

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).¹ 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."² This sense of choice incorporates the internal decision, the physical act following

¹ 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.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

from this decision, and the appropriate motive for the decision and act.³ 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."⁴

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."⁵ 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.⁶ 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

³ Ibid., p. 159.

⁴ Ibid., p. 160.

⁵ Ibid., p. 164.

⁶ 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.”⁷ 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.”⁸

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

⁷ 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.

⁸ *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.⁹ 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."¹⁰ The hero of the Western, in accepting this fact, also "recognizes exactly that as the value of human life."¹¹ Furthermore, if people ignore the reality of human mortality, "they devalue life and living, and that is to diminish their own value as persons."¹² Our choices and actions—our morality—are based on this fundamental recognition: we are alive and we will die.¹³ 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

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

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

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹³ 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.¹⁴

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

¹⁴ *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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ They do not like themselves and seek out the

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

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

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, IX.9.1170b14-19, p. 267.

¹⁸ 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.

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

²⁰ *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.²¹

²¹ 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.

