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Harry Potter and the Quest for Virtue

J K Rowling's Harry Potter books have caused controversy among Christians. Yet Andrew Goddard argues that the books offer a fascinating and helpful series of ethical insights, for example in relation to the use of power and moral formation.

Like many Christians I was initially very sceptical about Harry Potter. The popularity and hype focused on these books based around child witchcraft was, it seemed, an illuminating but rather disconcerting fact about our post-modern, post-Christian culture. Then in late 1999, encouraged by some of the ordinands I was teaching, I borrowed and read a copy of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.[1] I was pretty quickly hooked and soon bought my own copy of it and the sequel, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (*CS*).[2] Then, I managed to find (rather miraculously given their popularity!) a hardback copy of *Harry Potter and the Prison of Azkaban* (*PA*) in the children's public library.[3] By this time our eight year old son was showing interest but my wife was even more sceptical than I had been about their suitability. I offered to start reading them to her as a bedtime story to convince her she needn't be worried and Harry Potter soon had a new convert. Book two was finished about two o'clock one morning and, on its release, I was sent out to buy our own paperback copy of the third book to read to her. Needless to say we were among the millions who bought *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (*GF*) at the rate of 50 copies a second on the weekend it was published.[4] We are now reading book four to our children having completed the first three books, listen to the tapes on long car journeys, and will doubtless see the new film before Christmas.

What is it that has won us over to J. K. Rowling's books despite their focus on witchcraft and wizardry? Partly it is, of course, the fun and excitement of the stories. Partly it is the recognition that, despite the prominent terminological continuity,

1 J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Bloomsbury, London 1997. After each initial citation books will be referred to by the first letters of the last two words (eg *PS* here). Readers should be warned that some of the discussion which follows inevitably contains information that may diminish your subsequent enjoyment of any of the books you have not yet read!

2 J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Bloomsbury, London 1998.

3 J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Bloomsbury, London 1999.

4 J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Bloomsbury, London 2000.

her fictional world is not going to lure our children into the real and dangerous world of the occult or some form of new age religion. Above all, however, it is the fact that although the books are in no sense Christian they are deeply moral narratives and it is this feature which this article explores.[5]

The Moral World of Harry Potter

At its most basic level of course the moral world is seen in the battle between good and evil. This shapes the whole set of books and takes place not simply between 'goodies' and 'baddies' but within each individual heart as choices are made by characters. The wizard world, like our non-wizarding (Muggle) world, is one where powerful evil has been at work. Through the dark wizard Lord Voldemort (aka He Who Must Not Be Named or Tom Riddle) the Dark Side appeared to be on the verge of victory until Voldemort's attack on the baby Harry Potter led to his downfall. This attack also led Harry to spending the next ten years with his only-surviving family, the cruel and abusive Dursleys who lie about his past, prevent him forming friendships, and hide the truth he is a wizard until he is called to study at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. There, Harry and his schoolfriends Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley find themselves in the front-line of opposition to Voldemort. In each of the four books, under the ever-watchful eye and wise guidance of their headmaster, the great wizard Albus Dumbledore, they resist his endeavours to return in power.

Rowling's depiction of evil contains much which echoes themes in Scripture and Christian tradition. Again and again in her stories we see that evil gains its foothold by feeding off, using, and perverting the good. It seeks out and wins over people who are lonely and isolated or those who feel weak and powerless.[6] It will often appear to be good, sometimes making it difficult for us to tell in whom it is at work[7] but in reality it can have no communion with true goodness.[8] Even those who commit themselves to follow evil will find it a cruel and destructive master[9]

5 Religion plays no significant part in the books although there are vestiges of it in the references to Christian festivals and even Harry's godfather. The lack of Christian teaching is what obviously distinguishes Rowling's works from Lewis' Narnia stories although it is not clear why this omission explains or justifies the contrasting Christian responses to these two narrative worlds peopled by witches and other strange creatures.

6 Examples here would include Professor Quirrell, Ginny Weasley and Peter Pettigrew.

7 This is a recurring feature of the books: Quirrell not Snape meets Harry in the climax of *PS*; *CS* revolves around the identity of the Heir of Slytherin; only at the end of *PA* is the truth about Sirius Black revealed; in *GF*, Mad-Eye Moody proves to be not the person everyone thinks he is.

8 'Quirrell, full of hatred, greed and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good' (*PS*, p 216).

9 So Quirrell says 'I have served him faithfully, although I have let him down many times. He has had to be very hard on me...He does not forgive mistakes easily...' (*PS*, p 211) and is left to die by Voldemort. As Dumbledore says, 'He shows just as little mercy to his followers as his enemies' (*PS*, p 216).

and, ultimately, because it neither knows or understands the good on which it is parasitic,[10] it will rebound on itself and become self-destructive.[11]

The Use of Power

I have set out above some of the prominent and central features of Rowling's narrative world. They are not as alien to a Christian world-view as their appearance in the world of witches and wizards might suggest. The significance of the ethics of Harry Potter is, however, much deeper than this. The first step in exploring this is the fascinating defence of the books which Alan Jacobs, English Professor at Wheaton College, published in the Christian journal *First Things*.[12] Drawing on histories of magic and science and the insights of that great critic of modern Technique Jacques Ellul,[13] Jacobs argues that Rowling's narratives posit:

> a counterfactual history, a history in which magic was not a false and incompetent discipline, but rather a means of controlling the physical world at least as potent as experimental science... The counterfactual 'secondary world' that Rowling creates is one in which magic simply works, and works as reliably, in the hands of a trained wizard, as the technology that makes airplanes fly and refrigerators chill the air – those products of applied science being, by the way, sufficiently inscrutable to the people who use them that they might as well be the products of wizardry.

That this is, indeed, part of the meaning of Rowling's world is evident from the passage in the latest volume when the know-all, Muggle-raised Hermione explains to Harry and Ron that 'All those substitutes for magic Muggles use – electricity, and computers and radar, and all those things – they all go haywire around Hogwarts, there's too much magic in the air.'[14]

In this light, the stories are not just battles between good and evil but stories which raise for us questions about power and especially the use of science and technology in our contemporary world. We are offered by these books two opposing

10 Echoing themes of the Deeper Magic which allows the slain Aslan to defeat the Witch in Narnia, this ignorance and inability to understand recurs in Potter's conversations with Voldemort – (1) '*How did you survive?*...So. Your mother died to save you. Yes, that's a powerful counter-charm. I can see now... it was merely a lucky chance that saved you from me. That's all I wanted to know...' (*CS*, p 233); (2) 'Phoenix tears...' said Riddle quietly... 'Of course – healing powers... I forgot...' (*CS*, p 237); (3) 'His mother died in the attempt to save him – and unwittingly provided him with a protection I admit I had not foreseen... I could not touch the boy... His mother left upon him the traces of her sacrifice... this is old magic. I should have remembered it, I was foolish to overlook it... but no matter. I can touch him now...' (*GF*, p 566).

11 This is seen in the rebounding against himself of Voldemort's initial attack on the infant Harry and the poisonous fang of the Basilisk being thrust into the diary to end Tom Riddle.

12 'Harry Potter's Magic', *First Things* 99, Jan 2000, pp 35-38. Available on the web at http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0001/reviews/jacobs.html.

13 'There is also the technique, of a more or less spiritual order, which we call magic... Magic is a technique in the strictest sense of the word' (Jacques Ellul, The Technological Society, 1965, p 24).

14 *GF*, pp 475f. Also Mr Weasley's comment on having a telephone explained – 'Ingenious, really, how many ways Muggles have found of getting along without magic' (*CS*, p 37).

models of great power – the evil model of Riddle/Voldemort and the model of the one wizard of whom he is afraid, the Hogwarts' Headmaster Dumbledore. The difference between them is introduced right at the start of Rowling's work. As Dumbledore waits for the arrival of Harry the following exchange occurs with his Deputy, Professor McGonagall:

> 'Everyone knows you're the only one You-Know – oh, all right, *Voldemort* – was frightened of.'
>
> 'You flatter me' said Dumbledore calmly, 'Voldemort had powers I will never have.'
>
> 'Only because you're too – well – *noble* – to use them'.
>
> 'It's lucky it's dark. I haven't blushed so much since Madam Pomfrey told me she liked my new earmuffs.'[15]

Herein lies the central underlying moral issue Harry Potter forces us to address: the issue of power, the limits we are willing to place on it, and the sort of people we must be in order to address this issue properly. The question we have to ask is whether critics of technology like Ellul were not right. In the dominance of Technique throughout the twentieth century we have perhaps seen the triumph of the Nietzchean philosophy which Quirrell learned from Voldemort – 'There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it...'[16] Rowling offers more than simply a good vs evil battle. She offers readers the challenge Jacobs turns on her Christian critics as he ends his article:

> Perhaps the most important question I could ask my Christian friends who mistrust the Harry Potter books is this: is your concern about the portrayal of this imaginary magical technology matched by a concern for the effects of the technology that in our world displaced magic? The technocrats of this world hold in their hands powers almost infinitely greater than those of Albus Dumbledore and Voldemort: how worried are we about them, and their influence over our children?

The final words of that question – 'their influence over our children' – leads us into the next level of Rowling's moral universe, a level Jacobs does not explore as deeply. The setting of the stories in a school is not just the reworking of a well-worn form of children's story.[17] As those of us who have children know only too well, one of the greatest influences upon them is their schooling and the friendships they develop with their contemporaries. In these two areas – broadly those of philosophy of education and moral formation – we find two more ethical themes developed by Rowling. These are themes which Christians should welcome being addressed in children's books and which the stories enable us to explore further with both fellow Christians and non-Christians.

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15 *PS*, p 14. Cf 'Dobby has heard Dumbledore's powers rival those of He Who Must Not Be Named at the height of his strength, but sir... there are powers Dumbledore doesn't... powers no decent wizard...' (*CS*, p 18).

16 *PS*, p 211.

17 On this aspect see Richard Jenkyns, 'Potter in the past', *Prospect*, October 2000, pp 38-43.

Education

It is clear that Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry plays a strategic part in the struggle between good and evil in the wizarding world. Its importance is highlighted by Dumbledore's commitment to remain as Headmaster rather than serving in political office.[18] Within the school the wider and deeper conflict of good versus evil is particularly played out in the relationship between two of the four school houses – Gryffindor and Slytherin.[19] This conflict between them would appear to stem from the very origins of the school. Three of the founders after whom the houses are named fell out with Slytherin over how selective the school should be and 'after a while there was a serious argument on the subject between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and Slytherin left the school.'[20] The bitter conflict in Potter's relationships with the Slytherin student Draco Malfoy and its House Master Severus Snape are therefore simply the surface of deeper philosophical and moral differences which have historically marked out Slytherin. These also explain why Voldemort (himself the Heir of Slytherin) drew so many of his supporters from those schooled in that House.[21]

One important part of that philosophy is the discrimination Slytherin advocated in favour of pure-blood wizards and against those with magical powers from Muggle (non-wizarding) families. Clearly this is meant to represent a quasi-racist attitude and, in one of Rowling's weaker narrative ploys, the Durmstrang students in the latest work are represented as sharing Slytherin's philosophy. There is, however, a further distinctive feature of Slytherin which is related to the question of power and ethics. This is made clear in the highly-informative poems of the Sorting Hat which assigns new students to one of the four houses on their arrival at Hogwarts School. Although Rowling has let us hear these renditions in only two of the four years, we know from them that the distinctions between the Houses derive from the ethical visions of their respective founders.[22] The insights gained here into the Slytherin mindset are most illuminating. When Harry arrives he learns that 'Or perhaps in Slytherin You'll make your real friends, Those cunning folk use any

18 Its importance is also made clear in that when Voldemort's power was at its height, 'One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts... Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway' (*PS*, p 45).

19 The Hogwarts crest vividly demonstrates this with the Gryffindor lion and Slytherin serpent attacking each other.

20 *CS*, p 114.

21 It may be that this conflict between the Houses is even more significant for the stories. The great unanswered question of the books is that voiced by Harry at the end of the first volume – 'Voldemort said that he only killed my mother because she tried to stop him killing me. But why would he want to kill me in the first place?' Dumbledore sighed very deeply this time. 'Alas, the first thing you ask me, I cannot tell you. Not today. Not now. You will know, one day... put it from your mind for now, Harry. When you are older... I know you hate to hear this... when you are ready, you will know' (*PS*, p 216). Although all will doubtless be revealed in later volumes it would appear likely that this conflict between Potter and Voldemort is in some way related to the deeper historic conflict between Gryffindor and Slytherin and their respective world views.

22 'Now each of these four founders Formed their own house, for each Did value different virtues In the ones they had to teach' (*GF*, 157).

means To achieve their ends.'[23] Similarly, in the most recent book, the new students are told of the 'virtue' Slytherin valued – 'And power-hungry Slytherin Loved those of great ambition.'[24] What we seem to be offered here is a self-serving, amoral, power-driven, consequentialist perspective where technical skill and expertise is what really counts in education. Such an educational philosophy can appear a great success in terms of skills and abilities. Indeed, even Dumbledore must acknowledge that Voldemort, as Tom Riddle, 'was probably the most brilliant student Hogwarts has ever seen'.[25] Riddle lacked, however, the necessary moral training, virtues and wisdom and so that brilliance became a powerful evil force.

It is this theme which proves central in one of the most significant conversations of the books. Dumbledore is discussing with Harry why the Sorting Hat thought of putting him in Slytherin before he was assigned instead to Gryffindor:

> 'You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students.... Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think.'
>
> 'It only put me in Gryffindor', said Harry in a defeated voice, 'because I asked not to go in Slytherin.'
>
> '*Exactly*', said Dumbledore, beaming once more, 'Which makes you very *different* from Tom Riddle. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.'[26]

Dumbledore – himself a Gryffindor of course – is determined that Harry understand that who someone truly is cannot be discovered simply by their technical skills and gifts, or even how brilliant a student they are. It is the choices we make in our lives which reveal the deeper truth about our character, about who we really are. Or, in the words of Jesus, 'out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks...' (Mt 12:34 cf Mt 7:15ff).

It is also the case, again in contrast to the 'purity of blood' Slytherin philosophy, that who we truly are is not determined by our birth or even what we have been.[27] Dumbledore puts this belief into practice in numerous ways such as his trust in the half-giant Hagrid, the werewolf Lupin, and even the former Voldemort supporter, Severus Snape. The fundamental ethical rationale for this approach to life is again made explicit in the revealing conversations at the denouement of one of the stories. This time the closing confrontation is between Dumbledore and the Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge whose surname encapsulates his fundamental moral flaw: 'You place too much importance, and you always have done, on the so-called purity of blood! You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be!'[28]

Within such a perspective, the role of education cannot be the selection and empowering of a social elite but nor it can be simply the handing on of information

23 *PS*, p 88.
24 *GF*, p 157.
25 *CS*, p 242.
26 *CS*, p 245.
27 Another fascinating moral theme in the books is the issue of freedom and determinism. This is seen in the Centaurs (*PS*, p 188), the House-Elves and the ridiculing of Divination.
28 *GF*, pp 614f.

or the developing of technical/magical abilities to enable children to function effectively in the magical world. As Hermione says when she leaves Harry to confront Quirrell and Voldemort alone at the end of the first adventure:

> 'Harry – you're a great wizard, you know'
>
> 'I'm not as good as you' said Harry, very embarrassed, as she let go of him.
>
> 'Me!' said Hermione, 'Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship and bravery and – oh Harry – be *careful*!'[29]

Bravery, of course, is a reference to the virtue so important for Gryffindor[30] and vividly portrayed in the character of Harry. But by placing friendship first, Hermione draws attention to another central theme of the books and one which, along with the Latin spells and character names, draws our attention to the importance of the classical tradition in Rowling's works and her ethical thought.[31]

Moral formation

Throughout the ancient (and the early and medieval Christian) world, friendship is pivotal in moral philosophy and the formation and growth of character. Here, as with many of the books' other ethical themes, we are being reminded through narrative of a perspective lost in much modern post-Enlightenment thinking, including Christian thought.

The importance of friendship for society is something recognized even by the arch-Slytherin, Draco Malfoy. In his first meeting with Harry on the Hogwarts Express on their first day Draco warns him 'you don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort.'[32] His vision of friendship is, however, clearly set in and shaped by his flawed moral universe for it dismisses certain people as 'riff-raff' who can never become friends. The bland, sub-human, power-based, unequal form of friendship which results from this outlook is illustrated by the stark contrast between Malfoy's 'friendship' with Crabbe and Goyle and the rich true friendship between Harry, Ron and Hermione. The latter is, of course, not idealized. It has its ups and downs but even at its lowest points, the significance of true friendship for human happiness is manifest – 'He thought he could have coped with the rest of the school's behaviour if he could just have had Ron back as a friend.'[33] True friendship is portrayed here as friendship which will go so far as to lay down one's own life for the life of one's friends.[34]

Such true friendship is in a symbiotic relationship with the development of genuine trust, loyalty and faithfulness.[35] These qualities, when displayed within

29 *PS*, p 208.

30 'You might belong in Gryffindor, Where dwell the brave at heart, Their daring, nerve and chivalry Set Gryffindors apart' (*PS*, p 88); 'By Gryffindor, the bravest were Prized far beyond the rest' (*GF*, p 157).

31 Rowling studied classics at Exeter University during her degree.

32 *PS*, p 81 cf *GF*, p 632.

33 *GF*, p 259.

34 'THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED!' roared Black, 'DIED RATHER THAN BETRAY YOUR FRIENDS, AS WE WOULD HAVE DONE FOR YOU!' (*PA*, p 275).

35 Again there is a total contrast here with the 'loyalty' evil engenders. This is rooted in fear rather than trust and is exemplified by Quirrell (*PS*, p 211), Pettigrew and Voldemort's supporters known as the Death Eaters in the fourth book.

friendship and in relation to the good, are shown to be immensely powerful and play a decisive role in the stories, particularly the second book.[36] There we meet for the first time the phoenix which not only undergoes its death and resurrection in its first encounter with Harry but is characterized by Dumbledore as a highly *faithful* pet.[37] As the story reaches its climax we discover the amazing power of faithfulness to effect change and combat evil. Dumbledore, removed from office by the schemes and plans of Draco Malfoy's father, utters the memorable words, 'You will find that I will only *truly* have left this school when none here are loyal to me.'[38] Harry, emboldened by these final words, enters the Chamber of Secrets and, at his moment of desperate need, faithful Fawkes is sent to assist him, due to the real loyalty he was showing Dumbledore.[39]

The human need for friendship does not only enable the development of virtue and works as a power for good. When this need is not met or becomes distorted and deformed it can also easily provide an entry for evil, allowing it to feed on, manipulate, and control someone.[40] This is the foothold that Ginny gives to Riddle/Voldemort when, feeling isolated and friendless, she finds the diary responds to her – 'Tom... I'm so glad I've got this diary to confide in... It's like having a friend I can carry round in my pocket.'[41] And so, gradually, through their 'friendship', she is moulded and shaped to become other than she was before the relationship began. A similar warning is sounded in the following book with regard to Pettigrew. His ultimate duplicity and great betrayal is rooted in character flaws that shaped the pattern of his friendships: 'I'll never understand why I didn't see you were the spy from the start. You always liked big friends who'd look after you, didn't you?'[42]

The moral focus in the stories is, then, one rooted in the classical world with its emphasis on friendship, virtues and schooling in character. These are seen as necessary for good education and hence for the formation of good witches and wizards. Their significance, and the centrality of moral character, is made explicit in the latest book when it is explained what is needed for someone to be able to avoid being taken captive to the will of an evil wizard using the Imperius curse on them – 'The Imperius curse can be fought... but it takes real strength of character, and not everyone's got it.'[43]

Rules and their limitations

As a result of this emphasis on virtue and character, the role of rules in the moral life becomes much more uncertain. This has caused much concern among some

36 The importance of trust in relationships is evident in other stories such as the importance of the Fidelius charm and seriousness of betrayal (*PA*, pp 153ff) and the decision whether or not to trust Black at the climax of the third book.

37 *CS*, p 155. Italics original.

38 *CS*, pp 195 and 197.

39 *CS*, p 244.

40 This fact makes Harry's qualities of character even more astonishing given his long and constant maltreatment by the Dursley family. Their role in Harry's moral formation is an important area which cannot be explored further here. I am grateful to Peg Kerr for drawing my attention to this and for many other comments. Her excellent series of short papers on moral formation in the books through a discussion of the classic seven virtues and seven mortal sins is at www.groups.yahoo.com/group/HpforGrownups.

41 *CS*, p 228.

42 *PA*, p 275.

43 *GF*, p 189.

Christians and is portrayed as a particular struggle for Harry. This struggle is perhaps unsurprising in a young boy who is rewarded in his first week by becoming the youngest Quidditch player in a hundred years because he disregards a teacher's instruction (admittedly, and importantly, in outrage at bullying and injustice).[44] A disregard for rules is, however, also (if Snape is to believed), a family trait inherited from his father.[45]

In order to understand this feature of the books it is, as usual, Dumbledore's attitude to this feature of Harry's character and his comments upon it which are most illuminating. His preference for training in virtue rather than the giving and following of rules is evident in the short message he leaves when anonymously giving Harry his father's Invisibility Cloak. Instead of a list of 'Do's and 'Don't's Harry is simply instructed – 'Use it well'.[46] Indeed one could say that his beliefs concerning the task of education in magic/technique are encapsulated in this simple statement. We must use anything well and thus must be the sort of people who are able to discover what it is to use something well and then have the character to use it accordingly rather than to abuse it. This does not make rules unimportant. Dumbledore clearly warns Harry of the dangers inherent in aspects of his attitude. Among the qualities he says Slytherin prized in his students was 'a certain disregard for rules'[47] and, while he is clear that 'curiosity is not a sin', nevertheless, 'we should exercise caution with our curiosity.'[48]

Rules are, therefore, worthy of respect, but there are also clearly limits to their value. These limits are shown by Rowling in various ways. As already noted, the Imperius curse gives one wizard power to command and control others. It requires character to resist this and what demonstrates Harry's strength of resistance when he is placed under this curse is that when he is told what to do he asks 'Why, though?'.[49] As is most fully demonstrated with the house-elves – who slavishly follow their (usually evil) wizard masters – this willingness to question commands is important. Indeed, failure to ask questions like this and the resulting blind obedience to rules is a dangerous trait which leaves one open to manipulation and control by others with evil intent.

The limits inherent in many man-made rules are clearly manifested in the fact that Harry's great loyalty to Dumbledore in the second book (for which he is so highly praised) could only be shown because, in the words Professor McGonnagall, he was 'breaking a hundred school rules into pieces along the way'.[50] The irony of this is not lost on Dumbledore whose disdain for narrow-minded legalism is made evident in his reflection on his earlier response to Ron and Harry's initial rule-breaking in arriving at Hogwarts by flying car:

44 *PS*, pp 110ff.

45 *PA*, p 209. Snape clearly dislikes this feature of Harry (eg *GF*, p 242), perhaps illustrating the fact that those who personally lack virtue are often those for whom rules and their strict keeping are essential for moral order.

46 *PS*, p 148, repeated in italics p 150.

47 *CS*, p 245.

48 *GF*, p 520.

49 *GF*, p 204.

50 *CS*, p 241.

> 'I seem to remember telling you both that I would have to expel you if you broke any more school rules', said Dumbledore.
>
> Ron opened his mouth in horror.
>
> 'Which goes to show that the best of us must sometimes eat our words', Dumbledore went on, smiling, 'You will both receive Special Awards for Services to the School...'[51]

This sort of 'flexible' attitude to rules is of course not uncommon in the contemporary world. It is one which, understandably, many Christians find difficult and view as a possible threat to moral order. One important difference between such an attitude to rules in our world and that in Rowling's world is that for us such an approach to rules is usually divorced from the context of forming moral character and seeking the good. Another contrast is that we are therefore often left simply with consequentialism – we determine whether an action is good or bad solely in terms of its consequences.

In this light it is perhaps not surprising that the serious flaws of consequentialist modes of moral reasoning are powerfully illustrated in the third book. Such an approach to decision-making is pleaded by Pettigrew in defence of his betrayal of the Potters to Voldemort – 'Wh-what was there to be gained by refusing him'. A statement causing Black to explode with righteous indignation – 'What was there to be gained by fighting the most evil wizard who has ever existed?...Only innocent lives, Peter!'[52] Yet, Harry appears not to have grasped how fundamental this rejection of purely consequentialist thinking must be. In his final exchanges with Dumbledore, Harry – like so many today – cannot escape this calculating form of ethical judgment when faced with the apparently dreadful consequence that his refusal to allow Pettigrew's murder has left him alive to return to Voldemort to help him return to power: 'But – I stopped Sirius and Professor Lupin killing Pettigrew! That makes it my fault, if Voldemort comes back!'[53]

Dumbledore is emphatic: 'It does not.' He gives two reasons Harry's conclusion must be rejected. Following a standard critique of consequentialism he reminds Harry that 'The consequences of our actions are always so complicated, so diverse, that predicting the future is a very difficult business indeed'. But there is something more – 'You did a very noble thing, in saving Pettigrew's life'. There is a quality about the act of not using power to kill even a man such as Pettigrew which is worthy of praise and honour. Indeed, for those with ears to hear the echo, Harry has shown the very virtue in relation to the use of powers which Dumbledore himself was credited with in the first chapter of the first book.[54]

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51 *CS*, p 243.

52 *PA*, pp 274f. There follows the passage cited above (n 52) summing up the critique of consequentialism encapsulated in classical thought as better to be killed as an innocent than to kill the innocent in order to save one's life.

53 *PA*, p 311. This passage also illustrates how, as well as leading us to do evil, consequentialism can also engender enormous but false guilt for actions which are good.

54 Dumbledore goes on to speak of a bond created with Pettigrew as a result of this action, noting that this is 'magic at its deepest, its most impenetrable' (cf n 7 above on Lewis).

Harry's fears concerning the consequences of his actions are realized in the fourth book as Pettigrew enables Voldemort to return. Here, however, we are again encouraged to see that rejection of consequentialist thinking (the Slytherin philosophy that one can use any means to achieve an end) is correct. This initially appears in the teaching about 'the unforgivable curses'. These are actions – killing, inflicting pain and exercising control over another's mind – that are so immoral that 'the use of any one of them on a fellow human being is enough to earn a life sentence in Azkaban.'[55]

The importance of these prohibitions is made evident later in statements by Sirius Black. Despite his revenge-driven desire to kill Pettigrew in book three, Black now explains to Harry how Crouch and others who were opponents of Voldemort and appeared on the side of good had actually become morally corrupt. This was because of a desire for power and their willingness to embrace the 'can't make an omelette without breaking eggs' argument. Faced with the terrors of Voldemort's violence Crouch, although against the Dark side, revealed himself personally to be a flawed and power-hungry character and again it was his choices more than his abilities which showed what he truly was:

> Times like that bring out the best in some people, and the worst in others. Crouch's principles might've been good in the beginning – I wouldn't know.... He started ordering very harsh measures against Vodlemort's supporters... The Aurors were given new powers – powers to kill rather than capture, for instance. And I wasn't the only one who was handed straight to the Dementors without trial. Crouch fought violence with violence, and authorized the use of the Unforgivable Curses against suspects. I would say he became as ruthless and cruel as many on the Dark side. He had his supporters, mind you – plenty of people thought he was going about things the right way...[56]

In other words, Harry has to learn that while rules are not to be blindly followed and at times some rules may be disregarded and broken, there are certain actions which, even if done in order to combat evil or to prevent evil consequences, will never be done by a truly virtuous, a wise, a noble wizard. Those who do not recognize this fundamental fact about the genuine limits to true power and greatness but instead seek absolute power and believe evil can be done that good will come shall find that they themselves will become corrupt and little better than those they thought they opposed.

The attitude to rules displayed in the books is not without its problems (for example, the characters of Arthur Weasley and Hagrid and Harry's struggles with truth-telling). However, much Christian concern here has failed (perhaps because of its own stunted moral vision?) to see the wider picture. Rowling has reportedly stated that she believes her books are very moral stories and although this is clearly

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55 *GF*, p 192.

56 *GF*, p 457. The concern about what people who do such actions become was, of course, Harry's rationale for insisting Black did not kill Pettigrew – 'I don't reckon my dad would have wanted his best friends to become killers – just for you' (*PA*, p 275).

not their primary goal this claim is justified. Here is a feature of the Harry Potter books which, if Christians engaged with it, could prove of much greater value for Christian witness than a preoccupation with its setting in a world of witchcraft and wizardry.

Conclusion

In the world Rowling has created we are invited to see the potential for evil within all of us and to consider our moral formation, especially in relation to children through their education. We are encouraged to look afresh at our non-magic but highly technological society and think about the sort of people we must become in order to use things well and do good rather than fall prey to evil. We are faced with the deep moral questions raised by our power and the contrasting models offered us in Dumbledore, Fudge, and Voldemort. We are urged to reject both an unthinking adherence to simple moral rules and a dangerous consequentialism in which ends justify means. We are invited instead to cultivate, through bonds of true friendship, the virtues. The books show us that, by engaging with these moral issues, we can, whatever we are by birth, become people of good character who show by our choices and actions that we are faithful, courageous, wise and discerning. Then, like young Harry Potter, we will be developing the moral fibre to stand against and resist the often alluring power of evil both within ourselves and in our world.

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