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# Moral Lessons for Muggles: Aristotelian Virtue and Friendship in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series

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Laurie Delaney, from Dedham, is a senior majoring in Political Science. This research began in the summer of 2008 as an Adrian Tinsley Program Summer Grant project under the direction of Dr. Jordon Barkalow, and has expanded into a two-semester honors thesis. Laurie will be presenting her research at the 2009 Midwest Political Science Association conference. Laurie plans to go to graduate school for political theory in Fall 2010.

**T**he appeal of the *Harry Potter* series for adults is often attributed to its ability to speak to fundamental questions of human existence. Here, Edmund Kern finds a Stoic moral teaching as Harry employs his reason to balance his desires against the demands of the world. The problem with this argument is that it misses the centrality of friendship to Rowling's account of virtue which suggests that Rowling's theory of virtue is properly understood in Aristotelian terms. Pursuing the question of the manner and extent to which the *Harry Potter* series provides an Aristotelian account of virtue, my analysis begins by exploring Aristotle's understanding of friendship before applying this understanding to the *Harry Potter* series. I argue that the *Harry Potter* series is grounded on an Aristotelian conception of virtue where friendship serves as the fundamental, complete virtue allowing one to lead a good life.

In *The Wisdom of Harry Potter: What our Favorite Hero Teaches Us about Moral Choices*, Edmund M. Kern evaluates J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series as an embodiment of Stoic virtue. Stoic philosophy is based on the idea that "living well means living in accord with the world" and portrays a standard that fate "not only dictates proper action but also shapes the outcome of events" (Kern 2003, 34). Kern says that "random and contingent events shape human destinies, and there is no guiding principle of justice behind changing circumstances, but undue anxiety over this state of affairs interferes with the enjoyment of life and the proper assessment of right and wrong" (Kern 2003, 91). Kern concludes that "Rowling develops an essentially stoic moral philosophy through the ethical dilemmas in which she places Harry and his friends—dilemmas requiring them to think in complex ways about right and wrong" in which she uses the stoic virtue of constancy to imply that "Harry's resolution in the face of adversity is the result of conscious choice and attention to what is and what is not within his control" (Kern 2001, 1).

The problem with Kern's analysis is that it fails to touch on the centrality of friendship within the *Harry Potter* series. Kern does acknowledge that Harry has guidance but he only mentions that it comes from authority figures like Dumbledore, Sirius, Hagrid, and Lupin (Kern 2003, 109, 114). Although these authority figures do provide wisdom for Harry at times; most of Harry's virtue is a result of his constant interaction with his best friends Ron and Hermione. That friendship is central to one's virtue can be properly understood in terms of Aristotle who argues that in order to be completely

virtuous one must make use of one's virtue in the right way and towards someone else (*NE* 1130a 1-10).<sup>1</sup> The other regarding aspect of Aristotelian virtue is provided in Aristotle's account of friendship, in its complete sense, which serves as a necessary element to lead a good life. Complete friendship is between people who are good and are alike in virtue and requires one to want what is good for one's friends, for his or her sake, rather than for one's own benefit (*NE* 1156b 1-1157a). The elements of wisdom, decency, and living together make up Aristotle's model of complete friendship and when applied to the *Harry Potter* series one finds evidence to suggest that Harry, Ron and Hermione are virtuous and complete friends in the Aristotelian sense.

### Wisdom in the *Harry Potter* Series

Aristotle argues that wisdom is a necessary component of complete friendship. Necessary to this account is practical judgment which Aristotle understands to consist of "a truth-disclosing active condition involving reason that governs action, concerned with what is good and bad for a human being" (*NE* 1140b 1-10). Practical judgment is an intellectual virtue "directed at the ultimate particular, or which there is no knowledge but only perception" (*NE* 1142a 20-30). Because it is only aimed at particulars, practical judgement is "unable to take a comprehensive view of the whole" only providing "quick fixes at best" (Ruderman 1997, 415). Only wisdom can provide a comprehensive account of the good, which is why practical judgment needs wisdom. In terms of *Harry Potter*, the friends have to inform their actions, which are a result of prudent calculation, with an understanding of the good. What is good in the case of *Harry Potter* relates directly to the triumph over good and evil, a theme central to the series. Throughout the series the friends make the right decision and it is their friendship that facilitates the making of these decisions.

Since making good decisions is vital to Aristotle's understanding of wisdom, it is clear that the choices one makes, make us who we are. This understanding of choice is also stressed by Rowling. Professor Dumbledore, who is a constant voice of wisdom throughout the series, reminds Harry on more than one occasion that "it matters not what someone is born, but what they grown up to be" (GF 708).<sup>2</sup> Dumbledore tells Harry "it is our choices...that show what we truly are" (CS 333). Harry embodies this wisdom when he is forced to make two very important decisions that have a significant impact on the person he becomes. The first decision Harry makes has to do with the type of people he associates with. On the Hogwarts train Draco Malfoy seeks out Harry to tell him "you'll find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort" suggesting that Harry leave Ron and associate with Draco and

his friends (SS 108). Aristotle claims that the greater good is the highest good because "it is the city...which embodies the perfect good for humans" not just the good of individuals (Stern-Gillet 1995, 167). Accordingly, we must choose our friends based on those who aim at the highest good, or the greater good of the community (*NE* 1098a 10-20, 1157b 10-40). Harry knows that Malfoy's entire family had been in Slytherin, looks down on Ron's family, and favors old wizarding families (SS 78, 108). Confronted with this, Harry makes the wise decision that Malfoy is not concerned with the greater good, therefore; not the sort of person Harry should be friends with. The next big decision Harry makes is during his sorting. When the hat is put on Harry's head it suggests that Harry would be great in Slytherin (SS 121). At this point Harry knows three things about Slytherin: 1) Lord Voldemort was in it, 2) Malfoy was in it, and 3) it tended to produce dark wizards. This knowledge is enough for Harry to think "not Slytherin" while the Sorting Hat was on his head (SS 121). Asking the Hat not to put him in Slytherin is a decision that alters Harry's life. If Harry remained silent he may have been placed in Slytherin and not Gryffindor. The importance of this decision is reiterated in the *Chamber of Secrets*, when Dumbledore reminds Harry that his decision not to be selected into Slytherin makes him different from those (Malfoy and Voldemort) that belong there (CS 333). Although Harry makes these decisions on his own, he makes them based on an evaluation of personal character. Harry sees that Ron's character is superior to Malfoy's which shows that even from the beginning; Harry's wisdom is influenced by his friends.

While looking at *The Harry Potter* series through the lens of wisdom, it is impossible not to pay attention to one character in particular: Hermione Granger. Although Hermione is best in her year at Hogwarts, her genius is not limited to the classroom. The significance of her wisdom is revealed through Hermione's tendency to do what is best for her friends, showing that what is right is not always what is easy. She does what is best for her friends even when they do not realize it. From attempting to control their temper to telling teachers when they are in danger, Hermione risks her friendships on numerous occasions. Hermione exercises some control over her friends by reminding them that what they do and say has implications outside of Hogwarts. For instance, Hermione stops Ron from saying something in front of the Minister of Magic that could affect Mr. Weasley's job (PA 320). She also has her own way of reminding her friends when they are wrong. When Harry and Ron fly Mr. Weasley's car to school in the *Chamber of Secrets*, Hermione is angry at them because they never seem to consider the consequences of their actions (CS 84-85). Only after having learned this lesson is she friendly toward them again (CS 89). Throughout the *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Hermione stresses to Harry how important it is for him to remain safe. Hermione

tells Professor McGonagall that Harry received an anonymous broom for Christmas, which leads McGonagall to confiscate the broom for inspection (PA 231-232). If Hermione had done nothing about the broom, there was a chance that Harry could have been hurt. She also threatens to tell McGonagall if Harry sneaks off to Hogsmeade (PA 275). She does these things even though she knows that there is a good chance Ron and Harry will not talk to her afterwards. Both of these instances show that Hermione sacrifices her happiness to ensure Harry's safety.

For Aristotle it is not simply being wise that is important, but recognizing those situations that make us wise. Harry is constantly learning from his friends, and is wiser because of these interactions. There are many times throughout the series where Harry realizes that Hermione was right and he should have listened to her. Perhaps that greatest example of this is after his vision of Sirius being tortured by Lord Voldemort (OP 728-731). When Harry tells Hermione about his vision, she attempts to explain how unlikely the situation is and what actually could be happening. She seems to be the only one who realizes what Harry's Occlumency lessons were for, saying that Voldemort may have wanted Harry to see that vision in order to lead him into a trap (OP 734-735). Hermione tells Harry that Voldemort knows he has a "saving-people-thing," which would be enough to get Harry to come to Sirius' rescue (OP 733). She rationally thinks things through, telling Harry that he must check and see if Sirius is at home, and if he was gone then she would do what is right and help Harry (OP 735). Although they do check, they are unfortunately lied to, which leads to the events at the Ministry of Magic. Soon after they are there, Harry realizes that Hermione was right the entire time. Sirius was not at the Ministry and Harry realizes that he could have led his friends to their death (OP 782). Voldemort set Harry up and perhaps if Harry had practiced Occlumency more, as Hermione suggested, he would not have put himself and his friends in danger. This is an important example of a situation that makes Harry wiser. He realizes that he must pay more attention to his friends and the next time Hermione gives him advice he may want to listen. It is also important because Harry realizes that he does have a hero complex which will help him in future situations (OP 821). This is important from an Aristotelian perspective because knowledge of self is an important aspect of both wisdom and complete friendship (NE 1168a 30, 1168b 20).

### **Decency in the *Harry Potter* Series**

Decency makes a shared life possible. According to Aristotle, a decent person "acts on account of what is beautiful...for the sake of a friend, while he disregards his own interest" (NE 1168a 30). Everything the decent person does is done for the good of his friends or for the greater good (NE 1169a 20-

30). This means that the decent person is willing to die for the greater good and take less to insure justice (NE 1169a 20-30, 1138a). The decent person guarantees justice, which is a complete virtue, by "putting it to use in relation to someone else" (NE 1129a 30). Since one can only be complete friends with someone who is good, friends will be more concerned with the good of their friends than with their own. Thus, one should expect to find instances of sacrifice with an eye to the greater good throughout the *Harry Potter* series.

Harry, Ron and Hermione are constantly making sacrifices that take into consideration what is good for their friends. Their decency is seen in what they give up for their friends. In the *Goblet of Fire*, before the third task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Ron and Hermione sacrifice themselves and their studies to help Harry. Ron allows Harry to practice stunning charms on him so he could be properly prepared for the task (GF 574). Both Ron and Hermione put all their efforts into making sure Harry would survive the tasks rather than studying for their exams (GF 607). Sometimes they even sacrifice their beliefs for their friends. When Harry believes Sirius is being tortured in the Ministry of Magic, Hermione tries to convince him it is impossible (OP 731-733). She convinces Harry to at least check to make sure Sirius has left his house before he goes running off to London to save him (OP 735). She says that "if we find out he's not there then I swear I won't try and stop you, I'll come, I'll d-do whatever it takes to try and save him" (OP 735). She offers to accompany him into Umbridge's office so he can check to see if Sirius is home so Harry will not have to do it alone. Although she does not think it is a wise decision, she realizes how important it is to Harry. Harry recognizes "Hermione's offer to accompany him into Umbridge's office as a sign of solidarity and loyalty" (OP 737). Harry knows she did not think it was a good idea but still realizes how important it was to him and did what he needed her to do.

While most of their sacrifices involve situations where there are no serious consequences, some involve life-threatening situations. When the friends are confronted with evil, it is clear that they would not have survived any of the events without each making personal sacrifices. In the *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Ron tells Sirius that he is going to have to kill Hermione and himself if he wants to kill Harry (PA 339). Also, in the same scene, Hermione and Ron both physically attack Sirius when he has his hands around Harry's throat (PA 341). In the *Order of the Phoenix*, this willingness to sacrifice is present when the friends encounter Death Eaters at the Department of Mysteries. Each friend uses the spells they know to attempt to fight off the Death Eaters, protecting their friends as well as themselves. After Harry realizes he led his friends into danger, "he just wanted to get them all out of this alive, make sure that

none of his friends paid a terrible price for his stupidity” (OP 783). Harry is willing to sacrifice his life for his friends and asks the Death Eaters to let his friends go (OP 799). Each of these examples shows that the friends are willing to risk their lives for one another.

Harry, Ron and Hermione are not just concerned with the good of their friends. Unlike most children their age, they have an understanding of the greater good. Even very early in the series, Harry asks Professor McGonagall not to take points from Gryffindor because of Ron and his bad decision to fly the car to school (CS 82). Harry is willing to take detention rather than damage his house’s chance to win the House Cup. But their concern for the greater good is most evident in their struggle for good over evil. In the *Sorcerer’s Stone*, Harry, Ron and Hermione believe that Professor Snape is going to capture the Sorcerer’s Stone and give it to Lord Voldemort to ensure his return. Believing Snape has gone after the stone, they follow him to ensure that he does not recover it (SS 270-271). They understand that if Voldemort gets possession of the Stone he will return to power. They risk their lives to ensure that Lord Voldemort’s return is delayed. They fight Voldemort again in the *Order of the Phoenix*, hoping to again diminish his chances of spreading evil (see OP 764-806). They attempt to keep the prophecy away from him, which Voldemort believes will provide the key to killing Harry and expand his powers greater than they were before. The prophecy is destroyed which prevents Voldemort’s chances of hearing it. They also support the truth of Sirius’ innocence. This is beneficial to the greater good because once Dumbledore understands that he is innocent, others will follow. Sirius’ innocence proves to be beneficial in the fight against evil because; his innocence proves Peter Pettigrew’s guilt, leads to more insight to who is at Lord Voldemort’s side, and Sirius is able to provide a headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix. Their sacrifice for the greater good is most evident in the *Order of the Phoenix*, when Harry’s story of the night Voldemort returns is contradicted by the Ministry of Magic (OP 93-95). Harry, Ron, and Hermione stick by the truth even when almost all of the Gryffindor House and Hogwarts believe that Harry is lying. The Ministry is in denial and decides that the practical teaching of defense against the dark arts were no longer necessary (OP 239-246). Hermione, who understands this to be a danger, asks Harry to teach defense against the dark arts to anyone who wants to learn (OP 326-327). Harry, Ron and Hermione organize a group called Dumbledore’s Army in which Harry teaches his fellow students how to defend themselves (see OP 337-346, 390-396). Harry uses the spells and techniques that he has employed during his encounters with the dark arts to make sure others are prepared to fight. Harry, Ron and Hermione understand that if more people know the truth about Lord Voldemort and how to fight

him, they would have a better chance at defeating him. They show over and over again that they do what is decent in the struggle of good versus evil.

### **Living Together in the *Harry Potter* Series**

Just as in the case of virtue, complete friendship cannot exist without the active condition. Living together is the active condition of friendship. According to Aristotle, living together consists of sharing in conversation, thinking, and learning from one another (*NE* 1170b 10-10). By living together one is able to share his or her virtue with one’s friend. As a result of living together, friendship “grows along with their association, and they seem to become even better people by putting the friendship to work and by straightening one another out, for they have their rough edges knocked off by the things they like in one another” (*NE* 1172a 10-20). Living together brings the other elements of complete friendship together. Those who live together make each other wiser and more decent through constant interaction.

Once Harry, Ron, and Hermione become friends in *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, each change for the better and this continues throughout the series. Hermione becomes more relaxed about breaking rules, especially when it comes to breaking the rules for the common good (SS 181). Hermione, the voice of wisdom in the relationship, is constantly teaching them not to be reckless in their decisions and act rationally.<sup>3</sup> Aristotle’s model for living together requires that the friendship grow along with their association. This is most evident when Harry confides in Ron and Hermione. By confiding in them Harry receives advice on how to deal with situations better than he would on his own. Because of Harry’s past with Lord Voldemort most of what he confides in them is very serious. Harry tells Ron and Hermione about hearing voices, when his scar hurts, dreams he has about Lord Voldemort, and feeling what Voldemort is feeling at the very moment (see CS 121; GF 19; and OP 539-540, 381-382). There are also times when he is not with them but still thinks of the advice they would give him if he was able to confide in them (GF 21-22). Telling his friends about these instances shows that he values their opinions over that of others.

Because Harry, Ron and Hermione spend all their time together it becomes difficult to differentiate who has done what. In the *Order of the Phoenix* where Harry recounts the situations where he and his friends have made sacrifices in the fight of good versus evil and he find it hard to differentiate between what he has contributed to this situations and what they have contributed (OP 166-167). Harry acknowledges they were with him most of the time, and although they are not together all the time, they help him get to where he needs to be in order to fight alone. Since they have this type of relationship they are

able to understand each other when no one else can. A perfect example of this is what happens after Cedric Diggory dies during the third event of the Tri-Wizard Tournament.<sup>4</sup> Harry only wants to be around Ron and Hermione after witnessing Cedric's death because "he felt as though all three of them had reached an understanding they did not need to put into words" (GF 717). Ron and Hermione know Harry did not want to talk about what happened and around them he does not feel obligated to. Reaching an understanding like this shows the strength of their friendship. Only complete friends understand that it is not just the time they spend together but what they do during that time.

The best example of living together can be found in *Order of the Phoenix*, when Harry, Ron and Hermione create Dumbledore's Army. Dumbledore's Army is created so Harry could teach anyone who wanted to learn how to defend themselves against dark wizards (OP 339-340). The creation of this group shows courage because they break school and ministry rules (OP 351-352). But Harry, Ron, and Hermione see how important Dumbledore's Army is for the greater good, realizing "it's about making sure we really can defend ourselves" against Voldemort and his followers (OP 325). Each of the trio contributes to the group in their own way. Hermione is the one who thinks of the idea in the first place (OP 326-327). Ron defends the idea and attempts to convince Harry to see the good in it (OP 325-328, 330-332). Harry is the one who teaches his fellow students from the experiences he has with defensive spells (OP 339-344). They work together in pursuit of the greater good with the hope that more people will learn how to defend themselves and the wizard world will soon realize that Harry has been telling the truth about Voldemort's return.

While it is clear that the friends satisfy Aristotle's model of living together, the *Order of the Phoenix* shows Harry trying to break free of the relationship. In the series the *Order of the Phoenix* comes after Harry witnesses Lord Voldemort's return. At the beginning of the book Harry is back at his Aunt and Uncle's house waiting to hear about anything that is going on in the wizarding world and especially anything related to Lord Voldemort. Ron and Hermione are together and yet neither of them are telling Harry anything (OP 10). When Harry is finally brought to the headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix he is furious with his friends.<sup>5</sup> Although he learns that they were not allowed to tell him anything, he was still angry (OP 62). He believes they should have tried harder because he deserves information more than anyone since he is the one who saw Voldemort return (OP 62-68). Harry's anger carries over to Hogwarts where he learns that the majority of the school thinks he is lying about Lord Voldemort's return, even some of his friends (OP 219). Despite feeling isolated and alone, the

friendship never breaks even when Harry lashes out at his two best friends (see OP 222-223, 235).

Consequently, Harry does things in the *Order of the Phoenix* that he has never done before: He fails to confide in his friends. When Harry first starts having the strange dream about the corridors he tells Ron and Hermione but as the dreams become more in-depth he stops (OP 462-465, 539-540). Despite Hermione's many attempts to make Harry practice Occlumency, he does not listen and continues to have the dreams (see OP 554-555, 651). Harry lies to Ron and Hermione about still having the dreams, saying the dreams have stopped because he was practicing (OP 681-682). Harry also fails to confide in his friends is when Harry does not tell Ron and Hermione about the two-way mirror Sirius gave him (OP 523). Given Hermione's character and nature, it is reasonable to believe that if he had told them about it Hermione would have remembered it when they needed to talk to Sirius to see if he was being tortured by Lord Voldemort or safe at home (see 731-739). Both of these instances contribute to the death of Sirius. If Harry practiced Occlumency instead of lying about it, then he may never have had the dream that led him into Voldemort's trap. If Harry told his friends about the mirror they would have known that Sirius was safe at home. The *Order of the Phoenix* is a crucial test to their friendship. Harry realizes at the end of the book that he was wrong and should have listened to Hermione (OP 821, 829). Throughout the book there are many cases where their friendship could have ended but every time Harry pulls away his friends bring him right back in. Ron and Hermione recognize that he is going through a tough time and deal with his attitude knowing that he needs them more than he knows.

## Conclusion

In contrast to the stoic moral teaching Kern (2001, 2003) finds in the *Harry Potter* series, the analysis presented here finds evidence of an Aristotelian account of virtue in J.K. Rowling's works. Like Aristotle, Rowling recognizes the centrality of friendship to moral development. In short, the friends we have go a long way to making us the person we are to become. Rowling teaches her reader that doing the right thing is not always easy, but that we can do the right thing with the help of our friends. She also reinforces Aristotle's conclusion that the only friendships worthy of this title are those grounded on virtue. Moreover, Rowling shows us that we are not isolated individuals, but members of a community really committed to good or just principles. Rowling drives these moral lessons home when Dumbledore reminds the students of Hogwarts that "we are only strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust" (GF 723).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I will use *NE* as an abbreviation when referencing Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and use the standard Bekker numbers.

<sup>2</sup> I use the following abbreviations when referencing the *Harry Potter* series: a) *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*: SS; b) *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*: CS; c) *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*: PA; d) *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*: GF; and e) *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*: OP. For the sake of time I only look at books 1-5 of the *Harry Potter* series.

<sup>3</sup> There are many examples throughout the series where Hermione is the voice of reason for Harry. For examples see: CS 84; PA 231-232; GF 316-317 and 393; and OP 22-223, 245, 651 and 734.

<sup>4</sup> GF 634-669

<sup>5</sup> The Order of the Phoenix is an organization started by Dumbledore to fight against Lord Voldemort. Their Headquarters is Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, Sirius Black's house.

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