they know that they need to tell a teacher (*CoS* p. 292). However, when they overhear that Gilderoy Lockhart is going into the Chamber, instead of telling McGonagall, they tell Lockhart (*CoS* pp.

295-96). This illustrates a lack of deliberation. If Harry or Ron had thought about it, they would have realized that Lockhart is unreliable. After all, they had witnessed his lack of ability before (*CoS* pp. 102-3 and 163). Moreover, acting on impulse, they end up entering the Chamber with Lockhart in spite of Lockhart's reluctance to go (*CoS* p. 301), his admission that he has not performed any of the spectacular tasks recounted in his books (*CoS* p. 297), Ron's broken wand (*CoS* p. 74), and the fact that Harry and Ron are only in their second year of schooling. Despite his failure to deliberate, Harry enters the Chamber, motivated by "the faintest, slimmest, wildest chance that Ginny might be alive" (*CoS* p. 301), once again suggesting a predisposition to virtue.

The question then remains whether Harry is ever able to develop that predisposition into something more. Aristotle clearly states that a person is not praised or blamed for his predisposition, but his active conditions (1105b29-1106a2). Moreover, a predisposition, no matter how noble, can lead to harm if it does not get proper direction (1144b9). To be virtuous in an Aristotelian sense, Harry needs to gain the wisdom and experience necessary to develop intellectual virtue and be habituated to virtue of character. It will not develop naturally. In order to argue that Harry is truly virtuous, an intervening factor has to enter into the equation. For Harry, in accordance with Aristotle, that intervening factor is friendship.

### **5. Aristotelian Friendship and the Cultivation of Virtue**

The benefit of Harry, Ron, and Hermione's friendship is most clearly demonstrated in *Deathly Hallows*. In this novel, Harry, Ron, and Hermione venture on a treacherous journey, which tests their personal strength as well as the strength of their friendship. According to Aristotle, friendship "is a certain kind of virtue" (1155a1) and, as with all virtues, the people involved must continually work at it. For Aristotle, there are three types of friendship: use, pleasure, and complete. In each there is "a reciprocal loving," but the object of that love changes for each case. For the case of those in a friendship of use or pleasure,

those who love for what is useful have a liking based on what is good for themselves, and those who love for pleasure have a liking based on what is pleasant to themselves, and the other person is loved not for what he is, but insofar as he is useful or pleasant. (1156a15-18)

Someone who engages in a friendship of use does so because he requires a particular service from the other person and is not particular when choosing that person. On the other hand, a person seeking a friendship of pleasure will only desire someone whom he finds attractive or pleasant (1156a15). The friendships of use and pleasure are easily dissolved once one person no longer derives use or pleasure from the other person (1156a20-22). A complete friendship, however, incorporates good will, since such friends "wish for good things for one another in the same way insofar as they are good, and they are good in themselves" (1156b8-10). So a true friend desires good things for

others because of the benefit it yields them, and not for himself. In addition, complete friendships are rare, because they require much development, while friendships of use or pleasure are more common, because they are easily developed, easily broken, and there are many people who can satisfy some use or pleasure (1158a16-18).

Aristotle adds further detail to the development of a complete friendship. He states that “there is an additional need of time and intimate acquaintance” (1156b26), and the best way to acquaint each other is through living together: “for those who live together take pleasure in one another and provide good things for one another” (1157b7-8). It is not enough to occupy the same living space; interaction and experiences are also needed for friendship to blossom. This does not simply mean taking action together, but “one also ought to share in a friend’s awareness that he *is*, and this would come about through living together and sharing conversation and thinking; for this would seem to be what living together means in the case of human beings, not feeding in the same place like fatted cattle” (1170b11-15). Discussion adds to an awareness of self and each other. Also, defining moments of friendship can often come in times of conflict, for when friends stick together and work through the conflict, that is a sign of their commitment to each other. In addition, “the friendship of decent people is decent, and grows along with their association, and they seem to become even better people by putting the friendship to work and by straightening one another out” (1172a10-13). The goal of friendship is improvement of virtue and acquaintance. Friends are able to do this because “[they] are better able to contemplate those around [them] than [them]selves, and [the] actions [of friends] better than [their] own” (1169b34-36). Since friends are able to view each other’s situations from a different angle, they can give each other the best advice on the proper course of action. Friends have the ability to improve each other through living together and assist each other in reaching a broader perspective on life. Harry, Ron, and Hermione demonstrate a complete friendship, which is most clearly illustrated through their use of practical judgment; as a result, their friendship improves their virtue.

## **6. The Complete Friendship of Harry, Ron, and Hermione**

In *Deathly Hallows*, more than any of the other books, Harry, Ron, and Hermione experience what it really means to live together. In the past, the three have lived together in safety and comfort, but now they must suffer together as they attempt to feed themselves and to find and destroy Horcruxes. Ron struggles the most with the change. Ron’s “hunger made him both unreasonable and irascible” and “[w]henever lack of food coincided with Ron’s turn to wear the Horcrux, he became downright unpleasant” (*DH* p. 288). However, hunger is not the only thing upsetting Ron. His frustration with Dumbledore and Harry comes to a boiling point when he yells at Harry: “We thought Dumbledore had told you what to do, we thought you had a real plan!” (*DH* p. 307). When Ron storms out, Harry and Hermione hit a standstill. For Harry, Ron’s empty bed “was like a dead body in the way it

seemed to draw his eyes” (*DH* p. 311), and for Hermione, “Harry knew why she wanted to spin out their time on the riverbank; several times he saw her look up eagerly, and he was sure she had deluded herself into thinking that she heard footsteps through the heavy rain” (*DH* p. 312). Eventually, Harry reaches a point where “[h]opelessness threatened to engulf him” (*DH* p. 313). Emotional distress converges into an inability to strategize. Plans with Ron, such as breaking into the Ministry, although flawed, were nevertheless successful (*DH* pp. 235-67). When Harry and Hermione attempt a trip to Godric’s Hollow, they achieve very little and nearly die (*DH* pp. 322-45). Harry regrets their failed trip, saying, “We shouldn’t have gone to Godric’s Hollow” (*DH* p. 347). Ron returns, however, and restores balance to their relationship. Ron experiences a realization and comes back with a renewed optimism. He explains to Harry upon his homecoming that “[s]ometimes I’ve thought, when I’ve been a bit hacked off, [Dumbledore] was having a laugh or—or he just wanted to make it more difficult. But I don’t think so, not anymore. He knew what he was doing when he gave me the Deluminator, didn’t he?” (*DH* p. 391). Ron’s speech begins to renew Harry’s faith in Dumbledore and he assures Ron that “He must’ve known you’d always want to come back” (*DH* p. 391). Ron appreciates that Dumbledore has a purpose for everything and that he himself has a purpose for Harry and Hermione. Ron demonstrates his commitment to his friends by coming back. The open communication that they all share also helps them to overcome the obstacle of losing faith in their purpose, and this reinforces their friendship.

In the friendship between Harry, Ron, and Hermione, Hermione accepts the role of the planner. She uses her wisdom to deliberate, but action seems to terrify her, as shown in her response to Harry’s natural inclination to action. When the three begin making plans for breaking into the Ministry of Magic, Harry decides, “It’s time to act” (*DH* p. 231). Hermione’s response is anything but encouraging: “Hermione stopped dead, her jaw hanging,” and she replies to Harry, “I don’t know. . . . There are an awful lot of things that could go wrong, so much relies on chance” (*DH* p. 230). She grudgingly agrees to go and the product of their action is successful. They triumphantly retrieve the locket-Horcrux from Umbridge. If practical judgment is useless without action, then Hermione would be completely useless. She tends to be ineffective on her own, because she spends too much time planning and deliberating, and too little time acting. This hesitancy to act changes as she experiences the success that comes from action and, to Harry’s surprise, Hermione eventually suggests action on her own. After their failed journey to Godric’s Hollow, Hermione decides that she “want[s] to go and see Xenophilius Lovegood” (*DH* p. 393). Hermione’s decision is “completely unexpected” and even Harry is reluctant to go (*DH* pp. 393-95). In this case, Hermione has to convince Harry of the importance of action, instead of the other way around (*DH* pp. 394-95). This trip also results in some successes. They learn of the Deathly Hallows, which become extremely important to their journey, and of Luna Lovegood’s capture. By the end of the series,

Harry and Ron help Hermione to learn the value of action, and this adds to her virtue of practical judgment.

Ron, who has typically ignored the rights of house-elves, also improves as a result of his friendship with Harry and Hermione. Like the rest of the Wizarding World, he disregards house-elves' feelings and sees them as servants. When the goblin Griphook discusses the terrible racism occurring in the Wizarding World, Hermione responds, "Did you know that we've wanted elves to be freed for years?" In response to Hermione's question, "Ron fidget[s] uncomfortably on the arm of Hermione's chair" (*DH* p. 489). When Harry, Ron, and Hermione spend time at Twelve Grimmauld Place, Ron slowly becomes accustomed to Kreacher's presence. When Kreacher acts out of kindness toward the three of them, Ron responds, "Bless him . . . and when you think I used to fantasize about cutting off his head and sticking it on the wall" (*DH* p. 236). As his experiences with house-elves change, and nagging by Hermione continues, Ron slowly begins to learn the value of a house-elf's life. Moreover, Harry sets a great example of a beautiful relationship with freed house-elf Dobby, who sacrifices his life to "save Harry Potter and his friends" (*DH* p. 474). After Dobby's death, Harry's grief is touching. Before the final battle at Hogwarts, Ron tells Harry and Hermione, "[W]e should tell them to get out. We don't want any more Dobbies, do we? We can't order them to die for us" (*DH* p. 625). Here, Ron recognizes the unjust state of house-elf affairs and comes to an understanding of the value of these creatures. This can be attributed to Hermione's persistence for house-elf equality, the examples set by his friends, and his experience gained through living with house-elves. As a result of his friendship with Harry and Hermione, there is an improvement in Ron's virtue and reason that ultimately eliminates his racism.

In *Deathly Hallows*, Ron and Hermione help Harry to make the correct choice in one of the toughest decisions of his life. The three have set out on a journey to find and destroy one thing: Horcruxes. Through a string of events, however, the trio also discovers the menacing and powerful history of the Deathly Hallows. For some reason, the Hallows' mysterious power mesmerizes Harry. Soon after their discovery, "Harry's belief in and longing for the Hallows consumed him so much that he felt quite isolated from the other two and their obsession with the Horcruxes" (*DH* p. 435). Hermione yells at Harry when he will not help Ron and her in hunting for the Horcruxes and tells him that their mission is not about conquering death; it is about destroying Horcruxes and, therefore, destroying Voldemort (*DH* pp. 435-36). The turning point in Harry's decision, however, comes after Dobby's death when he must make this pivotal choice: Hallows or Horcruxes? He ultimately chooses Horcruxes, and explains that "Hermione's right. Dumbledore didn't want me to have [the Elder Wand/Hallows]. He didn't want me to take it. He wanted me to get the Horcruxes" (*DH* p. 500). Throughout most of the *Harry Potter* series, Harry is characterized by his impulsive behavior. Harry contemplates his decision, and Rowling describes how "[t]he enormity of his decision not to race Voldemort to the wand still scared Harry. He could not

remember, ever before, choosing *not* to act” (*DH* p. 502). Harry’s decision not to act is a sure sign of his deliberation. The choice shows that he has thought enough about his situation to deem action undesirable and resist acting in order to pursue a greater goal. Hermione leads Harry to make a decision aimed toward “the greater good” (*DH* p. 568). In this instance, Harry learns the value of deliberation versus action, aided in part by his friendship with Hermione.

### 7. Conclusion

Friends are constantly involved in action together, working toward fulfilling each other’s virtues. As complete virtue, practical judgment involves deliberation based on universals and particulars, concerns the good of the city, and has the end result of right action. A friend can possess practical judgment and assist another friend in attaining it by helping him to realize the error of his ways or by setting good examples. When friends share in practical judgment, they begin acting rightly and beautifully. The ultimate characteristic of complete friendship is that it helps each to develop virtue. Since practical judgment directs action, friendship must also include this virtue. Friends wish to cultivate practical judgment in each other in order to develop virtue. By the conclusion of the *Harry Potter* series, Harry, Ron, and Hermione develop an Aristotelian friendship and demonstrate how they each become better by engaging in complete friendship. At the beginning of *Deathly Hallows*, the trio is a complete unit, each bringing something to the table. By the end, however, they share and cultivate in each other something new and add to each individual’s virtue; all three have more of an ability to stand on their own. Between *Sorcerer’s Stone* and *Deathly Hallows*, Harry develops practical judgment through the intervening course of friendship. It probably could not be said that Harry reaches perfect practical judgment by the end of the series, but being-at-work, one can assume that he will continue to develop virtue with the help of his friends.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Mogg would like to extend special thanks to the numerous students (especially her co-author, Kendra Tully—class of 2014) who have helped her to clarify her thoughts regarding the relationship between Aristotle’s understanding of virtue and the way it is demonstrated in the *Harry Potter* series.

# Heroic Hermione: Celebrating the Love of Learning

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## 1. Introduction

The pragmatic turn in philosophy signals renewed interest in the significance of our practical nature. Even as pragmatists remind us of the ways our needs and purposes issue in meaningful action that provides a touchstone for truth and value, they also recognize the limitations of purposive action. Purposes give our acts focus, providing a principle of selection that makes decision and subsequent action possible. The price of selective emphasis, though, is subordination or exclusion of facts or features that lack relevance to our desired goals. To the extent that we do not supplement our perspectives, they remain a constant source of blindness to the needs, interests, and unique contributions of others. Recognizing this point, William James argues that

[w]e are practical beings, each of us with limited functions and duties to perform. Each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties and the significance of the situations that call these forth. But this feeling is in each of us a vital secret, for sympathy with which we vainly look to others. The others are too much absorbed in their own vital secrets to take an interest in ours.<sup>1</sup>

Our vital projects generate meaning and focus but require so much time, energy, attention, and devotion of our abilities that we can scarcely

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<sup>1</sup> William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology, and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 132. The language of "selective emphasis" is from John Dewey's explanation of the purposiveness underlying the experimental method; see John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 1, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), chap. 1, esp. p. 31. Dewey argues that selective emphasis proves only a temporary restriction unless we deem the concepts derived from such to be acontextual and absolute. Philosophers are notorious for just such a move.

acknowledge those of others. Since we cannot escape our practical nature, this blindness is always a potential malady. At a minimum, James urges tolerance of different purposes and perspectives as a remedy.

Pragmatic insight into the advantages and limits of purposive activity offers us a useful lens for exploring the complex intellectual, moral, and social factors that affect key characters in the *Harry Potter* series. For instance, the blindness of such divergent figures as Lord Voldemort and Albus Dumbledore can be traced to the unique purposes that define their acts and their characters. Hermione Granger, the most important female character in the series, possesses her own unique forms of blindness, but, as I will argue, she also has compensatory abilities. Her breadth of knowledge renders her a vital aid to Harry in solving problems and finding a practical course of action, but her comportment toward learning also informs her character and shapes her ideals, most notably her devotion to the cause of justice. Possessing a blend of curiosity, discipline, and self-direction that distinguishes her from the other characters, Hermione's eagerness to learn renders her open to new perspectives and capable of broadening her understanding of diverse people and complex events. As a result, her story demonstrates the liberating capacity that the love of learning has in overcoming the provincial limitations of powerful purposes.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Our Human Blindness

Before examining Hermione's love of learning in greater detail, we will consider how readily James's thesis concerning our human blindness helps us to understand the limits of various characters in the series. An intriguing contrast between Lord Voldemort and Albus Dumbledore arises from their devotion to radically distinct causes. To sharpen this contrast, we need to attend not only to their explicit purposes, but also to their needs and reactions to early traumatic events that helped to shape these goals. Just as we should not forget the context that purposes give our achievements and blindednesses, so too should we not ignore the generative context of our interests and desires. Lord Voldemort's plan to purge the Wizarding World of impure blood, for instance, stems from his hatred of his muggle father. Voldemort's birth is due not to a natural love but to a love potion. When his father realizes the enchanted nature of his relationship, he abandons Voldemort's pregnant mother, who in turn dies shortly after Voldemort's birth. The absence of a mother's love and the hatred of the muggle father who

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<sup>2</sup> For a complementary treatment of Hermione as a unique figure, see Eliza T. Dresang, "Hermione Granger and the Heritage of Gender," in *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter*, ed. Lana A. Whited (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), pp. 211-42. Also relevant is Katrin Berndt, "Hermione Granger, or, A Vindication of the Rights of Girl," in *Heroism in the Harry Potter Series*, ed. Katrin Berndt and Lena Steveker (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2011), pp. 159-76.

abandoned him leave Voldemort consumed with disdain for others. Consequently, he is blind to the power of love and also to the unique gifts of others, especially non-wizards.

Voldemort's prejudices are an obvious ingredient in his evil acts and also the limitations that lead to his demise. His ignorance of a mother's protective love nearly costs him his life when he attempts to kill the infant Harry. Moreover, because he deems his own powers to be vastly superior to those of others, he fails even to consider the unique abilities non-wizards may possess. This proves a serious oversight, for the talents of house-elves Dobby and Kreacher play a vital role in foiling the Dark Lord's agenda. When he needs to test the enchantments protecting the locket-Horcrux, for instance, Voldemort takes Kreacher to a cave, forces him to drink poison from the basin in which the locket is housed, and then leaves him stranded to die. Wizards cannot apparate out of the cave, and in his indifference to "lower" creatures, Voldemort assumes the same is true of house-elves. He is wrong, of course. Kreacher does in fact apparate and escape, later returning to the cave with his master, Regulus Black, to retrieve the locket-Horcrux. As Hermione rightly observes, "Of course, Voldemort would have considered the ways of house-elves far beneath his notice . . . . It would never have occurred to him that they might have magic that he didn't" (*DH* p. 195). Dobby similarly apparates into and out of the Malfoys' dungeon to help Harry and his friends escape, just moments before Voldemort arrives to catch his prey. Voldemort's disdain for others similarly prompts him carelessly to leave the diadem-Horcrux in the Room of Requirement, where Harry eventually finds it. As Harry notes, Voldemort "thought he was the only one" who could get into the Room (*DH* p. 627).

Dumbledore's purposes comparably blind him. On falling in love with the young Gellert Grindelwald, Dumbledore carelessly joins his beloved in a quest for wizard domination of the Muggle World.<sup>3</sup> Though he initially justifies his goal by arguing that it is for the greater good, his youthful quest for power proves too costly to him when it results in a battle with Grindelwald that leaves Dumbledore's sister, Ariana, dead. Unlike Voldemort, whose blindness only seems to grow, Dumbledore learns from his tragedy. Because he cares for others, especially his sister, his acts' negative consequences to others matter and produce a profound effect on him. Dumbledore is able to

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<sup>3</sup> Rowling reveals the romantic connection not in the books themselves, but in a live reading of *Deathly Hallows* at Carnegie Hall; reported at "J. K. Rowling Outs Hogwarts Character," Associated Press, October 20, 2007, accessed online at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20071021081806/http://365gay.com/Newscon07/10/102007potter.htm>. Rowling told her audience that "[f]alling in love can blind us to an extent." Dumbledore's family history with muggles—and so his own goals relative to them—is also complicated by the fact that three of them attack his young sister. His father, Percival, was later sent to Azkaban prison for torturing the three boys.

learn from his experience and abandons his originally reckless pursuit. His later commitment to the welfare of all creatures, whether magical or not, arises in part because of his combined wisdom and benevolence, each of which, we can reasonably infer, was sharpened by this tragic situation.

This brief contrast of Voldemort and Dumbledore underscores the fact that the blinding and hence limiting nature of prejudice toward others who are different is a theme Rowling weaves throughout the series. One might object, however, that only *some* purposes have a blinding effect. Voldemort's and Dumbledore's purposes are inherently selfish, which accounts for the resulting restricted perspective each possesses. If the pragmatist analysis of purposive action is correct, however, the blindness resulting from purposes is due to the selectivity inherent in them. Each purpose provides a focus relative to which some things, whether facts or perspectives, are included and some excluded. If this is true, we should expect to find some form of blindness attending even seemingly good, other-directed purposes. Indeed, we do. A good example is Hermione's crusade to ameliorate the working conditions of house-elves. Once she becomes aware of and committed to overcoming their centuries-old servitude, Hermione forms an organization (at first called S.P.E.W., or the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, but later renamed the House-Elf Liberation Front) whose explicit aim is to secure fair wages and working conditions for the elves. Much to her surprise, the response from wizards and house-elves alike is negative. We will examine the larger trajectory of this story more fully below, but it quickly becomes apparent that Hermione underestimates the resistance of all relevant parties. As George Weasley points out, she has not even observed the elves' working conditions (*GoF* p. 239). Her goal seems so meritorious that it blinds her to the realities behind elf servitude, including the elves' own resistance to change. While it is not impossible for Hermione to step back from her purpose and survey the situation more fully, such a move requires time and a more sophisticated approach.

### **3. The Love of Learning**

Despite her limitations, Hermione possesses a breadth of perspective that is grounded in and fueled by her eager, unfailing commitment to learn. Before exploring Hermione's case more fully, we should reflect on what we mean by "the love of learning." It is not uncommon, especially for teachers, to use the phrase as though its meaning and value were obvious. This use has some justification. One who loves learning prizes learning itself; she thus does not require external motivation in the classroom and will continue learning outside of school. Each of these goods, of course, has considerable value. As with many common ideas, though, offering a detailed account of the love of learning will help us more fully to appreciate its force and efficacy, both in general and in the context of Hermione's story. Discussions of learning date back to Plato's investigation of teaching and learning in the *Meno*, but a natural presentation for our purposes is that of John Dewey. Dewey had an abiding interest in education, producing major works on it

throughout his lengthy career.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, his account accords with the pragmatic perspective we have already employed in interpreting our characters. Inspired by his position, I will provide a sketch of the process of learning and then further characterize the love of learning.<sup>5</sup> As we will see, learning is a cumulative process; at the heart of the love of learning is a continuity that is a natural extension of this process.

How one understands learning is largely a function of how one understands children and their development. The modern empiricist conception, for instance, views each child as a *tabula rasa*, a passive being whose experiences furnish the mind with its contents. On this view, forces external to the child are largely responsible for shaping and impressing the mind. The pragmatist conception is influenced by a Darwinian understanding of humans as energetic and active organisms who develop and grow through

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<sup>4</sup> Key texts include two monographs born out of Dewey's experiment with the Laboratory School in Chicago, *The School and Society* (in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, Vol. 1, ed. JoAnn Boydston [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976], pp. 1-112), and *The Child and the Curriculum* (in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, Vol. 2, ed. JoAnn Boydston [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976], pp. 271-92). Also relevant are *How We Think*, the 1910 first edition (in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, Vol. 6, ed. JoAnn Boydston [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978], pp. 177-356) and the 1933 second revised edition (in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, Vol. 8, ed. JoAnn Boydston [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986], pp. 105-354), *Democracy and Education* (in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, Vol. 9, ed. JoAnn Boydston [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980]), and *Experience and Education* (in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, 1925-1953, Vol. 13, ed. JoAnn Boydston [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988], pp. 1-62). Diverse articles on this topic can also be found throughout his career.

<sup>5</sup> Dewey did not use the phrase "the love of learning," but the idea is present throughout his works. He often speaks of the value of "learning to learn" or of cultivating "an eagerness to learn." Moreover, when identifying growth as the end of education, Dewey contends that "[t]he criterion of the value of school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact"; see Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, Vol. 9, ed. Boydston, p. 58. Similarly, he argues that "the result of the educative process is capacity for further education"; *ibid.*, p. 73.

their transactions with the environment.<sup>6</sup> Children have needs and interests that quickly prompt the development of skills and habits. Their needs indicate not only deficits requiring an influx of food and water, but also energies seeking opportunities for expression and development. As Dewey explains,

[t]he child learns, not because the mind is like a piece of blank paper . . . nor like a wax tablet on which the natural world makes impressions. The people who said those things had evidently never watched babies. Instead of being passive and waiting for things to impress them, children are usually so active, so overflowing with energy of all sorts, that much of the difficulty parents have with them is not to draw out their activities but rather to keep some of them in.<sup>7</sup>

Children possess a natural interest in and curiosity about the world, for it is their home and the natural site of their development. Their transactions with it acquaint them with both the properties of objects and the nature and scope of their own abilities. Objects are interesting insofar as they satisfy needs or secure emerging purposes. Learning thus dominates life from the start.

In the early years, a child learns how to stand, walk, and talk as well as how to see and hear discriminately; she also comes to understand social roles and relations. Play is an effective context in which much of this occurs; information and abilities are not developed via impression alone but via expression through use in action. Roundness is not understood by simply being confronted by round objects, but is learned in the context of playing with objects that bounce or slip from one's grasp when reached for. In using objects or information, a child observes, investigates, and experiments until the properties of things become familiar and their uses meaningful. The process is cumulative in that she uses the fruits of her learning to solve new

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<sup>6</sup> Because "interaction" can suggest a static relation, Dewey later favored the term "transaction" to characterize the relation of humans to their environment. See Henry Miller, "Transaction: Dewey's Last Contribution to the Theory of Learning," *Educational Theory* 13 (1963), pp. 13-28, esp. pp. 13-15, for an apt discussion of this term in educational contexts. Additionally, I use the phrase "the environment" as shorthand for the variety of environmental contexts in which we act. These include those dominated by biological considerations as well as those characterized by cultural and personal norms and habits.

<sup>7</sup> John Dewey, "How the Mind Learns," in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 17, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 214. For a related discussion of early learning, see John Dewey, "What Is Learning?" in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 11, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), pp. 238-42. Dewey surveys and critiques different theories of learning in the early chapters of *Democracy and Education*; see esp. chaps. 5 and 6.

problems, meet needs, and find satisfactions tied to what is of interest to her. What is learned shapes her character by guiding and informing her energies and conduct.

Early learning concerns more direct and physical forms of interaction and so tends to implicate an immediate or proximate environment. But since learning is progressive, knowledge and abilities grow and become more complex so that more indirect imaginative and reflective forms of growth are possible. With them, the environment extends spatially and temporally to include the products and insights of the wider human heritage. Learning increasingly occurs through symbols, each of which conveys information about what is not present but is vital in meeting new needs and realizing more complex purposes. The understanding and manipulation of symbols through reading and writing signifies a dramatic expansion in the scope of the world with which the child can become familiar and interact; new meanings and activities are thereby made possible. Books possess a special value in that they make available experiences that are either impossible (because they require objects or agents long since extinct) or too costly for young learners to undergo themselves. Reading thus transmits with great economy a wealth of insight and advancement. Since mastery and use of symbols requires working beyond the parameters of the present environment, attention and memory play an increasingly important role in learning. Self-control is a natural part of the process, for attention needs to be disciplined so that more than the present environment can be considered. Present interests are not thereby abandoned but temporarily set aside for the sake of finding new means and so of establishing meaningful new connections.

Schooling provides a structured environment in which the human legacy is transmitted from one generation to the next.<sup>8</sup> History, literature, and scientific enterprise enlarge the context for meaningful action. Their transmission from one generation to the next is achieved not through drilling and repetition, but through use and transformation, so that the emerging generation participates in and extends, rather than simply providing a conduit for, the trans-generational heritage. Since learning builds on past information and abilities, its achievement requires making meaningful connections between what is known or valued by the learner and what is new and indeterminate. A child's initial acquisition of information and skills meets needs, cultivates abilities, and realizes interests and purposes; later education that becomes too abstract and divorced from needs, abilities, and interests risks becoming external and disconnected, a chore rather than a meaningful growth process. Successful teachers, then, do not spoon-feed past knowledge to their students. Instead, they structure the learning environment so that students can find opportunities for discovering and using objects in

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<sup>8</sup> Dewey begins *Democracy and Education* (chap. 1) by arguing that education renews life by transmitting past achievements and projects through communicative processes that render them common possessions of different generations.

meaningful ways that extend existing interests and abilities. In this way, our human heritage functions not as a deposit to be replicated but as a fund of meanings useful for variously meeting, enriching, and critiquing current needs and interests.<sup>9</sup> Formal education is best considered, then, as an extension of early learning, notable not for initiating learning but for extending and refining it.

One who loves learning cultivates the curiosity and discipline of early learning and liberally applies them to a broader range of topics and issues. In such a person, the cumulative nature of learning, with each phase building on but transforming its predecessors, faces no necessary limit apart from the fact that finite creatures require rest and rejuvenation. Unfortunately, some people lose their interest in continuous learning, preferring the comforts of a familiar environment and established habits; for them, growth belongs solely or primarily to childhood. Tragically, this attitude often results from school experiences that are dry and mechanical. Other people actively nurture the propensity to learn so that it is an integral part of their character; their endeavor to learn becomes a lifelong occupation. Historical examples of this sort of learner include systematic and revolutionary thinkers such as Aristotle (whose creative and insightful work encompasses nearly every field of study) and Charles Darwin (whose careful and exhaustive reflection on the connections and distinctions of diverse organisms transformed the way we think about life). Peter Abelard provides another example, for his desire to study prompted him to give up a comfortable life of inherited wealth and privilege. Lovers of learning possess, as the term “love” suggests, a vital interest and eagerness in continued learning, even in the face of impediments. Their chief characteristics include an animating curiosity, disciplined attention and memory, and creative self-direction. The interrelation of these features generates the continuity that lies at the heart of the love of learning.

Curiosity fuels the openness and eagerness that define the learner’s comportment toward experience. As noted above, curiosity signifies interest in the world about us, an arena that arouses both wonder and apprehension. Children take great joy in discovering new things, and novelty dominates the environment that gradually comes into focus for them. This novelty is a function of the complexity and diversity of the world; it can ignite interest but sometimes also threatens to overwhelm us. Learning produces skills and insights that help us to organize and thereby simplify the world. Simplifications that are taken as final and exhaustive categories of reality can have a blinding effect, especially when they readily promote our proximate purposes. In such cases, learning may close in on itself so that directive beliefs ossify into dogma. Such a result is not necessary, however, and experience—whether our own or that of our fellows—is diverse and precarious enough constantly to challenge our habits and perspective. The

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<sup>9</sup> Dewey’s analysis of understanding focuses on the significance of linking the familiar with the unfamiliar; see his discussion in *How We Think* (rev. ed. 1933), chap. 9.

love of learning means possessing an attitude of openness and receptivity to the world that is complemented by a readiness to attend to, reflect on, study, relate, and revisit. Dewey captures the spirit of this love when he observes that “[t]he open mind is the mark of those who have (in all their special learning) learned the eagerness to go on learning and the ability to make this desire a reality.”<sup>10</sup> Learning is less likely to be terminal, and curiosity best kept alive, when we view its results as instruments—and not finalities—that offer pathways for connecting previously unknown features with what is known and familiar, thereby generating further understanding. Curiosity, then, signifies a wide-ranging interest in the new or newly enhanced; it represents the continual growth of interest.

Since such growth requires alertness to connections and retention of the results of previous learning, a lover of learning needs to possess strong but flexible habits of attention and memory.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of these habits, interest sparks and fizzles, failing to initiate new, further modes of exploration and discovery. Without an attentive eye, new connections are not sought or seen; without a keen and active memory, even if information is retained, it remains in discrete units such that understanding does not grow. The self-control required for a child initially to observe and experiment with objects also needs to continue to develop into a disciplined comportment toward new perspectives and challenges, if she is to love learning. Patience and self-restraint form significant parts of learning’s ongoing discipline. Additionally, using and acting on ideas plays a vital role in nurturing discipline, since acting reinforces and transforms our habits and so our character.

While all learning involves self-control, a lover of learning possesses within herself sufficient direction to pursue learning throughout her life in diverse contexts. Her self-direction motivates and guides her explorations; as we shall see, it also protects her from impediments to learning. In early childhood, a child’s needs and interests provide the directing force for learning activities. Schooling inevitably introduces the new purposes of

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<sup>10</sup> John Dewey, “Between Two Worlds,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 17, ed. Boydston, p. 463.

<sup>11</sup> Dewey describes such habits as flexible, in distinction from more static routine habits. The former (which Dewey calls ‘intelligent’) are formed in such a manner that they retain their original plasticity and so can be modified and applied in different contexts. Such flexibility is common to talented musicians and athletes. A fine pitcher can adjust the spin on the ball he throws to take advantage of a batter’s weakness, just as the first-class pianist knows how to modify her accompaniment to the needs of a soloist. In each case, flexibility is not an accident but is a byproduct of responsive habits. For a fuller discussion of the distinction between routine and intelligent habits, see Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, chap. 4, and Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, Vol. 14, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), chap. 4, esp. p. 51.

teachers who aim to extend and refine the child's learning. Such purposes should not be external to or at odds with the child's own interests,<sup>12</sup> but they nevertheless enrich and make more complex the learning process. Since she is the source of her desire to learn, possessing her own motive energy, the lover of learning actively seeks to connect (and perhaps revise) her interests to new learning opportunities. Her education does not consist in simply completing assignments or following directions, for she has her own purposes and sees how her resources can be employed in further learning. Thus, her curiosity funds her with rich interests that prompt her to look for new connections, which her discipline enables her to see or generate. She has an interest in learning itself, prizing it for itself as well as for its fruits, and her eagerness to learn is a function of the joy she finds in each stage of learning. For such a person, study and skill acquisition generate revitalizing energy, while new information and insights provide food for future explorations. Because learning is an integral part of her character and not simply a function of her role as a student in a structured learning environment, she is genuinely self-directed. Her learning possesses the regenerative continuity that is the signature of the lover of learning.

#### 4. Hermione's Love of Learning

Hermione demonstrates these characteristics both individually and collectively, as a review of her profile demonstrates. From the beginning of the series, Hermione's relation to books distinguishes her from others. She is a voracious reader, a fact about which she boasts, telling Harry and Ron Weasley, "I've learned all our course books by heart, of course" (SS p. 105), even before the school year has begun. She checks out extra, often voluminous, books for background reading and is repeatedly exasperated that she appears to be the only student who has read *Hogwarts, A History*. Of course, loving to read is not synonymous with loving to learn. Many bookworms can navigate the realm of the written word but not the "real" world; as Ralph Waldo Emerson notes, the bookworm values "books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul."<sup>13</sup> A "bookish" person is typically

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<sup>12</sup> Dewey was sometimes wrongly charged with emphasizing a child-centered pedagogy, when in fact he argues that new purposes and challenges should be tied (but not reduced) to each child's existing abilities and interests. For example, in *Democracy and Education*, he argues that "[t]he problem of instruction is thus that of finding material which will engage a person in specific activities having an aim or purpose of moment or interest to him, and dealing with things not as gymnastic appliances but as conditions for the attainment of ends" (p. 139). Teachers—especially good ones—extend and modify, rather than instill or usurp, the interests of children through the educative process.

<sup>13</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 88.

one who retreats from, rather than has breadth and insight into, the world in which we live, her nose in a book as events pass her by. Her learning thus has clear limits.

Consequently, both how and what one reads matters. For one who loves learning, reading provides a gateway to a seemingly inexhaustible supply of information that may enhance knowledge and understanding. Darwin, for instance, tells in his *Autobiography* of reading and re-reading with great care many books during his youth, typically about the natural world. Reflecting on his teen years, he reports that “[t]he school as a means of education to me was simply a blank.” Indeed, Darwin’s performance in school prompted his father to fear that his son was “rather below the standard in intellect.” Nevertheless, Darwin pursued a lifetime of careful and continuous study. Reading nurtured his development, supplementing his observations of the natural world and expanding his mind, even as schooling failed to do so. He notes, for instance, that “[e]arly in my school days a boy had a copy of the *Wonders of the World*, which I often read, and disputed with other boys about the veracity of some of the statements; and I believe that this book first gave me a wish to travel in remote countries, which was ultimately fulfilled by the voyage of the *Beagle*.”<sup>14</sup> In her own extensive reading, Hermione favors history and non-fiction. Reading is a natural extension of her abiding variegated interest in the world. Recall, for instance, her envy of Ron’s family trip to Egypt in *Prisoner of Azkaban*. In a letter to Harry, Hermione writes, “Did you see that picture of Ron and his family [in *The Daily Prophet*] a week ago? I bet he’s learning loads. I’m really jealous—the ancient Egyptian wizards were fascinating” (*PoA* p. 11). Hermione possesses a living curiosity and avoids the trappings of the bookworm who becomes a parrot of the past, anchored to an armchair. For her, reading provides access to a broader world than that available through her own direct experience.

Hermione has a rich and strong memory and so has extraordinary recall of most of what she reads.<sup>15</sup> She is thus able quickly to connect new information with old. For instance, upon learning of his work on alchemy, she

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, ed. Nora Barlow (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1958), accessed online at: <http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=F1497&viewtype=text&pageseq=1>.

<sup>15</sup> Rowling does not address why this is the case, but a suggestion from Dewey is illuminating. He includes in his syllabi the following advice: “Do not aim to understand by first memorizing, but rather to remember by means of first understanding,” and “Form the habit of thinking while you read, rather than trying to memorize. Take care of your understanding of the subject, and your memory will take care of itself”; see John Dewey, “History of Education Syllabus,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 17, ed. Boydston, pp. 161 and 162. This is a plausible explanation of Hermione’s strong recall.

is able to link the familiar name, Nicolas Flamel, to the Sorcerer's Stone, thereby understanding what Professor Quirinus Quirrell is after. Her mind is alert, so that she attends to and finds meaningful contexts in which to relate what she learns. As a consequence, even in the midst of a crisis, she is able to draw on her knowledge to identify the Devil's Snare plant that has entrapped the trio in their quest to stop Quirrell (*SS* p. 277). Additionally, she remembers that Professor Severus Snape "mentioned" Polyjuice Potions in class, and so she is able to propose a successful means for interrogating Draco Malfoy to see whether he is the Heir of Slytherin (*CoS* p. 159). Finally, Hermione also proves to be more observant of her present environment than others. She alone sees the trapdoor underneath Fluffy, the three-headed dog, and so properly concludes that he is guarding something (*SS* p. 162).

Hermione successfully uses her wide knowledge-base, derived largely from reading, in conjunction with her sharpened memory and attention so that she is an excellent investigator and problem-solver. For instance, she is able to discover that journalist Rita Skeeter, who seems to be able to eavesdrop on numerous private conversations, is an Animagus capable of transforming into a beetle. Knowing that electronic bugging would not work at Hogwarts (because she has read *Hogwarts, A History*), Hermione takes Harry's suggestion that Rita is using a bug to spy on conversations as a prompt to research possible magical means of bugging (*GoF* pp. 547-48, 613-14, and 727-28). Importantly, she employs her intellectual skills in a critical manner. Although she sets great store by the written word, she develops appropriate skepticism to question its authority. Hence, even though the official registry of Animagi does not include Rita, Hermione draws the reasonable conclusion that Rita, whose sly character she knows, is a *non*-registered Animagus.

Hermione's capacity for self-direction also plays a significant role in her commitment to continue learning. Before enrolling in Hogwarts, she has already learned to perform some spells, a fact that gives her a leg up on her colleagues in Charms class. Additionally, in her third year she maximizes the opportunity to take all five of the possible elective classes (though only two are required) by securing the use of a Time Turner. And, of course, Hermione pursues elf liberation not only despite the lack of any external support, but in the face of considerable ridicule and resistance. She has the dedication needed to cultivate her own projects regardless of the fact that doing so renders her an outsider, even in her own circle. Her attitude toward learning is all the more distinctive when compared to that of her friends. Ron and Harry study when doing so is required. They research problems only when there is a

pressing need, and this marks a limit to their learning.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, Hermione's own interests prompt her to make regular visits to the library. As a result, she has a greater reservoir of information on which to draw. It is Hermione who usually knows and remembers details from her studies, in and out of class, thereby providing the links needed to advance the trio's plans and interpretations of events.

It could be argued, however, that Hermione does not love learning for itself, but rather because of the power it provides her.<sup>17</sup> An outsider who is insecure in many ways, one could contend that knowing more than her classmates enables her to distinguish herself and gives her power over others. Snape interprets her behavior in this way, frequently dismissing her as a show-off and a know-it-all. Even if power motivates her learning, Hermione nevertheless amply demonstrates joy and fascination in learning itself, as *Chamber of Secrets* and *Prisoner of Azkaban* in particular show. In *Chamber of Secrets*, she responds enthusiastically at the prospect of attending a deathday party, saying "I bet there aren't many living people who can say they've been to one of those—it'll be fascinating!" (*CoS* p. 130). In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, as we have already noted, Hermione expresses jealousy that Ron has the opportunity (one he probably ignored) to learn first-hand about Egyptians. Moreover, Hermione actively seeks out new perspectives. Though muggle-born, for instance, she enrolls in Muggle Studies. When Ron suggests that she is wasting her time, she responds, "But it'll be fascinating to study them from the wizarding point of view" (*PoA* p. 57). As she absorbs herself in reading and her studies, Hermione prizes learning in itself.

### 5. Lessons on the Love of Learning

Hermione thus possesses numerous traits—curiosity, a reservoir of knowledge enhanced by attention and readily accessed via her quick memory, as well as the self-directed pursuit of learning—that qualify her as a lover of learning. Considering her story both clarifies her distinctive character and

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<sup>16</sup> Harry's interest in learning increases dramatically in the final book. As he connects the diverse pieces of the puzzle to figure out how to defeat Voldemort, he is animated and passionate. Even here, however, Harry's learning tends to focus on immediate problems; moreover, he pursues learning largely on his own. By contrast, Hermione shares her knowledge and develops plans of action collaboratively. Harry falls into the more traditional hero mode near the end of the series, discovering truths for himself and making decisions without much input from his friends. It is thus no surprise that Hermione becomes marginalized in the last part of the story, since her way of learning and sharing knowledge defies the conventions of the traditional hero's quest. The end of the series would have been quite unique and transformative had Harry collaborated more fully with his friends.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Janet Brennan Croft, "The Education of a Witch: Tiffany Aching, Hermione Granger, and Gendered Magic in Discworld and Potterworld," *Mythlore* 27, nos. 3/4 (2009), pp. 129-42.

also provides additional insights into the complex dynamics of learning. The first is that acting, especially in a social context, increases the value of learning. Two social contexts are especially relevant to Hermione's learning. The first is Hogwarts, though the school bears a complex relation to her development. On the one hand, it is largely a vocational school that offers students an opportunity to act on what they learn. Hermione has already practiced spells and learned much on her own, but classroom activities offer her new opportunities to apply and extend them. On the other hand, Hogwarts offers Hermione little direct nurturing. Some teachers, such as Professor Cuthbert Binns, are downright dreadful, lecturing in a droning manner that renders the material for most students as dead as he is. Others are outright incompetent, such as Gilderoy Lockhart, or hostile, like Snape and Dolores Umbridge. Significantly, Hermione never gets the one-on-one attention Harry receives from Remus Lupin (in learning to generate a Patronus), Snape (in developing the skill of Occlumency), and finally Dumbledore (in understanding Voldemort's history better to discover Horcruxes).<sup>18</sup> Neville Longbottom and Harry, but not Hermione, get some directive attention from Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody (though really Barty Crouch, Jr.) as well. To a certain extent, this state of affairs is less detrimental than it might otherwise be, since Hermione comes to Hogwarts already loving learning. She does not appear to need one-on-one training, for she has the resources, most notably her own self-direction, to go on learning, despite the impediment of bad teachers. Hermione does not complain about her teachers (with the exception of Umbridge, as noted below), but attentively gleans what she can from classes so that it may be retrieved later when it proves meaningful or useful. The challenges of the school environment thus do not appear to weaken her eagerness and capacity to learn.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In one notable exception, Professor Minerva McGonagall recognizes Hermione's excellence as a student, using that as the basis for securing for her the Time Turner that enables her to take an overload of classes.

<sup>19</sup> Darwin's story suggests a related message. Though he would later go on to study the natural world with great discipline and insight, his skills and interests do not appear to have been promoted by his formal schooling. He reports that as a child he had a penchant for collecting things and was, as we have noted, an active reader. Furthermore, the following reflection suggests that he was animated by a love of learning: "Looking back as well as I can at my character during my school life, the only qualities which at this period promised well for the future, were, that I had strong and diversified tastes, much zeal for whatever interested me, and a keen pleasure in understanding any complex subject or thing"; see Darwin, *Autobiography*. A reasonable conclusion is that his natural curiosity was neither extended nor, thankfully, extinguished by his schooling. His family environment may have proven more supportive and so more vital to his development. Once cultivated, the self-direction of lovers of learning protects them from the deadening effects of the institution. Of course, that schools threaten to squelch the enthusiasm of those who have not yet acquired a thirst for continued learning is a great tragedy.

Hermione's more intimate interaction with Ron and Harry provides the other significant context relevant to her love of learning. Acting with friends increases the scope of needs and interests in a manner that prompts further growth in learning. Hermione's knowledge has clear value in that it helps Harry to face numerous challenges throughout the series, from figuring out who Flamel is to defeating Voldemort by destroying Horcruxes rather than pursuing Hallows. Each puzzle she is able to help solve, largely because of her breadth of knowledge and her ability to apply it to novel situations, reinforces the value that learning has for her.

Hermione grows in self-confidence as a consequence, so much so that she is able critically to challenge the institution of education. In the early books, she frequently reminds Ron and Harry of school rules and expresses the fear of being expelled. When Professor Umbridge threatens to drain their education of any value, however, Hermione openly rebels. Umbridge teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts by having students read from their texts, without ever practicing or using any defensive spells. Hermione challenges the professor in class and, realizing the need to practice spells, prompts the formation of Dumbledore's Army. Contending that they lack a "proper" teacher and that "we've gone past the stage where we can just learn things out of books" (*OotP* p. 325), Hermione proposes that the students take matters into their own hands, "learning how to defend ourselves properly, not just theory but the real spells" (*OotP* p. 339). She prizes discipline not for its own sake, but for its capacity to promote truly desirable goods like a "proper" education. Her story suggests that the love of learning is itself a resource in motivating and directing her in the face of threats to further growth and education.

Hermione's development also shows the need and value of integrating the theoretical and the practical. Theory alone is insufficient—"not just theory but the real spells"—which she realizes as a consequence of Umbridge's anemic conception of learning. By acting on her beliefs in the context of friends, Hermione demonstrates that learning can be prized both in itself, for the joy and knowledge it produces, and also for the means it makes available. She thereby challenges those, like Umbridge, who would separate and unduly prioritize the theoretical over the practical. Dewey offers an extensive treatment of this separation in *The Quest for Certainty*, showing how social divisions and limited methods of control have reinforced a separation of knowing and doing.<sup>20</sup> Historically, *doing* implicated the changing material world over which humans in ancient times had little control; it promised temporary security at best and produced merely transitory goods. *Knowing*, by contrast, was viewed as the act of a mind capable of accessing a realm of stable and eternal truths. Given the divine status of its

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<sup>20</sup> See in particular, Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 4, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), chaps. 1 and 2.

object, theory and the life of the mind ranked much higher than practice; that the former was a privilege that only those freed from life's exigencies could pursue only sharpened the separation. Dewey argues that the scientific revolution placed in human hands greater means of control of the world about us, thereby undercutting the grounds for this separation. Nevertheless, it still persists, as in the distinction academics sometimes draw between the humanities and vocational studies. Hogwarts is in many ways a progressive institution insofar as it offers traditional humanities subjects, most notably History, alongside plenty of courses whose subject matter can only be learned through the interweaving of theory and practice, of book learning and application.<sup>21</sup> Hermione is distinctive in her capacity to recognize that learning is not only useful but also enjoyable. The theoretical is valuable to her as an end in itself but also as a means; it is both satisfying and useful in meeting further ends. As a result, then, Hermione integrates theory and practice as well as means and ends.<sup>22</sup>

A related lesson we can glean from Hermione's story concerns the way in which her learning produces intellectual virtues that supplement and are interwoven with the development of her moral virtues. Hermione's commitment to justice for house-elves is rooted in a variety of features. The first is her empathy, initially apparent when she reaches out when Neville is repeatedly embarrassed by Snape in Potions class, and then when Hermione recognizes the terror to which Winky, a house-elf, is driven in the name of serving her master. Unlike Ron, Hermione is both aware of and concerned that Winky is treated as though she has no feelings. Her distinctive response comes as no surprise, because she is not only generally very attentive but also, like the elves, an outsider. As if to heighten our awareness of this, Rowling offers us little knowledge of Hermione's family, a fact that contrasts sharply with the portrait she paints of Harry and Ron.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Hermione is female and muggle-born. Her status as a devoted student marginalizes her even more. Ron repeatedly ridicules her for reading, studying, and

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<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, the fact that Professor Binns teaches history with dreadfully dull lectures, being oblivious to the needs of his students, demonstrates a residue of the theory/practice split.

<sup>22</sup> Dewey undercuts the separation of means and ends by situating both in what he calls the means-end continuum. The continuity of means and ends is due to the fact that means are always means *for* ends. Ends themselves function as means in providing the focus or aim relative to which the means are chosen. Additionally, actualized ends serve as means in further processes. For more on the means-end continuum, see John Dewey, "Theory of Valuation," in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 13, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 189-251, esp. pp. 226-36.

<sup>23</sup> Hermione's parents do appear early in *Chamber of Secrets*, but we learn nothing significant about them.

researching, only acknowledging the value of her knowledge which has helped him and Harry rather late in the series.<sup>24</sup> Not even Hogwarts teachers show much appreciation for Hermione's investment in studying. Though Lupin praises her cleverness, Snape more regularly dismisses her as a know-it-all. Her empathy and personal experience as an outsider—the latter due in part to her devotion to learning—fuel her acknowledgement and commitment to the amelioration of elf servitude.

Hermione's eagerness to learn proves additionally relevant in that her passion for the cause is intensified and guided by her knowledge of the past. Once Hermione becomes aware of how poorly house-elves are treated, she turns to her books for a more informed perspective. As she explains to Ron and Harry, "I've been researching it thoroughly in the library. Elf enslavement goes back centuries. I can't believe no one's done anything about it before now" (*GoF* p. 224). Her curiosity to understand the state of things, supplemented by her disciplined approach to finding answers, makes her more determined to make a difference. It thus shapes her devotion to the cause of elf welfare and justice.

Of course, we have already noted that Hermione's approach is also limited. In her enthusiasm for the cause, she forms a plan without consulting any of the elves; her plan understandably generates no support. Hermione is initially deaf to criticisms that the elves are content with their lot, charging her critics with complicity and attributing the elves' failure to seek freedom to a lack of education. Importantly, however, Hermione is inquisitive and open to criticism, eventually taking seriously George Weasley's chastisement for never having visited the Hogwarts kitchen. She thus journeys to the kitchen to talk to the elves. Though she rightly interprets Dobby to be happy with his freedom, she faces a different reality in the kitchen. Winky, who has also been freed, is miserable, and the other elves have no interest in Hermione's crusade. Always attentive to possible connections, she leaves the kitchen experience with a revised plan. She reasons that since Dobby is now working in the kitchen as a freed and paid elf, his example will inspire the other elves, who "will see how happy he is, being free, and slowly it'll dawn on them that they want that too!" (*GoF* p. 383). Though an improvement, her new perspective, derived from her actual interaction with the elves, is also deficient, since Dobby does not want to serve as such an example. Hermione thus has made some progress, acting to discover the veracity of her beliefs, but her own sense of the righteousness of her cause is still an impediment to her understanding of the situation.

By the end of the series, Hermione has done little actually to change elf conditions, but she does appear to have grown more respectful of them. In

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, upon learning in *Deathly Hallows* that Hermione sent her parents to Australia to protect them from Voldemort, Ron exclaims, "You're a genius." Harry immediately chimes in, "Yeah, you are, Hermione . . . . I don't know what we'd do without you" (*DH* p. 425).

*Order of the Phoenix*, she continues to be blind to the elves' perspective, even camouflaging hats she has knitted for them in the hope that they will inadvertently pick them up and be freed. When Ron protests, she retorts that "of course [the elves] want to be free!" (*OotP* p. 255). She still fails to comprehend the elves' fear of freedom and the depth of devotion they feel to the families they serve. By *Deathly Hallows*, however, she demonstrates respect for and a better understanding of the elf perspective. Though Kreacher repeatedly insults her, and though Hermione longs to comfort him on learning of the horrible treatment he has endured, she nevertheless respects his preference for physical distance and refrains from touching him. She also demonstrates a deeper understanding of the effects servitude have had on him. Harry is dismayed that Kreacher could betray Sirius Black (as he did in *Order of the Phoenix*) even while demonstrating such devotion to his brother, Regulus. Hermione argues that Kreacher's divided loyalties to the House of Black can be explained by the fact that he was loyal to masters, like Mrs. Black and Regulus but unlike Sirius, who were kind to him (*DH* p. 198). Unlike other wizards who treat elves gruffly without a second thought, Hermione achieves a fuller appreciation for their behavior, rooted in her willingness to view them as beings with feelings. Harry seems affected by this perspective, since he freely gives Kreacher the gift of Regulus's locket, much to Kreacher's delight (*DH* pp. 199-200). In a Webchat, J. K. Rowling indicates that Hermione later embarks on a career in justice, helping both to improve the lives of house elves and to eradicate pro-pureblood laws.<sup>25</sup> This suggests that Hermione continues to grow in her understanding and approach to the issue. Given the advances she makes within the series, it is reasonable to assume that her openness and inquisitiveness aid her in becoming a more successful advocate for the cause.

If we consider Hermione's other blindnesses, we see similar progress. Though she loves to learn, Hermione is not above dismissing some beliefs, opinions, and purported bodies of knowledge as sheer nonsense or, to use her favorite phrase, "utter rubbish." She tends to favor systematic forms of knowledge. A methodical thinker and learner, she finds little value in subjects like Divination that depend on innate knack or talent. By contrast, Hermione praises and loves Arithmancy, presumably because its reliance on numbers renders it more systematic. After suffering through the better part of a year of the study of Divination, Hermione snaps under the pressure of taking so many classes and uncharacteristically storms out of Professor Sybill Trelawney's Divination class, never to return (*PoA* pp. 295-99). Yet after attempting to retrieve the prophecy in *Order of the Phoenix*, she comes to

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<sup>25</sup> "Webchat with J. K. Rowling," Bloomsbury Publishing, July 30, 2007; accessed online at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20090617201646/http://www.bloomsbury.com/harrypotter/default.aspx?sec=3>.

recognize the limits of her earlier understanding and shows a new respect for Divination. In response to Ron's comment that the whole subject is useless, Hermione asks, "How can you say that? . . . After we've just found out that there are real prophecies?" (*OotP* p. 849). Despite her strong preference for one type of learning over another, she proves open enough to be willing to admit when she is wrong and to revise her beliefs.

Even in *Deathly Hallows*, however, Hermione's blindness toward unstructured forms of knowledge is still evident. She initially scoffs at the *Tale of the Three Brothers*, since it is a fairy tale suggesting outlandish possibilities. In response, Xenophilus Lovegood pointedly describes her as "painfully limited. Narrow. Close-minded" (*DH* p. 410). Though she knows of the existence of one of the three Deathly Hallows, that is, the Cloak of Invisibility, Hermione contends that belief in the existence of the other two is a matter of "utter rubbish" (*DH* p. 414). Here too, though, Hermione's openness leaves her receptive to revision and so, room for growth. As Harry becomes increasingly convinced of the existence of the Hallows, Hermione uses logic to poke holes in his interpretation. She does not challenge wandmaker Garrick Ollivander, however, when he later confirms that the Elder Wand is very real (*DH* p. 497). And importantly, she remains supportive of Harry's mission, despite her initial misgivings. Harry later concedes that Hermione exercised influence over his decision to pursue Horcruxes over Hallows by keeping Dumbledore's directive in view (*DH* pp. 433 and 500). Her critical but not dogmatic engagement thus serves both to guide Harry and to open her to new possibilities.

## 6. Conclusion

Consequently, Hermione makes progress in overcoming her chief forms of blindness. We do not see a complete change—nor should we expect to, given the complexities of acknowledging and addressing blindness in real life—but we do witness both the exercise of tolerance, as James proposes, and a gradual expansion of her field of vision. James supplements tolerance, the first step for addressing our blindness, in his article "What Makes a Life Significant." The additional steps require discovering the features that make any life significant; James concludes that "[t]he solid meaning of life is the same eternal thing,—the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man's or woman's pains."<sup>26</sup> Hermione herself only gradually becomes aware of these factors in other beings, most notably the house-elves. But we readers see just such a marriage in her own drive to learn—which expresses itself in the ideal to know but to also serve others—supported by the interweaving of curiosity, discipline, and self-direction. Moreover, Hermione's story offers a

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<sup>26</sup> William James, "What Makes a Life Significant," in William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology, and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 166.

supplementary message to James's discourse. Her development throughout the series offers testimony to the value that the love of learning can possess both in meeting practical (and sometimes extraordinary) challenges and in compensating for one's blindness.

Hermione remains eager for new information, possessing curiosity and wide interests, and her discipline enables her to make meaningful connections to existing problems. That renders her an invaluable aid to Harry in his journey, but it also accounts for the progress she makes with respect to her own blindness. Hermione is not a perfect or one-note character; Rowling renders her a complex character by showing her capacity to grow. She places Hermione in an environment in which her passion stands out all the more for its rarity and its capacity to survive against considerable challenges. The kind of character Hermione develops is one that prizes continuous learning and so openness, an attitude that sharpens her attention to diverse perspectives and renders her willing to revise her views. In Hermione's arc, then, we find a complex character whose journey both supplements Harry's and provides us with a notable model for becoming less blind.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> With thanks to my friend Gail Streete, who inspired this discourse.

# House-Elves, Hogwarts, and Friendship: Casting Away the Institutions which Made Voldemort's Rise Possible

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## 1. Introduction

While plantation slavery was introduced to the United States under British rule, it was not until the early nineteenth century that the southern states transformed from a society with slaves to a genuine slaveholding society.<sup>1</sup> Unlike a society with slaves, a genuine slaveholding society regards slavery and the attendant hierarchies as economically and culturally essential. Not only did slavery come to be highly profitable, but it also came to imply a vertical set of social and power relations within which every man, woman, and child was to be understood—where “white” or “black” marked the difference between those who could engage in trade and those who were a commodity to be traded.

A genuine slaveholding society did not—and could not—arise in a vacuum, but took root in a society which happened to have slaves. In the 1700s, while the plantation economy did not require slavery, it did depend on nearly free labor made possible by a system of indentured servitude. And various factors, from the scarcity of land and the increasing price of tobacco to pre-existing pockets of slavery and racial animus, transformed the South from a system of servitude to a totalizing system of race-based slavery.

We argue that an analogous transformation takes place over the seven books of the *Harry Potter* series. Prior to his final confrontation with

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of this traditional distinction, see Mark Weiner, *Black Trials: Citizenship from the Beginnings of Slavery to the End of Caste* (New York: Vintage, 2004), pp. 29-31.

Harry, Voldemort hardens a relatively fluid order of magical and non-magical creatures into the false universalism of a hierarchical society which privileges one group (European/white/magical/etc.) by rendering others deviant and invisible. But just as the slaveholding society of the antebellum South was built from a society with slaves, pre-existing institutions *within* Hogwarts and the Wizarding World set the stage for Voldemort's totalizing pure-blood utopia. Just as slavery would not have been possible without, for example, the institution of indentured servitude, we contend that the pre-existing subjugation of the house-elves and, less obviously, Hogwarts' house system prefigures and makes possible Voldemort's coup. While it is not clear that the defeat of Voldemort entails the elimination of either of these institutions, we suggest that Rowling nevertheless sees friendship as the ultimate means by which the Wizarding World avoids becoming a genuine slaveholding society. And perhaps, more radically, friendship could also eliminate the institutional soil in which Voldemort took root. True friendship that sees difference as a cause for celebration, as opposed to domination, would be a means toward a more truly egalitarian vision—where not only house-elf slavery is abolished, but also where the rigid house system is replaced with a more socially fluid network of learners. Moreover, friendship could be the vehicle by which the boundary between the Wizarding and Muggle Worlds is eliminated.

## 2. Voldemort's Pure-Blood Ideology

After Voldemort's followers infiltrate the Ministry of Magic, one of their first acts is to change the fountain in the main lobby. Whereas before witches and wizards were portrayed with house-elves and other magical creatures (admittedly, staring up at them with adoration), now they stand on top of cringing, inferior muggles and the other magical creatures are nowhere in sight:

Now a gigantic statue of black stone dominated the scene. It was rather frightening, this vast sculpture of a witch and a wizard sitting on ornately carved thrones . . . . Engraved in foot-high letters at the base of the statue were the words MAGIC IS MIGHT. . . . Harry looked more closely and realized that what he had thought were decoratively carved thrones were actually mounds of carved humans: hundreds and hundreds of naked bodies, men, women, and children, all with rather stupid, ugly faces, twisted and pressed together to support the weight of the handsomely robed wizards. (*DH* pp. 241-42)

The wizards' privileged standing has been extended with more explicit domination and persecution.

Harry Potter, himself of both muggle and wizard ancestry, was raised by a hateful aunt and uncle (Vernon and Petunia Dursley) who despise him for his difference, a difference so distasteful to them that they never even bother to explain it to him. Harry does not learn that he is a wizard until Rubeus

Hagrid shows up personally to deliver his invitation to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Uncle Vernon had tried, in vain, to destroy all of the magically delivered letters for Harry, so that Harry would never learn the truth of his ancestry. Only under duress does Aunt Petunia acknowledge the truth that Harry's parents were "freaks" killed not in a car crash, but "blown up" by another wizard (*SS* p. 53). Their shame is reminiscent of Americans of mixed ancestry hiding their African heritage, in the face of a discriminatory "one-drop" rule whereby even one drop of "tainted" blood nullified your whiteness.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the Durselys' prejudice is mirrored in the Malfoy family, which regards any mingling of wizard and muggle blood as dirty; thus Draco Malfoy insults Hermione Granger by calling her a "Mudblood" for having non-magical parents (*CoS* p. 112). The biologically false imagery of blood as possessing degrees of purity captures the imagination of prejudiced wizards as surely as similar imagery captivated Southerners who invented terms such as "octoroon" and "quadroon" to rank the degree of black blood in racially mixed people. Surely, J. K. Rowling, a British citizen, meant to draw the reader's mind to parallels with Hitler's racialized obsession with Jewish blood as a pollutant that came in degrees.<sup>3</sup> The Nazi regime shipped people off to concentration camps for even distant Jewish ancestry. And the irony behind Hitler's rumored Jewish ancestry is echoed in Voldemort's own mixed muggle-witch parentage; Voldemort's hatred of the muggle father who abandoned his mother, a father whom he physically resembled, drives his hatred of muggles as such.

### 3. Institutional Entrenchment: House-Elves and Hogwarts' Houses

Institutional or structural discrimination occurs when a society's rules and conventions unjustly favor certain subgroups. Intergroup oppression

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the one-drop rule in American racial discourse, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "Racial Formations," in *Rethinking the Color Line: Readings in Race and Ethnicity*, ed. Charles Gallagher (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), pp. 17-22.

<sup>3</sup> No doubt Rowling also intended the series as a commentary on the British aristocracy's preoccupation with family lineage and "blue blood." Hence the recent controversy over Prince William's marriage to Kate Middleton, a middle-class "commoner." For example, note James Whitaker's emphasis on heredity when he asserts, "I'm not against the middle class as such, but I do query whether she has the background and breeding to be queen one day"; see Anthony Faiola, "Kate Middleton's 'Commoner' Status Stirs up Britons' Old Class Divide," *The Washington Post*, December 18, 2010, accessed online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/18/AR2010121803829.html>. The article goes on to suggest that Rowling herself has been subject to this kind of discrimination: "that despite the rise of mega-rich commoners such as Richard Branson and J. K. Rowling, this is still very much a society where status is measured in birthright and breeding."

results from a variety of mechanisms, including what Charles Tilly calls “opportunity hoarding.”<sup>4</sup> Long-standing societal patterns in funding for America’s public schools, which channel resources to middle-class, white students and away from poor and minority students, are a clear example of institutional discrimination. Indeed, the latest data from the U.S. Department of Education tracks clear institutional bias in distribution of punishments by race and gender, with black males receiving the harshest and most frequent punishments.<sup>5</sup> Similar unfair outcomes for African-Americans in measures of health-care access, financial resources, and judicial punishment work together to create institutional barriers to their fair treatment and to re-entrench white racial privilege.<sup>6</sup> Racism in the U.S. has moved from *de jure* to *de facto*, but it endures and was nurtured in the ground of racial hatred and domination.<sup>7</sup>

Institutional barriers to equality flourish in similar soil in Harry Potter’s world. The pure-blood ideology of Voldemort and the Death Eaters did not arise in a vacuum. Both the barriers and the ideology simply pushed to an extreme the prejudice already represented in the original Ministry of Magic “Fountain of the Magical Brethren” statue—a smiling house-elf, centaur, and goblin “were all looking adoringly up at the witch and wizard” (*OotP* p. 127). While it—unlike the new statue—doesn’t imply the elimination or outright domination of non-pure-blood witches and wizards, the original statue was hardly a vision of equality.

Prior to Voldemort’s uprising, the Wizarding World was already organized in a relatively neat social hierarchy, represented in Figure 1:

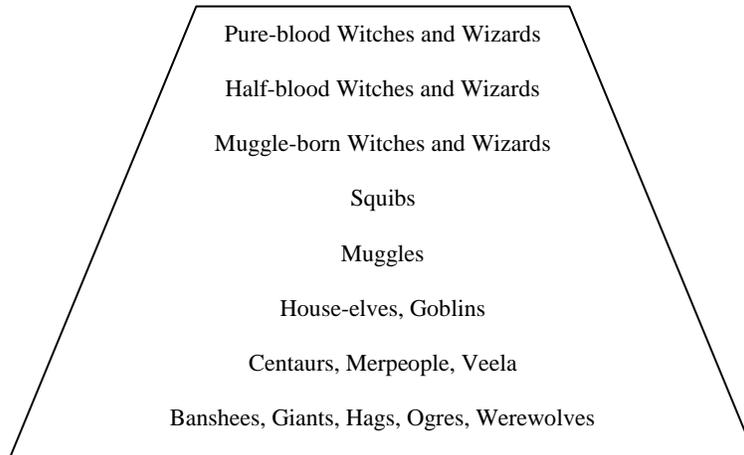
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<sup>4</sup> Charles Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries, and Social Ties* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2005), chap. 10. See also Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), chap. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Tamar Lewin, “Black Students Punished More, Data Suggests,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2012, pp. A11 and 18.

<sup>6</sup> For an extensive catalogue of opportunity hoarding, see Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, chap. 1.3.

<sup>7</sup> Readers desiring data documenting the many racial disparities in outcome in the U.S. can turn to the articles and appendices in Gallagher, *Rethinking the Color Line*.



**Figure 1**<sup>8</sup>

This hierarchy implies institutions which Voldemort was able to exploit in order to consolidate his power. In this section we'll look at two special cases: the institution of house-elf slavery and the house system of Hogwarts.

Let us first consider the case of house-elves. House-elves are still slaves, freed only at the whim of their masters (or by Hermione's hidden knitted creations), some with minds so thoroughly colonized like Kreacher's that they look forward to their heads being mounted on plaques at death (*OotP* p. 76). This house-elf identification with "their" family at the expense of their own identity and interests recalls Malcolm X's description of a "house Negro [who] would say, 'What's the matter boss, *we* sick?' *We* sick! He identified himself with his master, more than his master identified with himself."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the house-elves refuse to pick up the clothes that Hermione leaves out for them to "free" themselves, considering it insulting.<sup>10</sup> They identify more as slave-servants of Hogwarts than as their own free persons. Only Dobby seems to take pride and pleasure in his freedom and expresses gratitude to

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<sup>8</sup> This graphic is adapted from a figure in Karen Brown, *Prejudice in Harry Potter's World* (College Station, TX: VBW Publishing, 2008), p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm X, "Message to the Grass Roots," in *Reflections: An Anthology of African-American Philosophy*, ed. James Montmarquet and William Hardy (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999), pp. 203-10, quotation at p. 206.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *GoF* pp. 98-99, 138, and 374-82. For an in-depth discussion of house-elf slavery, see Brown, "Extreme Measures: Examining the Mindset of the House-elf," in Brown, *Prejudice in Harry Potter's World*, pp. 86-119.

Harry for freeing him (*CoS* p. 338). This different response to the offer of freedom fits with Malcolm X's analysis that the better treated house slaves identified with their masters, whereas the more abused field slaves hated them and wanted to escape. Recall that Dobby's masters, the Malfoys, treated him "like vermin" with death threats "five times a day" (*CoS* pp. 177-78).

Once wizards and witches accepted the idea that some fully non-human magical creatures—such as house-elves—were subordinate, the stage was set to question the moral worth of part-human magical creatures such as werewolves and centaurs. Next, the idea of degrees of worth helped to create the myth of degrees of "purity" of wizarding blood, whereby those of mixed parentage fall below those with two magical parents, and "mud-bloods" no longer count as full members of the magical community. Voldemort's uprising would not have been possible had this great chain of magical being not already entrenched itself in the hearts of ordinary witches and wizards.

Other institutional structures, besides the enslavement of house-elves, prefigure the pure-blood ideology of Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Superficially, it might seem as though Hogwarts' egalitarian system of houses remains an attractive alternative to the doctrine of pure-blood supremacy. The houses are organized horizontally, not vertically. And until the Ministry's Muggle-Born Registration Commission, instituted under Voldemort, accuses muggles of stealing magic, Hogwarts remains open to muggle-born magic users. However, even here, all is not well.

In general, the Sorting Hat selects students according to his or her natural talents or virtues, rather than according to family lineage. These are the characteristics heralded in the yearly song of the Sorting Hat:

You might belong in Gryffindor,  
Where dwell the brave at heart,  
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry  
Set Gryffindors apart;  
You might belong in Hufflepuff,  
Where they are just and loyal,  
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true  
And unafraid of toil;  
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,  
If you've a ready mind,  
Where those of wit and learning,  
Will always find their kind;  
Or perhaps in Slytherin  
You'll make your real friends,  
Those cunning folk use any means  
To achieve their ends. (*SS* p. 118)

Gryffindors are brave, Ravenclaws are intelligent, Hufflepuffs are self-disciplined, and Slytherins are ambitious.

One indication that something is amiss with the house system is that it might readily be compared to the autocratic utopia envisioned by Plato in the *Republic*.<sup>11</sup> The *Republic* consists of three classes—the Guardians or Philosopher-Kings and -Queens, the Auxiliaries, and the Workers. Not only are Plato’s classes and Hogwarts’ houses both individuated according to virtue or excellence, but there is great similarity in which virtues distinguish the various classes or houses. For Plato, all workers must have the basic virtue of moderation or self-discipline, defined both in terms of obedience to authority and self-mastery.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, the working class is self-disciplined when “the desires of the common majority are controlled by the desires and the intelligence of the minority of better men [and women].”<sup>13</sup> Correspondingly, Hufflepuffs are “loyal” and “unafraid of toil.” Both Gryffindors and the auxiliary soldier class must have the virtue of bravery or courage. Finally, both Ravenclaws and Philosopher-Kings and -Queens have wisdom or “a ready mind” as a principal virtue.

Against this background of similarity a few differences between Plato’s class system and Hogwarts’ house system readily assert themselves. First, the classes of Plato’s *Republic* are decidedly hierarchical, with Philosopher-Kings and -Queens commanding the Auxiliaries who exert authority over the Workers. And while most members of each house believe that their house is superior to the others, these houses are arranged in a more or less egalitarian fashion. In this regard it is important to note that the hierarchy of classes, for Plato, implies a hierarchy of virtues, so that the upper classes have all of the virtues that the lower classes have, plus their unique virtue. Thus Guardians are wise, brave, and self-disciplined, whereas the Auxiliaries are only brave and self-disciplined. Self-discipline, then, is regarded as a kind of basic virtue upon which the others are founded: “self-discipline literally spans the whole octaval spread of the community, and makes the weakest, the strongest, and the ones in between all sing in unison.”<sup>14</sup> Hogwarts’ egalitarian house system eliminates this Platonic picture of nested virtues so that Ravenclaws need only be wise, Hufflepuffs need only be hard-working, and Gryffindors need only be brave.

*Prima facie*, this egalitarian component is one of the more attractive aspects of Hogwarts, construed here as a kind of political utopia. However, as the exclusionary attitude of Salazar Slytherin suggests, the house system is embedded within and so not immune to a social hierarchy, beginning with pure-blood witches and wizards and ending with despised outsiders.

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<sup>11</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 330e-431d.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 431d.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 432a.

Following the founding of Hogwarts over 1,000 years ago, Professor Cuthbert Binns explains:

For a few years, the founders worked in harmony together, seeking out youngsters who showed signs of magic and bringing them to the castle to be educated. But then disagreements sprang up between them. A rift began to grow between Slytherin and the others. Slytherin wished to be more *selective* about the students admitted to Hogwarts. He believed that magical learning should be kept within all-magic families. He disliked taking students of Muggle parentage, believing them to be untrustworthy. After a while, there was a serious argument on the subject between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and Slytherin left the school. (*CoS* p. 150)

The rift between Slytherin and the other founders suggest that the various houses are only superficially “separate but equal.”

Second, Plato’s political utopia has no place for the Slytherin temperament. Indeed, the Platonic interlocutor most akin to a Slytherin is Thrasymachus, the sophist who argues that morality is nothing but a means by which the stronger maintain rule over the weaker.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Draco Malfoy’s name evokes the specter of tyranny, bringing to mind both the notorious, draconian dictator and the French phrase meaning unfaithful (*mal foi*). To be unfaithful is a way of lacking self-discipline, even the basic means for obedience to “the intelligence of the minority of better men”; Malfoy’s name suggests he lacks loyalty. Yet without self-discipline, which spans the octaval spread of the Platonic community, Slytherin cannot be a part of that community.<sup>16</sup> While Plato would find it perplexing that Slytherin is a part of the Hogwarts community, perhaps this also explains why Slytherin must be the source of discord within it.

There’s a third difference between the *Republic* and Hogwarts. While at least three of the four founders of Hogwarts strove for harmony within the wizarding community, the house-based solution was itself exclusionary in that it could not include non-magic-using muggles. Hogwarts is a utopia within the world, but could not include the world. This stands in marked contrast to

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 338c.

<sup>16</sup> For a more sanguine take on Slytherin, see Steven Patterson, “Is Ambition a Virtue? Why Slytherin Belongs at Hogwarts,” in *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2004), pp. 121-31. Patterson argues that because, for Aristotle, virtue is a midpoint between an excess and a deficiency, then appropriate, moderated ambition can be a virtue. While there is virtuous ambition, it isn’t clear that Slytherin exhibits this. Recall that the Sorting Hat says of Slytherin, “Those cunning folk use *any means*/To achieve their ends” (*italics ours*). Indeed, even Patterson cites Hermione Granger, a Gryffindor, as the epitome of virtuous ambition; *ibid.*, p. 131.

Plato's utopia, which strives to include nearly everyone within its fold (but still excludes the disabled and moral reprobates such as Thrasymachus).

Ironically, where Slytherin sought to exclude only those who did not come from established wizard families, a Hogwartian utopia still excludes those without magical skills. Even the most sympathetic wizards readily deceive, censor, and manipulate muggles in order to enforce the separation between the Wizarding World and the Muggle World. These thought-control practices are reminiscent of Plato's noble lie.<sup>17</sup> What can be said on behalf of the wizarding community in this regard? First, a defender of Hogwarts might simply note that it is, after all, a school for wizardry and witchcraft. As such, it cannot be any more culpable for excluding muggles than a pilot school is for excluding the blind. Second, these exclusionary practices are understandable: "They built this castle together, far from prying Muggle eyes, for it was an age when magic was feared by common people, and witches and wizards suffered much persecution" (*CoS* p. 150). The potential for continued persecution is reinforced in the Dursleys' treatment of young Harry Potter.

While the fact that Hogwarts is a wizarding school explains why muggles are not admitted, this cannot explain the full-scale manipulation and isolationist practices enacted by even the best members of the wizarding community. Pilot schools might justly refuse to train the blind, but they would not thereby be justified in deceiving the blind as to the existence of pilots, aircraft, etc. Moreover, Hogwarts isn't open to magic users of any variety. House-elves, and perhaps other magical creatures such as goblins and merpeople, are powerful magicians and yet refused admission.<sup>18</sup>

So it is only the threat of persecution by muggles that might explain the Wizarding World's deceptive practices. However, the witches and wizards obviously wield tremendous power. As demonstrated by Voldemort's uprising, it seems that muggles have more to fear from wizards than the other way around. More importantly, to explain these practices is not the same as justifying them; even if we grant that a separation between the two worlds is necessary, we should not thereby think that such a separation is ideal.

The house system of Hogwarts, while not nearly as pernicious as the pure-blood ideology of Voldemort and the Death Eaters, nevertheless buttresses the larger social order which sets the stage for a genuine

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<sup>17</sup> *Republic*, 382c.

<sup>18</sup> House-elves, however wandless, can perform spells—such as apparating—under conditions that witches and wizards cannot. Note also that although part-veelas, such as Fleur Delacour (*GoF* p. 256), appear to be candidates for admission to Schools of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Harry discovers in *Prisoner of Azkaban* that the werewolf Remus Lupin entered Hogwarts in secrecy only thanks to the sympathy of Headmaster Albus Dumbledore (*PoA* p. 353). In addition, as discussed in *Goblet of Fire*, Hagrid hid his half-giant parentage until he was "outed" by journalist Rita Skeeter (*GoF* p. 439).

slaveholding society. The house system inflames differences through isolation and competition. Moreover, following Tilly's pattern of "opportunity hoarding" (see note 4 above), the school artificially monopolizes magical power. Hogwarts is not open to magic users of all varieties (including house-elves), and goblins bitterly resent the fact that only wizards and witches are permitted to carry wands (which are needed for the vast majority of spells) (*DH* p. 488). Finally, the secrecy surrounding the school requires mass manipulation of non-magical muggles. These are the kinds of institutional structures which give rise to class resentment, thus leaving the Wizarding World vulnerable to the rise of a charismatic dictator.

#### **4. Harry's Hope: Friendship as an Antidote to Hate**

We've argued that Voldemort and the Death Eaters exploit pre-existing institutionalized divisions in proffering their pure-blood ideology. So what's to be done? This question actually flags two questions. Given that the Ministry of Magic had been taken over by Voldemort's puppets, we might first inquire into the conditions by which Voldemort is defeated. Voldemort's ultimate defeat is possible, though, without re-examining the institutionalized hierarchy which gave rise to the coup in the first place. So we must also inquire into the kinds of institutional changes which might prevent this kind of uprising from ever happening again.

How was Voldemort defeated the first time? In spite of his espoused pure-blood ideology, his own grudging respect for "mixed bloods" comes out when he selects Harry (rather than Neville Longbottom, a pure-blood whose birth also satisfied the terms of the prophecy) as the target of the prophecy about the one with the power to defeat him. As Dumbledore points out to Harry, Voldemort perceived the mixed-blood baby as a greater threat:

"He chose the boy he thought most likely to be a danger to him," said Dumbledore. "And notice this, Harry. He chose, not the pureblood (which, according to his creed, is the only kind of wizard worth being or knowing), but the half-blood, like himself." (*OotP* p. 842)

Prejudiced wizards such as Voldemort and the Lestranges continue to underestimate to their own peril the powers of those they view as weaker. The hiding place of Voldemort's locket-Horcrux is twice breached because he considers only a full-grown wizard to be a threat. The underage Harry and the house-elf Kreacher both foil magical defenses that simply fail to register their presence because of who they are. Kreacher escapes with the locket-Horcrux and Harry escapes with Dumbledore because of this oversight (*DH* pp. 176-200; *HBP* pp. 555-78). Furthermore, Dobby rescues Luna Lovegood, Garrick Ollivander, Dean Thomas, Ron Weasley, Hermione, and Harry from Death Eater clutches, because the Malfoy mansion's magical defenses do not protect against house-elf magic (*DH* pp. 446-76). Oppressed peoples have similarly won battles and freedom by exploiting their oppressors' hubris and myopia.

However, merely taking advantage of Voldemort's ignorance of difference will not be enough to rebuild either the Wizarding World, or our own. After all, Voldemort's power consists, in large measure, in his ability to exploit pre-existing institutionalized hierarchies of difference. Without addressing institutionalized prejudice, the killing of Voldemort is merely a stop-gap. Indeed, the Sorting Hat itself grasps the danger of institutional divisions' turning difference into deviance, when it laments at the start of Harry's fifth year:

Though condemned I am to split you  
Still I worry that it's wrong,  
Though I must fulfill my duty  
And must quarter every year  
Still I wonder whether sorting  
May not bring the end I fear.  
Oh, know the perils, read the signs,  
The warning history shows,  
For our Hogwarts is in danger  
From external, deadly foes  
And we must unite inside her  
Or we'll crumble from within. (*OotP* pp. 206-7)

As Andrew Mills re-phrases the Sorting Hat's worry, "[b]eing in a House at Hogwarts affects the way you treat people": good and loyal Gryffindors put their house-mates above students from other houses.<sup>19</sup> Sadly, such loyalty can morph into vice when inter-house division leads to feelings of superiority and division.

Thus the magical world needs a full-scale reimagining of the social hierarchy which conditions how witches, wizards, squibs, muggles, service creatures, and various outsiders might relate to one another. Audre Lorde argues:

The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women [and men] to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference . . . . [W]e have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Mills, "Patriotism, House Loyalty, and the Obligations of Belonging," in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles*, ed. Gregory Bassham (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Theorizing Feminisms*, ed. Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger (New York: Oxford,

What would it take to dismantle the house system? Lorde is addressing the need for an intersectional approach to feminism that does not focus on a monolithic “woman” that really represents only white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual women’s interests.<sup>21</sup> Defining “woman” in terms of the experience of the norm within society’s power structure simply replicates the ways in which men have historically defined “human” only in terms of their own experience. We cannot root out sexism while leaving other forms of discrimination in place; as long as we turn any difference from the normative “status quo” into deviances to be controlled and feared, dominance and inequality will remain. Extrapolating these remarks to the social hierarchy which frames the Wizarding World, in order to prevent a pure-blood ideology from ever taking root again, we have to, if Lorde is correct, alter the “old structures of oppression,” which see house-elves as staring adoringly at their masters, and the house system, which exacerbates differences through competition and segregation. Instead, following Lorde, we must “identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference.”

Rowling, we contend, suggests that friendship constitutes one such alternative pattern of relating across difference. Friendship across diversity is the key to *seeing* one another. Nasri Abdel-Aziz and Laurence M. Thomas assert:

Friendship at its best, we believe, requires a certain kind of moral disposition, namely that of being naturally responsive to the moral goodness of others. We think of this as a kind of innocence, responsive innocence is perhaps the best term for it; and we believe that responsive innocence is exhibited most fully by infants. Infants are quite uninterested in skin color, and other physical features, of the persons who love them. Instead, infants simply delight in being the object of love. . . . [T]here is no greater impediment to the development of such friendships [across ethnic differences], than that the two parties allow their thinking about the other to be so informed by prevailing social images regarding the group to which the other is a member that the other’s actual behavior is distorted by these images.<sup>22</sup>

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2006), pp. 292-97.

<sup>21</sup> On this point, see also Angela P. Harris, “Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory,” *Stanford Law Review* 42 (1990), pp. 581-616; Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1993), pp. 1241-99.

<sup>22</sup> Nasri Abdel-Aziz and Laurence M. Thomas, “Friendship,” in *Reflections*, ed. Montmarquet and Hardy, pp. 279-80.

Similarly, Alexander Nehamas suggests that friendship, which he calls “dangerous,” is a vehicle for change:

The sense that our knowledge of our friends, and everyone we love, is always provisional and incomplete is a constant incitement to come to know them better. Knowledge, in this context, is not passive: it changes both the knower and the known, and the further we look into and reinterpret our friends, and so ourselves, the more extensively we are likely to change.<sup>23</sup>

Albus Dumbledore himself suggests bases for non-hierarchical social relations when he speaks with Harry at King’s Cross:

“That which Voldemort does not value, he takes no trouble to comprehend. Of house-elves and children’s tales, of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. *Nothing*. That they all have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped.” (*DH* pp. 709-10)

Love, loyalty, and innocence are characteristics of friendship, and Harry consistently exemplifies the way that friendship cuts against the grain of the social hierarchy which made Voldemort’s rise to power possible.

Harry, raised by muggles, does not know the Wizarding World’s stereotypes about house-elves, giants, mud-bloods, and pure-bloods. He also still possesses, at age eleven, some of the child’s responsive innocence (especially given his own lack of experiences of love). He sees Dobby, Hagrid, Hermione, and Ron as individuals, not through the lens of prejudiced stereotypes. His seeing them this way, especially in the case of Dobby, but also with respect to Hermione and Hagrid, enables them to see themselves as something more than the stereotypes that the pure-blood obsessed throw their way. Recall Draco’s remark, “You’ll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don’t want to go making friends with the wrong sort” (*SS* p. 108). For Draco, friendship is a relation that must exist within the wizard hierarchy, but for Harry it’s a means of transcending it. Even in his friendship with Ron, Harry defies what we could label class-based-wizarding differences (*SS* p. 108). He goes even further when he rescues and befriends magical outsiders: having saved the goblin Griphook and buried Dobby the house-elf, the former remarks, “You are an unusual wizard, Harry Potter” (*DH* p. 486). Having himself experienced neglect and a refusal of others to see him in his own uniqueness and valued difference, Harry is careful not to discriminate against others in this fashion.

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<sup>23</sup> Alexander Nehamas, “The Good of Friendship,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 110, no. 3 (2010), pp. 270 and 289-90.

Rowling offers Harry to us as a model of the power of friendship to turn differences into a source of delight and not deviance. As such, the *Harry Potter* books offer a possible vision of an inclusive world. Friendship and love are, for Rowling, defined in terms of openness to the other.<sup>24</sup> Harry does not invite us to reject differences or different identities and to take on what Mari Matsuda calls “the cloak of the detached universal.”<sup>25</sup> Progressive identity politics longs neither for an inversion of the status quo—say, where house-elves rule—nor for Harry’s Invisibility Cloak to hide all of the things that make people even within the same groups diverse.

As discussed above, the “responsive innocence” of friendship sees with the expansive eyes of love instead of the myopic vision of stereotype, and thus sees each person in her or his individuality. Muggle, house-elf, goblin, centaur, werewolf, veela—you name it—can and should forge a world together, taking on the difficult but rewarding work of understanding one another in their diversity.

### **5. Does the Death of the Master Imply the Dismantling of His House?**

Through the power of friendship and sacrifice, Harry Potter succeeds in killing Voldemort. But, in the years that follow the Battle of Hogwarts, is he as successful in dismantling what Lorde calls “the master’s house”—the entrenched institutions which made Voldemort’s rise to power possible in the first place? Again, we’ll look at the particular cases of house-elf enslavement and Hogwarts’ exclusionary house system.

We’ve discussed the revolutionary role friendship can play in Hermione’s and Harry’s treatment of the house-elves. Dobby’s last words in the film *Deathly Hallows: Part I* clearly identify friendship as the means by which his emancipation is possible: “Such a beautiful place it is, to be with friends. Dobby is happy to be with his friend, Harry Potter.”<sup>26</sup> But as Dobby and Kreacher learn of the possibility of different wizard-elf relations through their interactions with Harry, they are able to resist externally imposed definitions, enabling them to fight for their own and other elves’ freedom. Indeed, in the Battle of Hogwarts, Kreacher leads the other house-elves against the Death Eaters (*DH* pp. 734-35).

In the case of the house-elves, Rowling tells us—though, curiously, not in the books—that “Hermione greatly improved life for house-elves after

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<sup>24</sup> When a character loves another, as in the case of Severus Snape’s love for Lily Potter, his or her Patronus changes to reflect the object of love. See Catherine Deavel and David Deavel, “Choosing Love: The Redemption of Severus Snape,” in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy*, ed. Bassham, pp. 53-65.

<sup>25</sup> Mari Matsuda, *Where Is Your Body?* (New York: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 419.

<sup>26</sup> Even in the book series, Dobby’s last words are the name of his friend, “Harry . . . Potter” (*DH* p. 476).

her graduation.”<sup>27</sup> While this suggests the possibility of the kind of institutional change necessary to prevent the future restocking of Death-Eater ideology, this description is sadly compatible with continued enslavement of the house-elves.

What about the difference-making implicit in Hogwarts’ house system? Do we see, as Lorde puts it, an attempt to “identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference”?

In the epilogue to the series, nineteen years after Voldemort falls, Harry, Ginny Weasley (now Potter), Hermione, and Ron are putting their children on the Hogwarts Express. Despite the sentimentality of the final scene, the sparring of the siblings and cousins over who will be in Slytherin and beat Draco’s son Scorpius on exams shows that the unstable house structure remains. Signs that the racial hierarchy has been weakened come in Ron’s teasing his daughter Rose that “Granddad Weasley would never forgive you if you married a pureblood” (*DH* p. 756). We also see Teddy Lupin, the half-werewolf, kissing Victoire Weasley, herself a part-veela French witch. We might extrapolate that the relations between the Wizarding and Muggle Worlds are no longer based on paternalistic lies (though we do not know for sure). We can also take comfort in the fact that Harry reassures his son Albus Severus that the Sorting Hat takes one’s free choice into account when selecting one’s house (*DH* p. 758),<sup>28</sup> signaling that the house structure need not be rigid or biologically determined.

Yet why insist on the house structure at all? We have attempted to argue that at least one snake lurks in Hogwarts’ rose garden. Not only are muggles excluded and house-elves enslaved, but the house system artificially exacerbates competition and reifies difference. Why not exchange the neat system of houses with a messy, multivariate and inclusive concatenation of overlapping skills and values? Why artificially introduce divisiveness at all?

Recall that prejudice against centaurs (Firenze) and werewolves (Remus Lupin) and giants (Hagrid) led parents of some students at Hogwarts to protest and seek any chance to get non-fully-human staff discharged from their posts. The purge that Dolores Umbridge and her ilk brought to bear against all non-pure-blood families had its seeds in these accepted hierarchies of power. Failure to recognize differences among magical folk and across sentient beings as valuable lay the groundwork for Voldemort’s vicious persecutions and purges of non-pure-bloods.<sup>29</sup> If the world post-Voldemort is

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<sup>27</sup> “Highlights of J. K. Rowling’s US Book Tour,” accessed online at: <http://bibliophilists.wordpress.com/2007/10/22/highlights-of-jk-rowlings-us-book-tour/>.

<sup>28</sup> See also Dumbledore and Harry’s discussion of the role of choice in house selection (*CoS* p. 333).

<sup>29</sup> For a similar analysis see Brown, “On Squibs and Werewolves: A Closer Look at the Disability Issue,” in Brown, *Prejudice in Harry Potter’s World*, pp. 120-48.

to be rebuilt in a way that prevents the return of another like him, equality and celebration of difference must be its new groundwork. A new fountain in the Ministry of Magic must show muggles, witches, wizards, giants, goblins, house-elves, centaurs, and all living beings as dignified each in her or his own right.

Instead, the *Harry Potter* series ends on an ambivalent note: while progress has been made, it's not clear that either the institution of house-elf slavery or Hogwarts' exclusionary house system has been fully dismantled. And so remains the possibility that a future tyrant will return to exploit those differences. Perhaps this is why, in the limbo of Harry's King's Cross experience, Voldemort continues to exist in the form of a small, flayed-looking child. Until the institutions which give rise to racism are abolished, Voldemort can never die.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> We wish to thank those who have provided helpful feedback, including participants of the "The Power to Imagine Better": The Philosophy of *Harry Potter*" Conference, held in the Fall of 2011 at Marymount Manhattan College, NY; Kaleigh Pappas; Tara Hunter; Jordan Nein; Maya Carter; Miranda Ghali; Alannah Creswell; Madeline Briggs; and the other participants in Stetson University's Honors 4 tutorial on the Philosophy of Harry Potter. We would especially like to thank Carrie-Ann Biondi for her dedication and insightful comments.

## Part III: The Dark Side of the Moral Imagination

### Voldemort Tyrannos: Plato's Tyrant in the *Republic* and the Wizarding World

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“Voldemort himself created his worst enemy, just as tyrants everywhere do! Have you any idea how much tyrants fear the people they oppress? All of them realize that, one day, amongst their many victims, there is sure to be one who rises against them and strikes back!”

—*Half-Blood Prince* (p. 510)

“What if one of the gods should carry away a slaveholder of fifty or more slaves out of his city and deposit him, along with his wife and children and slaves, in the wilderness where he cannot be helped by his fellow free citizens? Would he not be absolutely terrified that he and his wife and children would be killed by the slaves?”

—Plato (*Rep.* 578e)<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. Introduction

In the *Harry Potter* novel series, by J. K. Rowling, the character of Lord Voldemort is the dictatorial ruler of the Death Eaters and aspiring despot of the entire wizarding community. As such, he serves as an apt subject for the application of Plato's portrait of the tyrant in *Republic* IX. The process of applying Plato to Voldemort, however, leads to an apparent anomaly, the resolution of which requires that we move beyond the *Republic* to the account

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<sup>1</sup> All passages from the works of Plato have been translated by the authors. All in-text references to the *Republic* are abbreviated as *Rep.* and to the *Symposium* as *Symp.*

of beauty presented by Plato in the *Symposium*. In doing so, we shall find that while Plato can help us to understand Voldemort, Voldemort can also help us to attain a deeper understanding of Plato.

## 2. Voldemort as the Tyrant of the *Republic*

In “Dumbledore, Plato, and the Lust for Power,” David Lay Williams and Alan J. Kellner apply Plato’s concept of appropriate rulership to the characters of Voldemort, Albus Dumbledore, and Harry Potter, observing that “Voldemort fits perfectly into Plato’s category of ‘least trustworthy rulers.’”<sup>2</sup> They note clearly Voldemort’s failure to meet the criteria that Plato requires of those who are fit to rule the ideal Republic. As they explain, Plato’s ideal rulers must be so uninterested in power that they must be coerced to rule<sup>3</sup>; furthermore, they must not only be remarkably intelligent, but also “must combine their brains with virtue” and “use their power for good.”<sup>4</sup> Williams and Kellner argue persuasively that Voldemort falls far short of meeting these requirements. We shall demonstrate further that not only does Voldemort fail to possess the positive qualities that characterize a fit ruler in *Republic VI*, he also matches almost exactly the negative qualities that characterize the tyrant in *Republic IX*.

Plato’s description of the tyrant arises in the context of a discussion of different forms of government. In addition to the ideal society, ruled by Philosopher-Kings, he also describes four less-desirable governments: timocracy (rule by those motivated by honor), oligarchy (rule by a small group, usually the wealthy), democracy (rule by the common people), and tyranny (rule by a tyrant). In order to distinguish one type of government from another, and to articulate the advantages and disadvantages of each, Plato offers distinctive portraits of the personality types that correspond to each type of ruler. He then employs the metaphor of the descent of a family over a series of generations from the best kind of person to the worst in order to describe the inevitable devolution of a society from the best to the worst kind of government.

The final, worst form of government corresponds in Plato’s metaphor to the tyrannical person, who is ruled by his lower appetites, rather than by his reason:

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<sup>2</sup> David Lay Williams and Alan J. Kellner, “Dumbledore, Plato, and the Lust for Power,” in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles*, ed. Gregory Bassham (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), pp. 128-40, quotation at p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

He shrinks from nothing, not from having sex with the person he thinks is his mother (or with any other person, or god, or animal whatsoever, for that matter), not from murdering anyone at all, not from consuming any sort of food; in short, there is no shameful or foolish act he leaves undone. (*Rep.* 571c-d)

Setting aside for the moment the question of sexual misconduct (to which we shall later return), we may note that Voldemort is guilty of the other two specific activities listed here. He has committed many murders; indeed, he first uses the killing curse to slay his own father and grandparents (*GoF* p. 646; *HBP* p. 367), an act that would come as no surprise to Socrates's friend Glaucon, who frets, "For my part, I am not at all confident about the tyrant's parents" (574b). Moreover, the first time the eleven-year-old Harry Potter sees Voldemort, he glimpses him feasting on the blood of a unicorn, showing that he does not shrink from consuming food which is not only forbidden but, as the centaur Firenze explains to Harry, utterly abhorrent:

"[I]t is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn," said Firenze. "Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips." (*SS* p. 258)

These are not isolated incidents; Voldemort commits many other atrocities that fall under Plato's general description of any "shameful or foolish act," not the least of which are the murders required for the production of the Horcruxes.

Since the portrait of the tyrannical man traces the span of his life, Plato acknowledges that the tyrant may have had some initial potential for good, which he repudiates as his tyrannical character comes to the fore:

[A]nd if he encounters in himself any opinions or desires that may be considered decent or that even exhibit a sense of shame, he expels them from himself until he is purged of self-discipline and is filled with self-imposed madness. (*Rep.* 573a-b)

So although the young Tom Riddle we encounter in Dumbledore's memories in *Half-Blood Prince* (*HBP* pp. 269 ff.) has already exhibited reprehensible behavior prior to becoming Lord Voldemort, he also appears promising and possibly redeemable. As he grows older, he develops into an increasingly evil individual. In their final confrontation, Harry makes a last-ditch attempt to save Voldemort by encouraging him to feel remorse for his actions (*DH* p. 741), much as in the *Star Wars* saga, Luke Skywalker appeals to the shred of

goodness that Darth Vader still retains.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, unlike Vader, Voldemort rejects his final chance for redemption; he has indeed expelled from himself any sense of decency or shame.

Plato describes tyrannical men in their early stages as those who “steal, commit burglary, snatch purses, rob travelers, defile temples, and enslave people” (*Rep.* 575b). These activities find their parallels in Tom Riddle’s childhood in the orphanage, where he steals from other children and commits other escalating acts of cruelty toward animals and the other children (*HBP* pp. 267-76). As such people advance in tyranny, their attitude toward others shifts as well:

Before these people come to power, when they are on their own and find themselves in need of anything, either they associate with flatterers who are eager to serve them in any way, or they ingratiate themselves with people who can supply their need; once they gain what they want, however, they discard those who once helped them. . . . Those with a tyrannical nature live their entire lives without ever being friends with anybody, being either a master or a slave to others as circumstances require, and never tasting freedom or true friendship. (*Rep.* 575e-576a)

These attitudes toward both inferiors and superiors also characterize the future Voldemort.

Tom Riddle’s association with his “flatterers who are eager to serve [him]” is seen in the classmates he gathers around him, the kernel of the group later known as the Death Eaters. When we see Riddle at Hogwarts, he is seldom alone; his Death Eater associates are not friends, however, but servants who do his bidding out of self-interest or fear. Dumbledore tells us that the members of Riddle’s circle of classmates “were a motley collection; a mixture of the weak seeking protection, the ambitious seeking some shared glory, and the thuggish gravitating toward a leader who could show them more refined forms of cruelty” (*HBP* pp. 361-62). Looking at his closest followers, we can see that he does not treat them as a person would treat his friends. Quirinus Quirrell, who allows Voldemort to use his body as a host, dies horribly as a result. As Dumbledore explains, “He [Voldemort] left Quirrell to die; he shows just as little mercy to his followers as his enemies” (*SS* p. 298). Peter Pettigrew, who becomes Voldemort’s dogsboddy after returning to human form near the end of *Prisoner of Azkaban* (*PoA* pp. 358-77), is casually used, then mutilated (*GoF* pp. 641-42), and finally discarded (*DH* pp. 470-71) by Voldemort. Voldemort threatens the family of Lucius Malfoy even after Malfoy has gone to prison for helping Voldemort (e.g.,

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Kasdan and George Lucas, *Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi*, DVD, Dir. Richard Marquand (Marin County, CA: Lucasfilm, 1983).

*HBP* p. 33); he also disregards the plea of his devoted follower Severus Snape and kills Lily Potter (*DH* p. 677). As a result of these actions, both Malfoy and Snape turn against Voldemort.

Our glimpses into Tom Riddle's teenage years also reveal the subservient character of the budding tyrant as he ingratiates himself with those from whom he can obtain useful information or favors. An excellent example provided within his student days is his cajoling manner toward Professor Horace Slughorn, who comments on Riddle's "careful flattery of the people who matter" (*HBP* p. 370). The portion of his sixteen-year-old self that has been encased in the diary-Horcrux poses as a sympathetic confidant to gain the trust of Ginny Weasley, who becomes his unknowing agent as well as a source of life energy. As Riddle brags to Harry, "I've always been able to charm the people I needed" (*CoS* p. 310). As a recent graduate of Hogwarts, Riddle works hard to beguile the elderly witch Hepzibah Smith, ostensibly in his role as an acquisitions agent for Borgin and Burkes, but really to obtain objects from her for his own personal use as Horcruxes (*HBP* pp. 433-38).

Riddle's behavior toward Dumbledore offers us an even fuller parallel with Plato's description of the tyrant, since we see the two of them interact at various stages. At their first encounter, it is clear that Tom Riddle treats Dumbledore with courtesy, not out of any genuine respect, but in order to obtain desired information as well as to retain his permission to enter Hogwarts. Scolded gently for his initial rudeness in demanding proof of Dumbledore's claim to be a wizard, Riddle immediately changes tack: "Riddle's expression hardened for the most fleeting moment before he said, in an unrecognizably polite voice, 'I'm sorry, sir. I meant—please, Professor, could you show me—?'" (*HBP* p. 272). Once at Hogwarts, Tom Riddle is courteous to Dumbledore; as a recent graduate, he displays forced politeness when he returns to ask for a teaching position (*HBP* pp. 441-45); as Lord Voldemort, he feels free to be rude to Dumbledore, spitting and snarling at him, since he believes that Dumbledore can no longer be of use to him (*OOTP* pp. 813-14).

Ultimately, Plato argues, the tyrant finds himself imprisoned by his own irrational desire and fear:

Is it not the case that the tyrant, having a nature such as we have described, shuts himself up in this type of prison, being full of many and manifold desires and fears? Although his soul is greedy, he alone of all the people in the city cannot go anywhere abroad, nor can he view the sights that other free citizens want to view. Instead, he shuts himself up in his house most of the time, living hidden away like a woman and envying his fellow citizens who travel abroad and see wonderful things. (*Rep.* 579b-c)

Throughout the duration of the series, since his unexpected failure to kill the infant Harry Potter, Voldemort exhibits the fearful reclusiveness of the tyrant. Initially, he is quite literally unable to move about, having no body of his own,

and existing only as a disembodied consciousness (*SS* p. 293). Then he must share the body of Quirrell, hiding under the folds of Quirrell's turban (*SS* p. 295). Even when he regains his own body (*GoF* pp. 639-43), he is still forced to hide and work in secret, fearful of discovery and imprisonment, until the time he can openly wield power in *Deathly Hallows*.

Near the end of his discussion of the tyrant's character, Plato offers a celebrated psychological portrait of the tyrant:

In addition . . . as a result of exercising power, he must be envious, suspicious, unjust, friendless, and irreligious, and become ever more so as time passes. He welcomes and nurtures every vice, and as a result he cannot avoid being extremely unhappy, nor can he avoid making those who associate with him just as unhappy. (*Rep.* 580a)

This portrait of extreme unhappiness serves as a particularly apt description of Voldemort's followers during the final novel of the series, when his power is in its ascendancy. We see in earlier books that his followers fear his wrath when they fail to do what he asks of them<sup>6</sup>; in the final book, they fear even the *possibility* of arousing his wrath. In the first chapter of *Deathly Hallows*, for example, Voldemort's Death Eaters shy away as he locks eyes with Snape, "apparently fearful that they themselves would be scorched by the ferocity of the gaze" (*DH* pp. 3-4). A few pages later, Voldemort discusses his failure, to date, to destroy Harry Potter, even admitting that his own mistakes have played a role. Nevertheless, his followers react as if he is about to attack them: "The company around the table watched Voldemort apprehensively, each of them, by his or her expression, afraid that they might be blamed for Harry Potter's continued existence" (*DH* p. 6).

The more power Voldemort secures, the more insecure his followers become. When Harry, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger are captured by Fenrir Greyback and brought to Malfoy Manor, Bellatrix Lestrange reacts not with joy but with terror, unnerved by their unexpected possession of the Sword of Gryffindor and uncertain of the identity of Harry, who is nearly unrecognizable owing to a spell cast by Hermione. When Lucius Malfoy is about to touch his Dark Mark to summon Voldemort, Bellatrix panics: "'STOP!' shrieked Bellatrix. 'Do not touch it, we shall all perish if the Dark Lord comes now!'" (*DH* p. 461). This fear among Voldemort's followers

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<sup>6</sup> For example, although Bellatrix Lestrange is confident that Voldemort considers her his most faithful and trusted follower, she is terrified when he learns of her failure to obtain Sybill Trelawney's prophecy intact (*OOTP* p. 812). Lucius Malfoy also disappoints Voldemort during this mission, and Severus Snape confirms Narcissa Malfoy's fear that Draco Malfoy's impossible assignment to kill Dumbledore is retribution for his father's failure: "The Dark Lord . . . does not forgive easily" (*HBP* p. 34).

works to the advantage of his enemies; it is their delay in summoning Voldemort that gives Harry and his friends time to escape.

### 3. The Tyrant's Tyrant and the Symposium

There is one aspect of Plato's account of the tyrant's character that does not appear to have a parallel in Rowling's portrait of Voldemort. According to Plato, the tyrant is himself tyrannized by desire (*erōs*), which leads him to commit all sorts of atrocities, such as incest or other forms of sexual misconduct (*Rep.* 571c). Since *Harry Potter* is a children's series, Rowling does not portray Voldemort as an individual consumed by inappropriate sexual desire. Given that Voldemort fits the portrait of the tyrant so very well, however, it would be odd were this one important factor to be entirely missing from his makeup.

One possible resolution to this apparent omission is to interpret improper *erōs* in the sense of excessive self-love. Williams and Kellner employ precisely this strategy. They offer evidence of Voldemort's egocentrism such as his decision to murder Lily Potter; Voldemort's disregard for Snape's request that he spare her life shows that he does not value other people, but only himself. Similarly, they argue, his placement of people under his control in selected positions within the Ministry of Magic demonstrates once again his willingness to use others instrumentally as well as his egocentric desire for power. They also cite Voldemort's creation of the Horcruxes as evidence of his lust for immortality, another sign of excessive self-love.<sup>7</sup>

This resolution might be extended even further by interpreting the creation of Horcruxes by Voldemort as unnatural acts of reproduction, and hence as inappropriate expressions of desire (*erōs*). From this perspective, Voldemort and Nicolas Flamel are alike: both seek immortality by unnatural means. Rather than attempting to secure immortality in his own person through alchemy, however, Voldemort desires to reproduce himself, so that the death of his body does not result in the extinction of his soul. The tyrannical character of Voldemort emerges through a consideration of the means through which he achieves this reproduction. Voldemort's acts of reproduction are unlike those of other humans: he does not direct sexual desire toward another person and he does not seek the generation of a person with a distinct, although related soul. The egoism of Voldemort will not allow him to join himself with another person in the act of reproduction—his reproduction must be asexual, rather than sexual, and thus magical, rather than biological. Moreover, the egoism of Voldemort would never allow him to cede power to another person, even one of his own offspring.

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<sup>7</sup> Williams and Kellner, "Dumbledore, Plato, and the Lust for Power," in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy*, ed. Bassham, pp. 136-37.

The portrait of Voldemort that emerges from this analysis is reminiscent of Ouranos and Kronos, the early ruling divinities in Greek mythology. Like these figures, Voldemort seeks to rule the universe and displays a lack of control over his physical desires and emotions. Like them, he also fears being overthrown by his offspring and takes drastic, unnatural action to prevent this occurrence. Voldemort, however, goes farther in his quest for power than either of his mythological antecedents; whereas they merely imprison the offspring they obtain through sexual reproduction,<sup>8</sup> Voldemort avoids this method of reproduction altogether. He even seeks to destroy the one person who (in a magical fashion) inherits qualities from him and is therefore most like a son to him—Harry Potter.

While this interpretation is not without merit and offers intriguing insights, we wish to offer an additional perspective that arises from the works of Plato himself. As Plato indicates in the *Symposium*, desire (*erōs*) is oriented toward beauty, “being a lover of Beauty by nature” (*Symp.* 203c). The speech of Socrates, presented through the voice of Diotima, his teacher in the art of *erōs* (*Symp.* 201d), explores the mystery of *erōs* by organizing the various senses of beauty into a hierarchy, which he then describes as a ladder leading to the ultimate principle of reality. By examining this account from the *Symposium* in more detail, we can see that the perversion of *erōs* characteristic of Voldemort is not merely confined to one sense of beauty, but in fact extends throughout the entire hierarchy of beauty.

**a. Beautiful bodies (*Symp.* 210a-c)**

Voldemort certainly has little regard for the beauty of his own body. His physical appearance throughout the course of his life is a guide to his increasingly evil nature. At the age of eleven, when Dumbledore first meets him, Tom Riddle is “his handsome father in miniature” (*HBP* p. 269). Yet, when he learns from Dumbledore during this meeting that he is a wizard, his face lights up with a disturbing, twisted form of happiness: “his finely carved features seemed somehow rougher, his expression almost bestial” (*HBP* p. 271). We meet him again at the age of fifteen at an informal gathering of the Slug Club. Among the boys gathered, “[h]is was the most handsome face” (*HBP* p. 369), but when he learns about Horcruxes from Professor Slughorn, he once again demonstrates “the sort of happiness that did not enhance his handsome features, but made them, somehow, less human . . . .” (*HBP* p. 499, ellipsis Rowling’s).

In *Chamber of Secrets*, Harry meets the sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle in the form of a Horcrux encased in a diary. This version of Voldemort has committed his first act of sufficiently atrocious evil to generate a Horcrux; the telltale sign of his loss of humanity is “an odd red gleam” that Harry notices in Riddle’s eyes (*CoS* p. 313). After graduating from Hogwarts, the eighteen-

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<sup>8</sup> Ouranos imprisons his offspring within the body of their mother, Gaia, thus preventing their birth, while Kronos swallows his offspring immediately upon their birth from Rhea, thus imprisoning them within his own belly.

year-old Riddle visits the elderly Hepzibah Smith to obtain the Hufflepuff cup and the Slytherin locket. Although he is “more handsome than ever” (*HBP* p. 434), his eyes once again hold a “red gleam” when he sees the cup (*HBP* p. 436) and “flash scarlet” (*HBP* p. 437) when Smith discusses the locket.

Ten years later, Riddle visits Dumbledore to ask for a position at Hogwarts; his physical deterioration signals a transitional phase from Riddle’s earlier appearance to his later identity as Lord Voldemort:

[H]e was no longer handsome Tom Riddle. It was as though his features had been burned and blurred; they were waxy and oddly distorted, and the whites of the eyes now had a permanently bloody look. (*HBP* p. 441)

At this point, Riddle is still mustering his Death Eaters, and while he has already created more Horcruxes, he is not yet ready to commit terrible crimes openly; in short, he has not yet fully come into his own as Lord Voldemort.

Our first introduction to Riddle as Lord Voldemort occurs near the end of *Sorter’s Stone*, when Harry sees Voldemort’s face peering out from the back of Quirrell’s head. It is “the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake” (*SS* p. 293). This is the adult Voldemort’s consistent appearance throughout the books, regardless of the condition of his body.

Dumbledore’s summary of Voldemort’s appearance connects this stage of the ladder to the next:

Lord Voldemort has seemed to grow less human with the passing years, and the transformation he has undergone seemed to me to be only explicable if his soul was mutilated beyond the realms of what we might call ‘usual evil’ . . . . (*HBP* p. 502, ellipsis Rowling’s)

While this may seem like an unsophisticated fairy-tale approach, in which good creatures are beautiful and bad ones are ugly, from Plato’s perspective a disinterest in the lowest level of beauty is a bad sign—one cannot begin to climb a ladder without stepping on its first rung.

***b. The beauty of people’s souls (Symp. 210c)***

Voldemort is obsessed with his own soul, especially considered as the principle that animates a living being. He has not, however, sought virtue, which according to Plato consists in the harmony of the soul (*Rep.* 443d). Indeed, in an attempt to ensure his immortality, he fragments his soul through the creation of Horcruxes. Instead of integrating his soul harmoniously, he has *disintegrated* it, achieving precisely the opposite of the harmony that Plato urges us to seek. In *Half-Blood Prince*, we learn that Voldemort has become so distant from the parts of his soul contained in his Horcruxes that he cannot even tell when one of them has been destroyed (*HBP* p. 508).

Furthermore, by fragmenting his soul, Voldemort irreparably damages it, creating, in Dumbledore's words, a "mutilated" soul (*HBP* p. 511). In the reconstruction of King's Cross station in Harry's consciousness, we see the portion of Voldemort's soul that was trapped in Harry's scar represented as a pathetic creature, whimpering in pain and sorrow (*DH* pp. 706-7).

Voldemort exhibits a twisted approach to the souls of others as well. For Plato, a harmonious soul is one governed by reason (*Rep.* 441e). Voldemort, however, seeks to replace the governing principles of other people's souls with his own reason, so that they no longer think for themselves. From a Platonic perspective, Voldemort's actions are inimical to the welfare of the souls of others, especially his followers. Unlike the just ruler, who is more concerned with the interest of his people than with his own benefit (*Rep.* 347d), Voldemort is truly a tyrant who becomes a ruler through his own power, subjugating all others to his self-serving will.

*c. The beauty of activities and laws (Symp. 210c)*

This sense of beauty essentially describes the art of politics, in which Plato emphasizes the formation of a society that enables its citizens to flourish. Voldemort, however, seeks to establish an oppressive hierarchy in which muggles are at the bottom, half-blooded wizards are in the middle, and pure-blooded wizards are near the top, with himself at the apex. From Plato's perspective, Voldemort's insistence on the superiority of purebloods and half-bloods and the exclusion of muggle-borns runs directly against the reality that people with superior talent may be born to parents of any level of ability. This reality is expressed metaphorically in the *Republic* by the "Myth of Metals" (*Rep.* 415a-c). According to this myth, the quality of a citizen's soul, and hence its proper role in the ideal community, may be expressed in terms of the value of various metals (gold, silver, bronze, or iron). Those with gold or silver in their souls belong in the guardian class; the gold souls would be best suited to rule, while the silver become those who protect and defend the city. Those whose souls contain bronze or iron flourish in lower-ranking occupations such as farming or manufacture. An essential component of the myth is the assertion that the metal in a child's soul need not match the metal in its parents' souls. Consequently, it is crucial to observe children carefully and educate them according to the kind of souls they have, rather than according to parentage. A farmer's child may have a gold or silver soul and should join the ranks of the guardians; a ruler's child whose soul contains iron or bronze should be trained as a farmer or craftsman. To insist upon bloodline alone as the determining factor of each person's role in society would invite disaster for the Republic, as well as for Voldemort's ideal hierarchy. Just as iron parents may have golden children and vice-versa, muggle parents may produce witches and wizards of great ability, while pureblooded magical parents may produce squibs (that is, non-magical children).

In addition, Voldemort's twisted attachment to politics and law is represented symbolically in *Deathly Hallows* by the new statues in the Ministry of Magic depicting the subjugation of muggles and inferior magical creatures by wizards (*DH* pp. 241-42). It is also depicted literally in events such as the trials over which Dolores Umbridge presides, in which muggle-born witches and wizards, as well as those of suspect lineage, are interrogated in an effort to root out those undeserving of the privilege of using magic (*DH* pp. 257-61).

**d. *The beauty of various kinds of knowledge (Symp. 210c-d)***

Voldemort is frequently described as being fascinated by knowledge, and it is often made clear that he has sought out information unknown to other wizards. He returns again and again to Hogwarts, a bastion of knowledge, and he chooses items significant to the history of Hogwarts to use as Horcruxes, such as the Hufflepuff cup, the Ravenclaw diadem, and the Slytherin locket.

We should not allow ourselves to be misled into believing that Voldemort is in agreement with Plato on the beauty of knowledge, however. Where Plato emphasizes the priority of the intelligible world, knowledge of which we seek for its own sake, Voldemort concerns himself solely with the perceptible world, knowledge of which he seeks in order to exercise power. Voldemort's quest for knowledge is thus truncated; he chooses not to focus on topics such as the power of love or the extraordinary capacities of house-elves, which would lead to a deeper understanding of magic and reality, but rather on the Dark Arts and the power they enable him to wield.

Unlike Plato's ideal philosopher, who seeks to discover knowledge in shared dialectic with his peers, Voldemort focuses on the unilateral acquisition of knowledge, confident that he is its exclusive possessor. His use of arcane knowledge to create Horcruxes so as to ensure his immortality is the ultimate embodiment of this attitude. Of course, Voldemort is mistaken in his belief that no one else knows about his Horcruxes, and so his improper orientation toward knowledge of the perceptible world proves to be his downfall.

**e. *The beautiful itself (Symp. 210e)***

For Plato, the highest sense of beauty is the Beautiful itself, which serves as the ultimate principle of reality, identical with the Good of the *Republic*. The Beautiful itself is the goal of *erōs* (*Symp.* 210e, 211b-c), and when a person discerns this beauty, a remarkable transformation occurs:

Only at that moment, when he sees the way in which Beauty becomes visible, will it become possible for him to beget not images of virtue (since he has not attained a mere image of Beauty), but true virtue (since he has attained true Beauty). Moreover, having begotten and nurtured true virtue, it is possible for him to become a friend of the gods, and if indeed it is possible for anyone to become immortal, it will be possible for him as well. (*Symp.* 212a)

According to Plato, the ascent to the Beautiful itself is the only path to true immortality, and this ascent must be accomplished in a particular fashion: “in the proper sequence and in the correct manner” (*Symp.* 210e). Voldemort’s failure to ascend properly the ladder of beauty condemns him to strive for the false immortality of the Horcruxes, a grotesque caricature of true immortality.

Thus, by examining each sense of beauty within the hierarchy enumerated by Plato in the *Symposium*, we can discern in Voldemort a consistently improper orientation of *erōs*, precisely as required by Plato’s portrait of the tyrant in *Republic IX*.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Lord Voldemort is an extraordinarily vivid literary manifestation of the tyrant described by Plato in *Republic IX*. Many of his actions and characteristics, such as the commission of crimes that escalate from petty theft to cold-blooded murder, his treatment of other human beings solely in terms of their instrumental value, as well as the fear and misery he spreads to everyone around him, correspond closely to Plato’s depiction of the tyrannical person. Our exploration of each facet of this portrait, moreover, leads us to recognize that Voldemort, like every tyrant, exhibits improper desire (*erōs*), which extends beyond the mere inappropriate sexual desire cited in the *Republic* to a fundamental perversion of every sense of beauty addressed in the *Symposium*. This recognition not only helps to elucidate the application of Plato’s portrait of the tyrant to Voldemort, but also permits us to attain a fuller understanding of the portrait of the tyrant itself. Thus an examination of literary works, even contemporary popular novels marketed to children, can serve a valuable function in illuminating philosophical treatises from antiquity intended for adults.

# “Neither Can Live While the Other Survives”: The Driving Force of Revenge in *Harry Potter*

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## 1. “The Boy Who Lived”: An Unlikely Revenger

Since the 1990s, J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series has grown from a scribble on a napkin to a world-wide cultural phenomenon. The books have caused people to line up outside of bookstores hours, even days, before their release, and have led to a billion-dollar movie franchise. But what makes the story so enticing? What made the series grow from yet another Young Adult fantasy series to a world-wide phenomenon, even, some would say, an obsession? Some will argue that it is Rowling’s creativity, her incredible talent for world-building. Others claim that it is the archetypal struggle between good and evil. While I don’t discount either of these arguments, I argue that the real driving force behind the series, and its success, is revenge. There are few less likely revengers than Harry Potter—a shy, quiet eleven-year-old boy who, when we first meet him, wants nothing more than a friend. However, just as the books move from childhood to reluctant adulthood, and the plot becomes more twisted, Harry changes from innocent to revenger. Like Shakespeare’s character Hamlet, the revenge tragedy genre’s most well-known face, Harry is reluctant to adopt this role for most of the seven-volume series. Ultimately, though, Harry not only acts as a revenger, but also struggles with the same complex dilemmas central to Renaissance drama—the loss of family, the loss of self, and the struggle for agency.

## 2. Rowling and the Revenge Tragedy Genre

Revenge is the driving force of the *Harry Potter* series. Like every revenge tragedy in the genre’s canon, the series is framed by two defining events: the initial crime and the final, bloody battle. The series begins on the night that Harry’s parents are murdered, and ends sixteen years later with the “Battle of Hogwarts” (*DH* p. 608). The initial murder is characteristic of revenge tragedies as it involves a close family member. For instance, in *Hamlet*, the revenger’s father is also killed. Hamlet is literally haunted by his father’s death and, throughout the play, is torn between wanting to revenge his father and simply wanting to remember him. Harry, whose parents and loved ones are all killed, struggles with the same decision throughout the novels.

Early on in the series, Rowling characterizes Harry in a way that predisposes him to become a revenger. A highlight among nearly all revengers in the genre's canon is a value system that places a high premium on family honor, chivalry, and heroism. It is a societal value, but also a personality trait that revengers share, and seems to predispose them to become revengers. For instance, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the play's main revenger Hieronimo feels honor-bound to revenge the murder of his son Horatio. When he is slow to take revenge, he berates himself: "see, see, oh, see thy shame, Hieronimo . . . to neglect the swift revenge of thy Horatio."<sup>1</sup> The shame that Hieronimo feels for neglecting revenge reveals a personal and societal value system laden with familial honor, duty, and heroism. Though young, Harry shares this value system, and this predisposes him to become a revenger. During the Hogwarts sorting ceremony, the Sorting Hat debates between putting Harry into Slytherin, whose members are described as "cunning" people who will "use any means to achieve their ends," or Gryffindor, whose "daring, nerve, and chivalry set [them] apart" (*SS* p. 118). Against the Sorting Hat's advice, Harry chooses to be in Gryffindor and reveals his heroic moral code (*SS* p. 125). As the series progresses, Harry is further revealed to have a "weakness for heroics," which Voldemort eventually exploits (*OotP* p. 782). The importance that Harry places on heroism, honor, and chivalry causes him to feel honor-bound to revenge his parents' deaths, and thus predisposes him to become a revenger.

Like the most famous revenger, Hamlet, Harry is slow to accept the path of revenge. The first five books of the saga seem to lead to this choice. Like a typical revenger, Harry feels frustrated that redress through the established legal system is impossible because the perpetrator, Voldemort, is in a position of overwhelming power. In *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry is unable to go through the traditional legal channels at the Ministry of Magic, because the Ministry represses the knowledge that Voldemort has returned, and even terrorizes Harry for saying otherwise (*OotP* p. 245). Once the Ministry admits the fact of Voldemort's return, it is a short time before the Ministry itself is taken over by Voldemort and his followers (*DH* p. 159). Voldemort's power, combined with the Ministry's lack of cooperation and then corruption, make it impossible for Harry to go through the established legal system, leaving "lawless" revenge as his only option for redress.

Meanwhile, there is tremendous psychological and social pressure on Harry to take revenge. Harry collects mementos, which remind him of his need for revenge, most prominently "the locket with the note signed R.A.B.," which reminds him of Dumbledore's death, and the shard of a mirror that was once Sirius Black's (his late godfather) (*DH* p. 15). John Kerrigan discusses such mementos in *Revenge Tragedy*, describing how revengers, specifically Hieronimo of *The Spanish Tragedy*, "[set] out to secure retribution by

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Kyd, "The Spanish Tragedy," in *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Katharine Eisaman Maus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 2-91, quotation at p. 65.

equipping [themselves] with objects charged with remembrance.”<sup>2</sup> These *memento mori* remind the revenger and the audience of the crime, and constantly prompt the revenger toward vengeance. In addition to the psychological pressure to seek revenge created by the *memento mori*, Harry also faces extreme social pressure, most notably in the last two books. The wizarding community comes to think that Harry is “‘The Chosen One,’ . . . the only one who will be able to rid [them] of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named” (*HBP* p. 39). Because of this belief, the entire wizarding community pressures Harry into action. Harry is faced with the revenger’s most common dilemma: a feeling of being honor-bound to seek revenge, but knowing that doing so will go against society’s established rules.

Though all of the books are driven by revenge, Harry doesn’t become a revenger until the end of the sixth book, *Half-Blood Prince*. Kerrigan describes how “the revenger . . . suspends his own identity” when he decides to seek revenge.<sup>3</sup> Harry, likewise, suspends his identity when he finally accepts the role of the revenger. The first step on this path is Harry’s conscious choice to remain in the Wizarding World. After Sirius Black’s death, Harry tells himself that he “can’t shut [himself] away or—or crack up” (*HBP* p. 77). He realizes he can’t escape his duty to revenge by living with the Dursleys in the Muggle World. Harry seems to be aware that, in order to become a revenger, he can no longer be “normal”; he can no longer be himself. At Dumbledore’s funeral, Harry makes the final decision to begin “hunting Voldemort” alone, and becomes a true revenger (*HBP* p. 647). He decides to end his relationship with Ginny Weasley, referring to their brief relationship as “something out of someone else’s life” because of its normalcy (*HBP* p. 646). He realizes that, once he takes on the role of revenger, he can no longer lead a normal, teenage life, and can no longer totally be himself.

Once Harry accepts this role, he also fulfills a traditional characteristic of the revenger: he loses his moral code. In the *Harry Potter* series, there are three Unforgivable Curses, outlined in *Goblet of Fire*: the Imperius Curse, used to control an individual against his or her will, the Cruciatus Curse, used to torture, and Avada Kedavra, the killing curse. After taking on the role of the revenger, Harry uses both the Imperius and the Cruciatus Curses, reluctantly at first, but eventually to great effect. In *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry first attempts to use the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix Lestrange after she kills his godfather, Sirius. However, he is unable to, because, as Bellatrix points out to him mockingly, “[the user needs] to *mean* them, . . . to really want to cause pain—to enjoy it” (*OotP* p. 810). His “righteous anger” is ineffective; he has not yet lost his moral code and become a revenger, and thus cannot properly perform the Unforgivable spells (*OotP* p. 810). After becoming a true revenger, however, he uses both the Imperius

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<sup>2</sup> John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Curse and the Cruciatus Curse in *Deathly Hallows*. Harry uses the Imperius Curse first, putting two individuals under the curse while he, Ron, Hermione, and Griphook infiltrate Gringotts Bank. Upon realizing that the goblins know that Hermione is an imposter, Harry puts a goblin under the Imperius Curse. Harry is hesitant to perform the spell and only does so when he knows that they are in imminent danger. The second time, however, Harry “[acts] without thinking,” and places Travers under the Imperius Curse as well (*DH* p. 531). This reveals that Harry begins to lose his moral code after performing an Unforgivable Curse. At first, he is hesitant to perform the curse and listens to multiple warnings from Griphook before acting. After first using the Imperius Curse, it becomes easier for Harry to perform the Unforgivable Curse, and he can even place an individual under this spell without thinking. After performing the Imperius Curse, Harry soon becomes able to perform the Cruciatus Curse, further revealing the loss of his moral code. In the *Deathly Hallows* chapter “The Sacking of Severus Snape,” Harry uses the Cruciatus Curse on Amycus Carrow after Carrow spits on Professor McGonagall. He uses the curse so effectively that Carrow is “lifted off his feet . . . , smashed into the front of a bookcase and crumple[s], insensible, to the floor” (*DH* p. 593). Harry’s ability to use the Unforgivable Curses effectively reveals the loss of his moral code.

### 3. “All the Difference in the World”: Harry’s Struggle for Agency

The central conflict of many of the revenge tragedies in the literary canon is the revenger’s struggle to attain agency. The revenger is faced with a fundamental paradox. Because of the initial crime, and the fact that there is no course of redress through typical legal channels, the revenger is forced into a difficult position. While he gains agency by choosing to take revenge and redress the wrong inflicted on him by the perpetrator, in doing so he loses agency by falling into a role that is prescribed for him by others (that is, society, the personification of Revenge, etc.). Kerrigan discusses this paradox in relation to *The Spanish Tragedy*: “In one way, [Hieronimo] is compelled to travel towards Revenge, for the goddess of his play, Proserpine, has granted Andrea a providential as well as a judgmental ‘doom,’ and Hieronimo is the instrument of her will. But in another sense he actively chooses to make the journey.”<sup>4</sup> Here, Kerrigan highlights the central struggle for agency that revengers face. *The Spanish Tragedy*’s revenger, Hieronimo, is a brilliant illustration of this paradox. Throughout the play, the personification of Revenge controls the events that take place.<sup>5</sup> From the beginning of the play when the ghost of Don Andrea, whose death begins the chain of events that leads Hieronimo to revenge, meets Hades’s wife Proserpine to assign Andrea his “doom” and subsequently summons Revenge, there is a strong sense that

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>5</sup> Kyd, “The Spanish Tragedy,” in *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Eisaman Maus, p. 5.

Hieronimo's revenge is fated by the gods.<sup>6</sup> Even when he chooses to revenge his son's death, his actions are scripted by the personification of Revenge, which strips Hieronimo of agency, and thus reveals the unique and maddening struggle of all revengers: while he seems to gain agency by choosing to revenge, he also loses agency by falling into the scripted role of a revenger.

This paradox is also central to the *Harry Potter* series. Like Hieronimo, Harry's fate to become a revenger and to kill Voldemort seems to be destined in Sybill Trelawney's prophecy: "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. . . . Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies . . . and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not . . . and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives" (*OotP* p. 841). Because of the prophecy, Harry seems fated to become a revenger. Because Voldemort chose to "mark" Harry as his equal by attempting to kill him, Harry is inextricably tied to Voldemort. There is a strong sense in the final three books that Harry is doomed to face Voldemort, that he is "The Chosen One." This stems both from the prophecy and from Harry's own personification of Revenge, which comes to script his actions. At the same time, however, Harry is also able to "choose" to become a revenger, to pursue Voldemort. In a pivotal discussion with Harry, Dumbledore struggles to make Harry understand the fundamental paradox that he faces—that Harry can simultaneously choose to become a revenger and be destined to revenge. When Harry protests, saying "it all comes to the same thing," that Harry has "got to try and kill him" either way, Dumbledore breaks in: "Got to? . . . Of course you've got to! But not because of the prophecy! Because you, yourself, will never rest until you've tried! We both know it!" (*HBP* p. 511). Here, Rowling introduces the revenger's struggle for agency, the central paradox that revengers face, and tries to help the reader come to terms with it. Perhaps more than other revenge tragedies, Rowling attempts to solve this paradox, allowing Harry both to choose and to be destined to revenge.

But Harry's struggle for agency doesn't end with his choice to become a revenger; once Harry makes his choice, he struggles against the scripted role that Dumbledore, who acts as the personification of Revenge in the *Harry Potter* series, creates for him. Harry's revenge and eventual killing of Voldemort is planned and controlled. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the personification of Revenge is the one pulling the strings. As the play progresses, Revenge and the ghost of Don Andrea sit on the sidelines and watch the events that lead to the revenge of Don Andrea's death. At one point, Revenge falls asleep, and Don Andrea forces him awake, worried that nothing is being done to avenge his death because of Revenge's lack of attention. However, Revenge replies that "though I sleep, yet is my mood soliciting their souls."<sup>7</sup> After this, he shows Andrea a "dumb show," which reveals the events

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

to come: a bloody wedding and the completion of Andrea's revenge.<sup>8</sup> The personification of Revenge controls all of the events of the play, even while he is not present in the action, or even conscious.

In *Harry Potter*, the figure of Dumbledore acts in a similar way. Particularly after his death in *Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore scripts all of Harry's actions. Much of *Deathly Hallows* involves Harry attempting to puzzle out the clues Dumbledore has left for him, Ron, and Hermione in order to defeat Voldemort. Though Dumbledore appears to be absent, Harry finds that Dumbledore has carefully planned the death of Voldemort. After Dumbledore's physical death, "the portrait of Dumbledore" is able to continue to orchestrate Harry's revenge with the help of Severus Snape (*DH* p. 689). In Snape's memories, Dumbledore instructs Snape in each step of Harry's revenge, telling him how and when to hide the sword, scripting Harry's actions so that he constantly feels as if he is unraveling a code, a riddle left for him by Dumbledore (*DH* p. 689). Similar to other revengers, Harry goes back and forth between accepting the scripted role created for him by Dumbledore and wanting to rebel against it. As he watches Ron and Hermione on one occasion, Harry realizes that they "could walk away if they wanted to [while Harry] could not" (*DH* 278). He feels especially resentful toward, and even betrayed by, Dumbledore when he discovers in *Deathly Hallows* that Dumbledore's plan for Harry's revenge inevitably leads to Harry's death (*DH* chap. 34). Still, however, Harry accepts his fate. Harry knows that he must not only move toward Voldemort's end, but also to "his [own] end" (*DH* p. 693).

#### 4. "A Power Beyond the Reach of Any Magic": The Subversion of the Revenge Tragedy Genre

Until this point, Rowling follows the model of a revenge tragedy closely, allowing young readers to grapple with the complex themes of agency and morality. However, in "The Forest Again" chapter of *Deathly Hallows*, Rowling begins ever so slightly to subvert the genre. Like many revengers, Harry accepts his own death as part of the cycle of revenge. Both the revenger and the perpetrator must die in order to expunge society of the chaos and disorder that their conflict causes. Harry resigns himself to this fact after realizing that he is the last Horcrux, meaning that part of Voldemort's fragmented soul resides within Harry's body. He must die in order for Voldemort ever to be killed and revenge to be achieved. After resigning himself to this fact, he walks to meet his death—a kind of suicide—and Voldemort "kills" him.

However, all Voldemort manages to kill is the fragmented piece of Voldemort's soul which resides within Harry, making Harry's soul "whole, and completely [his] own" (*DH* p. 708). Therefore, Voldemort expunges the chaotic and disorderly part of Harry's soul, allowing the "complete," non-

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

revenger Harry to continue to live without disturbing society. Voldemort, however, is not so lucky. Following the tradition of the revenge tragedy, Voldemort is killed. However, he is not killed by the new, “complete” Harry, but by Voldemort’s “own rebounding curse” (*DH* p. 744).

Rowling’s subversion of the genre here is jarring. She modifies the revenge tragedy genre to allow her revenger to live normally in society. Harry achieves his revenge and manages to eliminate Voldemort, but only through a willingness to engage in self-sacrifice. By deviating from the genre at the final moment, allowing Harry to survive through love, Rowling suggests that love and revenge—two seemingly polar forces—may be intertwined to eliminate evil.

At the end of the saga, the reader is relieved that Voldemort has been killed and that society has been expunged. But at the same time, Rowling’s jarring subversion of the revenge tragedy genre leaves the reader somewhat stunned and dissatisfied. The series ends with an epilogue, showing the main characters nineteen years later. Without Voldemort, normalcy has returned; however, Harry is no longer an exciting character. His characteristic scar has “not pained [him] for nineteen years” (*DH* p. 759). The reader’s dissatisfaction with the normalcy of the ending connects *Harry Potter* even more to the revenge tragedy genre, because it reveals the mixed repulsion and intense attraction that humans feel toward revenge.

## 5. Conclusion

Harry not only operates as a revenger, but deals with the complex dilemma of agency and identity that troubled playwrights during the Renaissance. The fact that the series operates as a revenge tragedy raises the uncomfortable question: why a revenge tragedy for children? In the *Harry Potter* series, Rowling doesn’t shy away from the ugly, the hateful, and the painful. By making revenge a driving force in the series for both Harry and Voldemort, two opposing characters, Rowling powerfully illustrates to her young readers that people, and life, are imperfect. Furthermore, the fact that children are so wholly invested in the series, and compelled to continue reading until the final revenge is achieved, suggests that revenge is an innate, even involuntary, part of human nature. In the *Harry Potter* series, Rowling highlights an uncomfortable truth about human nature: that humans, of all ages, are at once horrified and enticed by revenge.



# Spells and Hate Speech: Linguistic Violence and Vulnerability in the *Harry Potter* Series

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*“Dumbledore is dead!”* Voldemort hurled the words at Harry as though they would cause him unendurable pain.  
—*Deathly Hallows* (p. 592)

## 1. Introduction

In “On Linguistic Injury,” Judith Butler puts literary and linguistic theories of performativity into a political context.<sup>1</sup> Butler takes her terminology from J. L. Austin’s seminal essay “Performative Utterances.”<sup>2</sup> In that essay, Austin considers performative speech, which he describes as

perfectly straightforward utterances, with ordinary verbs in the first person singular present indicative active, and yet we shall see at once that they couldn’t possibly be true or false. Furthermore, if a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something.<sup>3</sup>

From this basic definition Austin goes on to explain the rules that govern this particular use of words. Performativity relies on rules which include, but are not limited to: the existence and acceptance of a convention if the words rely on this convention to perform their action; the absence of “infelicities,” such as insincerity in the speaker’s intention; and understanding on the part of the

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, “On Linguistic Injury,” in Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-41.

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Austin, “Performative Utterances,” in J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 233-92.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

listener. Actions such as promising, marrying, and naming are all given as examples of how we use performative speech.

Butler develops and interrogates Austin's theories in much of her work, most famously in her account of gender as performative in *Gender Trouble*.<sup>4</sup> However, in "On Linguistic Injury" she focuses on the implications that performativity has for the mediation of race and gender discourses through hate speech and pornography. Butler finds Austin's theories to be crucial to debates on these matters as these are instances in which it is necessary to think of a form of "speech" as inseparable from conduct. In J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series we can see such concerns enacted through the novels' metaphor of "words as weapons." In the novels, the "as though" in the quotation that serves as the epigraph of this article is elided, and the books take the reader from the realm of analogy to that of metaphor. The scar on Harry's forehead becomes the physical signifier of the wounding power of words, a power that is literalized as the metaphor of magical injury throughout the books. This highlights what Butler refers to, following Austin, as the illocutionary function of words, which is an implied action or performance that the words carry with them. Butler writes:

[L]inguistic injury acts like physical injury, but the use of the simile suggests that this is, after all, a comparison of unlike things . . . . Indeed it appears that there is no language specific to the problem of linguistic injury, which is, as it were, forced to draw its vocabulary from physical injury. In this sense, it appears that the metaphorical connection between physical and linguistic vulnerability is essential to the description of linguistic vulnerability itself.<sup>5</sup>

In literalizing these metaphors the novels show the powerful effects of linguistic vulnerability and linguistic injury, as well as the problematic relationship between them. The metaphor of "words that wound," that is, the metaphor of physical for linguistic injury, is, as Butler says, a comparison of unlike things. It is as though in order to discuss the effects of words we must use an intervening metaphor; we cannot talk about the pain of words in a direct fashion. The "essential" connection that Butler makes between physical and linguistic vulnerability becomes exposed in the *Harry Potter* novels and, so, can be discussed and challenged, albeit with the intervening distance of the metaphor.

In this article I will discuss how this connection between physical and linguistic vulnerability becomes exposed in the *Harry Potter* novels, first, through the power of naming and of linguistic communities, and then through the novels' depiction of hate speech as differentiated from spells. I will then

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Butler, "On Linguistic Injury," p. 4.

discuss the power of citation to shape the future of linguistic communities, allowing the use of hate speech to be curtailed and changed. I will conclude by suggesting how Butler's analysis and Rowling's universe can be seen alongside each other to suggest a way of transcending the harm of wounding words while still functioning within the boundaries of language and its historicity.

## 2. Naming and Community

The *Harry Potter* books may appear morally simplistic as they ostensibly create a reductive dichotomy of good versus evil. However, in considering the socio-linguistic status of the characters in the novels—in particular, the novels' central doubling of Harry/Lord Voldemort—the moral boundaries are revealed as complex, built as they are on the power of language and naming. The power of naming is hugely significant in the novels, especially in *Philosopher's Stone*, in which Harry enters the Wizarding World for the first time, having been taken from it before he can remember and being “kept in the dark” (quite literally, in the cupboard under the stairs) by his muggle (or non-wizarding) uncle and aunt (Vernon and Petunia Dursley). On entering the wizarding community, Harry discovers not only a new set of allegiances, but also a new linguistic community that has constructed his identity wholly in his absence. Butler writes that “[o]ne may meet that socially constituted self by surprise, with alarm or pleasure, even with shock.”<sup>6</sup> Harry shows his distance from the socially constituted self to whom he has recently been introduced:

“He *is*,” said the first twin. “Aren't you?” he added to Harry.

“What?” said Harry.

“*Harry Potter*,” chorused the twins.

“Oh, him,” said Harry. “I mean, yes, I am.” (*PS* pp. 71-72)

The distance Harry feels toward his socially constituted self, shown by his reference to this construction in the third person, asserts his special status in the novel and draws attention to the way Harry has been constituted in language, outside of any linguistic community he might recognize.

Part of what binds the wizarding community together, both linguistically and in political allegiance, is the way its members refer to Harry's nemesis, Lord Voldemort. Voldemort is almost exclusively referred to as “You-Know-Who.” The linguistic complicity suggested in this term—a term that binds the addresser to the addressee—strengthens the identification that the wizards feel toward each other and refers to their shared history, a history from which Harry has been excluded since his entry into language. He refers to Voldemort by his correct name:

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

“I didn’t know anything about being a wizard or about my parents or Voldemort—”

Ron gasped.

“What?” said Harry.

“*You said You-Know-Who’s name!*” said Ron, sounding both shocked and impressed, “I’d have thought you of all people—”

“I’m not trying to be *brave* or anything, saying the name,” said Harry, “I just never knew you shouldn’t. See what I mean?” (*PS* p. 75)

Harry does not know the history of Voldemort’s name nor his own history, and so he does not understand the power behind the name, the power that the other characters recognize and so try to displace by substituting Voldemort’s name for the claim to solidarity signified in the term “You-Know-Who.” We can see how the name has an injurious effect, to the point of an effect on the body through Ron Weasley’s gasp, a physical sign that shows the direct connection between the word and the psychosomatic pain it causes. Butler writes:

Clearly, injurious names have a history, one that is invoked and reconsolidated at the moment of utterance, but not explicitly told. This is not simply a history of how they have been used . . . it is the way such histories are installed and arrested in and by the name. The name has, thus, a historicity, what might be understood as the history which has become internal to a name . . . a repetition that congeals, that gives the name its force.<sup>7</sup>

Harry, as outside of that history, does not recognize the force of the name as the linguistic locus of the trauma associated with Voldemort’s insidious reign. This period is figured in the novels as a social trauma on the level of an almost-Holocaust, which they understand and relive when the name Voldemort is used. Harry clearly realizes the importance of these linguistic bonds from which he has been excluded as we see him attempt to establish such a connection with Ron through the emphatic “See what I mean?”

Harry may be excluded from this community, as he was removed from it at the time of his parents’ murder, when he was a one-year old and too young to remember. However, his entry into language is at the crux of the novels’ treatment of what can simplistically be referred to as “good” and “evil.” Butler describes the entry of the subject into language as “interpellation,” heavily bound up with naming and the violence of survival and threatened death. This is exemplified through the history of Harry Potter, a subject who is brought into language by the threat of annihilation. Voldemort’s Avada Kedavra, the most fatal curse known to wizards, brings

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

Harry to language as he struggles for survival and overcomes certain death—he is forced to recognize himself as an individual, independent of his parents, through his orphanhood. The violence remains as a physical scar on his forehead, as through his naming Harry is injured:

But the name holds out another possibility as well: by being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call. Thus the injurious address may appear to fix or paralyse the one it hails, but it may produce an unexpected or enabling response.<sup>8</sup>

The Avada Kedavra curse is derived from the term “Abracadabra,” a nonsense word used in magical performances. Perhaps not coincidentally, some claim that the origins of the word Abracadabra lie in the Aramaic phrase for “I create as I speak,” giving it the implicit suggestion of performativity.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, Harry as a linguistic being is created in this act of destruction. The curse becomes Harry’s induction into language and, just as Butler says, it fixes him; it gives him his identity as it marks him (physically and linguistically) as apart from other people, while at the same time producing the “enabling response” that allows Harry to stand as a beacon of power against Voldemort. The wizards refer to him afterwards as “the boy who lived.” Rowling uses this as the title for the first chapter of *Philosopher’s Stone*, obviously as a play on the traditional beginning of a children’s story that uses the formula, “There once was a boy who lived . . . .” In this context, however, the phrase also takes on the suggestion of the phrase, “The boy who lived to tell the tale.” Harry survives in spite of Voldemort’s attempt to remove him from language altogether through his annihilation. We can therefore see Harry as a locus for the conflict between naming as injurious and naming as necessary to identity. The incident with Voldemort will shape the rest of Harry’s life and defines his identity from the moment of his introduction into the Wizarding World. Butler writes:

There is no way to protect against that primary vulnerability and susceptibility that solicits existence, to that primary dependency on a language we never made in order to acquire a tentative ontological status.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Some sources citing this etymology of the word “Abracadabra” are gathered in Craig Conley, *Magic Words: A Dictionary* (San Francisco, CA: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2008), p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Butler, “On Linguistic Injury,” p. 26.

This dependency on language is described by Butler almost as original sin, as she refers to the subject constituted in language as “one afflicted with impurity from the start.”<sup>11</sup> Like original sin, language is handed down through the generations with no choice on the part of children, such as Harry, who are brought into a linguistic system that they did not make. This is because language is citational; it relies on repetition to give it meaning and, as such, can never truly be original or specific to an individual. From Harry’s entry into language he, like all of us, is dependent on that language and on the community with whom it is shared.

Harry shows that he has been constituted in language by Voldemort through his constant insecurity that he will become like Voldemort, or that Voldemort is connected with him in some deep and irreversible way. For this reason the books cannot be criticized for a reductive view of good and evil. Paradoxically, Voldemort has created Harry and made him who he is through the act of attempting to annihilate him. Significantly, this link is shown through the other language that Harry was introduced to by Voldemort, namely, Parseltongue, the ability to converse with snakes:

“You can speak Parseltongue, Harry,” said Dumbledore calmly, “because Lord Voldemort . . . can speak Parseltongue. Unless I’m much mistaken, he transferred some of his powers to you the night he gave you that scar.” . . .  
“Voldemort put a bit of himself in *me*?” Harry said, thunderstruck.  
(*CoS* p. 245)

These close connections between Voldemort and Harry develop through the series and show how Harry’s constitution in language and his identity are wrapped up in Voldemort’s. The named and the one who gives the name are destined to exist together, both in mutual dependency and in opposition. The link between the entry into language and original sin is again brought to mind through the connection with the serpent image, and suggests that one is inevitably always-already tainted, as one is necessarily constituted in language and steeped in language’s historicity from the time when one is able to seize some agency.

Voldemort, and the constitution of his name through the books, also provide a fascinating example of the power of naming. In *Chamber of Secrets*, Voldemort takes on the guise of Tom Marvolo Riddle, the boy he was when he was a student at Hogwarts, preserved through a magical diary. At the climax of the novel Riddle writes his name in the air with his wand, then rearranges the letters to reveal that his name is an anagram of I AM LORD VOLDEMORT. He explains:

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

“You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father’s name forever? I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin himself, through my mother’s side? I, keep the name of a foul, common Muggle, who abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch? No, Harry—I fashioned myself a new name, a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!” (*CoS* p. 231)

Voldemort here seems to suggest that he believes his agency in choosing his name is part of what gave him his power in the first place. In distancing himself from his questionable background, he creates a name that he must live up to and so prophecies his own destiny. Of course, the name Voldemort is not an original name lacking in historicity, just as the spells in the novels are not original creations. The ritual and citation needed to give words their power is present in all of the magical words in the novels. The name Voldemort is French for “flight of death,” and the spells in the novel are simply Latinate approximations of the effects the spells produce. While Voldemort claims to have “fashioned [himself] a new name,” he has in fact taken on an old name, using the power already instilled in the words before he uses them as a name for himself. He has not even escaped his specific origins, or what he sees as the shame of being half-muggle: his new name is still an anagram of the old, so he fails even in purging the history of his origins from his name. In believing he has created his name for himself Voldemort fails to acknowledge the power of language; he places himself above language. He may believe that in changing his name he is distancing himself from the father who abandoned him, but, even in that father’s absence, he is still responsible for bringing Voldemort to language in the same way that Voldemort does for Harry. Voldemort’s name is based on his father’s; just as Harry is brought to language by his orphanhood, so Voldemort is brought to language by his father’s abandonment. It is arguably Voldemort’s mistaken belief in his sovereignty over language that leads him into the hubris that will enable his downfall.

### **3. Wounding Words**

Voldemort’s attitude toward his “foul, common Muggle” father is extended to all muggles and amounts to racism against the non-Wizarding World. This is a theme the books often return to, particularly through the term “Mudblood,” a highly offensive word used to describe wizards or witches with muggle parents. This term again muddies the waters (so to speak) between what constitutes a spell or a curse and hate speech. When Draco Malfoy uses this word for the first time, toward Hermione Granger, Ron responds with an attempt to curse him. The fact that a curse which will have physical ramifications is considered an appropriate response to the insult, shows the force of the words and again highlights the similarities between spells and wounding words of the kind that are used in our world. The

situation is more interesting because although the word is directed at Hermione she, as a muggle-born, does not attach meaning to the word. Harry does not understand the word either, as a newcomer to the wizards' linguistic community:

Harry knew at once that Malfoy had said something really bad because there was an instant uproar at his words. (*CoS* p. 87)

[Hermione] said, "But I don't know what it means. I could tell it was really rude, of course." (*CoS* p. 89)

Again, the importance of the linguistic community is shown through the exclusion not only of Harry, our narrative center in the story, but also the exclusion of the one at whom the word is aimed. Despite the fact that Hermione is the one insulted, the word still manages to cause distress to the others who overhear purely because of its invocation and the memories the word elicits. The word is divisive and affects the whole community, not just the one who says it and she at whom it is directed.

This incident could be seen as the beginning of Hermione's political awakening as she allies herself in the later novels with the cause of the house-elves who are kept in a position of slavery in wizarding society. In her efforts to have the house-elves' situation recognized, she takes the language surrounding house-elf oppression seriously:

"We've been working like house-elves here!" [said Ron].  
Hermione raised her eyebrows.  
"It's just an expression," said Ron hastily. (*GoF* p. 197)

This solidarity deepens as the novels progress toward what seems to be a return to power for Voldemort. In a conversation with the goblin Griphook, Hermione's identification of the mudbloods as a social category, one in need of protection from persecution, aids the ability of the Wizarding World and the wider magical community to join forces in driving out Voldemort's fascist regime:

"As the Dark Lord becomes ever more powerful, your race is set still more firmly above mine! Gringotts falls under Wizarding rule, house-elves are slaughtered, and who amongst the wand-carriers protests?"  
"We do!" said Hermione. She had sat up straight, her eyes bright.  
"We protest! And I'm hunted quite as much as any goblin or elf, Griphook! I'm a Mudblood!"  
"Don't call yourself—" Ron muttered.  
"Why shouldn't I?" said Hermione. "Mudblood, and proud of it! I've got no higher position under this new order than you have, Griphook! It was me they chose to torture, back at the Malfoys'!"

As she spoke, she pulled aside the neck of the dressing gown to reveal the thin cut Bellatrix had made, scarlet against her throat. (*DH* p. 395)

In appropriating the mudblood epithet as a social marker, Hermione aims to create her own community, centered around the word. Again, this is something that Voldemort fails to anticipate. In picking out various groups to target he inadvertently creates pockets of resistance based around his own categories—mudblood, goblin, house-elf—creating solidarity against his regime among various defined social groups.

#### 4. Citation and Transcendence

In discussing this spectrum, between wounding words and words that actually constitute spells, it is useful to consider the most severe spells in Rowling's world, namely, the three Unforgivable Curses. These curses are the Avada Kedavra curse, which is fatal; the Cruciatus curse, which tortures its victim; and the Imperius curse, which controls the victim's actions. In *Goblet of Fire*, these curses are demonstrated to the students in class and the mere mention of them brings back trauma for both Neville Longbottom, whose parents were tortured to insanity with the Cruciatus curse, and of course Harry, whose parents were murdered with the Avada Kedavra curse that he himself survived. The "mentioning" of the curses in the classroom highlights the problems faced by bringing such painful terms into discourse outside of their original context:

[I]n the political and social critique of such speech . . . 'mentioning' those very terms is crucial to the arguments at hand, and even in the legal call for censorship, in which the rhetoric that is deplored is invariably proliferated within the context of legal speech . . . . The critical and legal discourse of hate speech is itself a restaging of the performance of hate speech.<sup>12</sup>

Barty Crouch, Jr., in the guise of Alastor "Mad Eye" Moody, acknowledges these problems. He points out that there is no counter-curse to the Avada Kedavra curse, but still insists, "You've got to know. It seems harsh, maybe, *but you've got to know*. No point pretending . . ." (*GoF* p. 193). In his insistence he shows an awareness that there are problems with this "mentioning" of the hate speech, but he sees knowledge as the first step toward combating its effects.

However, the pain of "mentioning" is shown by the reactions of already experienced students in the classroom situation of Hogwarts, particularly Neville's reaction. As he sees the Cruciatus curse performed on a spider, he experiences a physical effect: "Neville's hands were clenched upon

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

the desk in front of him, his knuckles white, his eyes wide and horrified” (*GoF* p. 190). This shows the problem with the “mentioning” of such terms, a problem Butler tries to tackle in her analysis. As she says, “there is no way to invoke examples of racist speech, for instance, in a classroom, without invoking the sensibility of racism, the trauma and, for some, the excitement.”<sup>13</sup> Harry finds this to be the case at Hogwarts, as those students without personal experience of the curses fail to understand their significance from Moody’s demonstration: “They were talking about the lesson, Harry thought, as though it had been some sort of spectacular show, but he hadn’t found it very entertaining” (*GoF* p. 192).

Significantly, these curses are punishable by life sentences in the wizarding prison of Azkaban and the other curses and spells are heavily regulated. These prohibitions open discussion of the importance of state intervention in censorship and protecting its citizens from linguistic injury. On this point Butler is ambivalent, as she associates a separation of speech from conduct with laissez-faire attitudes that allow cases of hate speech and linguistic injury to proliferate. However, there remain the aforementioned problems with the legal citation, or “mentioning,” of such speech as a re-enactment of the original crime. The solution found to these issues in the *Harry Potter* series is similarly ambivalent. There is an argument made for the “mentioning” of such speech as a means of overcoming the power of a word. Dumbledore says, “Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself” (*PS* p. 216). This reflects one of Butler’s conclusions that “the saying of the unspeakable become[s] part of the very ‘offense’ that must be committed in order to expand the domain of linguistic survival.”<sup>14</sup>

So, how do the texts suggest that this ostensible paradox can be escaped? If the naming of these wounding words re-enacts their trauma and their power, but is also necessary in breaking new ground for language and in creating a history for the word in which it can be appropriated, then what grounds can we find to help a community overcome linguistic injury? The *Harry Potter* books point to something anterior to language, finally finding refuge there from the extreme social trauma the books depict and from the “original sin” of induction into language. The reason given for Harry’s survival of the Avada Kedavra curse is his mother’s sacrifice; she died for her son and in doing so gave him the protection he needed to survive. Dumbledore explains to Harry, “of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. *Nothing*. That they all have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped” (*DH* p. 568). In using this as an escape from the realms of magic, or

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

of linguistic violence and vulnerability, it is finally suggested that that which is anterior to language, represented through the maternal body and the maternal connection, will conquer the violence of the law and language.

However, it is not enough to escape to the realms of non-language in search of a solution. Language, as tied up in the law and in how humans function as political and individual subjects, must be interrogated in order to find a way for the community practically to overcome linguistic injury. Butler states that her purpose in discussing linguistic injury is to attempt to recast injurious words in order to give them “affirmative modes.” She writes, “by affirmative, I mean ‘opening up the possibility of agency’, where agency is not the restoration of a sovereign autonomy of speech, a replication of conventional notions of mastery.”<sup>15</sup> The novels also find a response to this problem of language. Harry repeats his first encounter with Voldemort in *Deathly Hallows*, repeating his originary subordination. He survives the Avada Kedavra curse once again. In this repetition of what had been thought impossible, he creates a new citation with new possibilities and increases the community’s hopes for linguistic survival, closely bound up with physical survival itself. In surviving an Unforgivable Curse for the second time he destabilizes the realms of possibility, questioning the social structures and hierarchies that had been taken as rigid. He creates a new pattern of survival, transforming the exception into a new rule. This offers new possibilities for the linguistic community and annihilates Voldemort, who relies on the now-defunct system for his power. In his victory Harry shows that “these terms we never really choose are the occasion for something we might still call agency, the repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partially open.”<sup>16</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

In considering the role of linguistic injury in the *Harry Potter* novels and, in particular, the role that Harry plays in disrupting the linguistic community of the Wizarding World, the reader can see that the novels are more morally ambiguous than they may appear at first sight. As I have shown, the mirroring of Harry and Lord Voldemort highlights the fact that they rely on each other for their existence: neither of them is purely evil, or innocent. There is also a disruption of what could be considered the Christian trajectory of the narrative. There may be a temptation to view Harry as a Christ figure, given that, in a sense, he “dies” for the sins of his community. However, while Harry does have to go through a kind of death in order to save the Wizarding World, his survival is not a singular event specific to him, it is not a “miracle”; it is the citational nature of his act, the fact that it is

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

repeatable, that saves the Wizarding World. This is the true lesson of the series if any is to be found: that free will can change the very structure of the community for the better. As Dumbledore says, “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities” (*CoS* p. 245). This argument is consistent with the novels’ rejection of racism and other forms of hate speech, as it suggests that the subject retains agency within a linguistic system—and, to retain this agency, the subject must have the power to bring about the system’s alteration. Harry’s original insistence that he is not innately special, despite his reputation in the Wizarding World, is proven to be true. Although he creates the citation, it is the repeatability of his survival, a repeatability that must extend to all other members of the community, that breaks the power of Voldemort’s linguistic injury, creating space for the community to overcome the trauma of the past and to open a future where all members of the community have some agency.





