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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.¹ 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).

¹ 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,² but there has yet to be a full-scale analysis of the whole of Harry’s Hero’s Journey³ in relation to Plato’s famous Cave Allegory in the *Republic*.⁴ 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*⁵ is the increasingly treacherous Wizarding World, in which the media, controlled by

² 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.

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

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.⁸ 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).⁹ 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).¹⁰ Since

⁸ 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.

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

¹⁰ 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

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).¹¹ 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

¹¹ 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.¹² 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*.¹³

¹² 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.

¹³ 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.¹⁴ Harry steadily progresses up the moral ladder under the mentorship of Dumbledore, himself a *phronimos*.

[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).

¹⁴ 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 Diggory¹⁵—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

¹⁵ 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).¹⁶ 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:

¹⁶ 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,¹⁷ 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*

¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸

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-o-meter 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.”¹⁹ 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

¹⁸ 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/.

¹⁹ 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.”²⁰ 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

²⁰ 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.²¹

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.

²¹ 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*.²² 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.²³

²² 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.

²³ 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."²⁴ 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.²⁵

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

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

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

²⁵ 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.²⁶ As Ayn Rand explains, “‘sacrifice’ is the surrender of a greater value for the sake of a lesser one.”²⁷ 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

²⁶ 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.”

²⁷ 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).²⁸

²⁸ 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.