

Part I: Metaphysics, Literature, and Self-Understanding

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

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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.

