

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).¹ 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.”² 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.³ 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 retrace 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*

¹ 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.

² 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>.

³ *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,⁴ 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."⁵

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

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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 well⁶—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

⁶ 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.⁷

Carrie-Ann Biondi
Marymount Manhattan College
New York, NY

Irfan Khawaja
Felician College
Lodi, NJ

www.reasonpapers.com

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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*, 4th 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.

Jennifer Mogg holds a Ph.D. in Political Science, and is Adjunct Instructor of Philosophy at Bridgewater State University, MA, and Adjunct Instructor in

Political Science at Rhode Island College, RI. She specializes in and has presented papers on sovereignty and the U.S. Constitution, and has developed and teaches a course on “The Ethics of Harry Potter.”

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.

Kendra Tully is currently pursuing a B.A. as a double major in Economics and Political Science at Bridgewater State University (class of 2014).

