

Love Bears All Things:

Thomas Aquinas, Harry Potter & the Virtue of Courage

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I do moral philosophy for a living, as a philosopher. J.K. Rowling does moral philosophy, too, but as a writer. We philosophers need writers. Because moral philosophy is not something we do to become smarter philosophers. We do moral philosophy—at least if Aristotle is right—in order to become morally better people, and perhaps to help our students or our children become better people, too. Doing moral philosophy with that practical aim requires pictures—images created in fiction and film, in Scripture and sometimes in real life—of people who embody the virtues. We learn to have good character by imitation, so we need heroes & role models to pattern our lives after. They are pictures of virtue for us.

In her books J.K. Rowling gives us a picture of the virtue of courage—in all Gryffindors, in James, Sirius and Lupin, Ron and Hermione, Dumbledore and Snape, in Lily, and most of all in Harry himself. Courage is the virtue concerned with strength and power. How do different views of power and strength, fear and vulnerability shape our definition of this virtue? Tonight I'd like to suggest to you that Rowling gives us a fairly radical, and radically Christian, view of what real power consists in.

What is remarkable about her picture of Harry's courage in Book 7 is the way it resonates with the way Christians have thought and taught about courage through the ages, from St. Augustine to Thomas Aquinas to Martin Luther King, Jr, to John Paul II. And this picture of distinctively Christian courage gives us a thought-provoking contrast with our common contemporary notion of courage. This is the picture found in your average action-adventure

film—think Tom Cruise in *Mission Impossible* (or Bruce Willis in *DieHard*, or Toby Maguire in *Spiderman 1 and 2*). I want to examine how Harry’s courage is different from the courage of our culture’s heroic ideal. I also want to contrast Harry’s courage with the moral character of Voldemort. I will argue that Voldemort cannot have the virtue of courage in any form.

Rowling’s “picture” of Harry’s courage gives us a positive model of a higher kind of courage, and a warning, because we –like our contemporary action heroes—are tempted to put our faith in our own power, which tempts us to become more and more like Voldemort, if we are not careful.

So tonight I’d like to consider three models of character tonight. The first is the American action-adventure hero model of courage. The second is Voldemort’s character, and his view of fear, suffering, and death. Lastly, I will consider Harry’s courage, setting it against the first two models and explaining how Harry’s courage is the kind of courage championed by the Christian tradition through many centuries until today.

First, let’s think through the familiar “American action-adventure hero” model of courage. This model of courage is inspiring, and noble, and fun to watch on the big screen. The mark of this hero is that he rushes in and *does something* to ward off the evil that threatens. He fights the bad guys and wins. He uses aggressive means, and even violence, to achieve justice in the end. He is a rescuer, a problem-fixer, a fighter, someone who can DO something about evil, and do it with his own physical strength, power, and ingenuity. Not coincidentally, this hero is almost always male. Like all courageous people, he is willing to suffer, put up with injury, risk death, and face his fears in order to achieve his good end. But in the end, it’s usually a picture of human power, the power to triumph over evil using our own strength. And that power is usually physical or military power—it involves the use of force (brute strength, bigger guns). It easily trades on our desire to solve our own problems, on our own terms, and by ourselves. Note that

the action-adventure hero usually does it “his way”—he steps in when the government fails or the police are found inept, and faces the enemy by himself. He is an autonomous actor—he “goes in alone.”

Now there is something right about this model—the action-adventure hero acts for justice, fights for a good cause, and is willing to risk his life (but not others’ lives) for the sake of that good cause. He *is* courageous. But we should be wary of the way this model glorifies human power, and its ability to overcome all evil. We should be wary a hero who never needs others, and who expects to be able to conquer evil and evade death by his own strength, on his own terms.

This brings us to Voldemort. Rowling deliberately depicts Voldemort as lacking courage, usually through the voice of Dumbledore. In fact, it is *impossible* for Voldemort—unlike the action-adventure hero—to have this virtue. Courage is the virtue that enables us to face and stand firm against our fear of injury, difficulty, and ultimately death for the sake of some good end that transcends us. Courage requires that we realize that there is some good bigger than we are, a good that facing danger and risking death can—in some cases—protect or preserve. Courage is a safeguarding virtue—standing fast against our fears (even our fear of death) is good only because enables some great good to be safeguarded or enabled or protected.

Why can’t Voldemort have courage? Because for him, his life *is* the greatest good. He loves nothing but himself. There is nothing in Voldemort’s universe worth risking his own life for, nothing and no one worth dying for. He cannot recognize any good that transcends himself. That means death is the greatest evil for him. As Rowling says, “He regards death itself as ignominious. He thinks that it’s a shameful human weakness...His worst fear is death.”

Because his own life is the greatest good, his greatest quest is to protect and preserve himself at all costs, and for that he needs the power to defy death.

Fear is our response to things that threaten us. How can we get rid of fear? By accumulating power for ourselves, enough power to overcome what threatens us, even power over death. Voldemort's quest is not to stand firm in the face of fear, but to eliminate fear, especially the fear of dying. Ultimately, the way to get rid of all fear is to become invincible, all-powerful—God-like. “ES: ‘What would Voldemort see if he were in front of the Mirror of Erised?’ JKR: ‘Himself, all-powerful and eternal. That’s what he wants.’” Voldemort is infatuated with power, his own power, because he seeks to be above death, immortal, beyond the possibility of fear. Ideally, he won’t need courage, because he will have eliminated his own vulnerability to death, and any possibility of his own weakness or suffering.

Now what’s scary about Voldemort’s agenda is how closely it can resemble our culture’s agenda. Look at the way we use military might and genetic engineering and medical treatments and physical force to try to eliminate our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, to try to become above death, invulnerable, superhuman. Our natural response to the threat of death (the ultimate form of human vulnerability), is to aggressively defend ourselves against it at all costs, to eliminate the possibility of it as far as we can with our own power, and to treat it as the worst possible thing that can befall us. As John Paul II once said, we live in “a cultural climate which fails to perceive any meaning or value in suffering, but rather considers suffering the epitome of evil, to be eliminated at all costs.” (*Evangelium Vitae* 15). This is a view of death and weakness that makes the search for power and control paramount over all other aims. Like Dumbledore’s quest for the Hallows and mistaken quest for the ‘greater good’, like our culture’s pursuit of more and more control over life and death, the worry is that we will use power to try to overcome our

vulnerabilities in ways that deny our humanness and trample the weak. This is not courage, but a perversion of it. This is a selfish, worldly view of power and what power is for. It makes us less human, not more fully human.

Human power to overcome suffering and death is so inadequate, which is why we are so often tempted to go to extremes. This is why action-adventure heroes often have to be superheroes—with superhuman powers or power-enhancing props like the Elder Wand. Like the young Dumbledore, our “action hero” moral ideal often tempts us toward a selfish obsession with our own self-sufficiency and power. Even when we are engaged in the fight against injustice, like an action-hero, how often do we rely on human power to save the day, and assume we are able to secure justice by ourselves? The danger of the action-hero model of courage is that it can easily slide into a Voldemort-like choice to build our lives around human power, and to enhance human power to reach superhuman, or divine, levels.

Turning to our third model, then, we should ask what makes Harry’s case of courage different from the action-adventure hero’s aggression and Voldemort’s plan to eliminate the possibility and the fear of death altogether.

In the Christian tradition, the virtue of courage is always rooted in love. “Courage” without love is mere gritted teeth, and facing death is pointless. The courageous person does not seek death, and she does not glorify it; in fact, she naturally fears it. She recognizes and values the life she lays down; her sacrifice is not a suicide. What enables her to conquer her fear of death is not faith in her own power, but the power of love. The good she loves enables her to face her fear. In courage, your love has to be greater than your fear of death—there has to be something or someone you love more than your own life. St Augustine defines courage as

“love bearing all things *for the sake of the beloved.*” He could have been writing about Lily Potter when he said that.

Now Augustine’s definition of courage might also describe the action-adventure hero—it might describe Sirius or James or Lupin. But Harry’s sacrifice is importantly different. Many centuries ago, Thomas Aquinas made a distinction between two expressions of courage—he called them aggression and endurance. Aggression is the “fight-back” form of responding to a threat. Endurance, however, is the form of courage required when “fighting back” is something we cannot or *should not* do. And endurance, says, Aquinas, is no “walk-all-over-me doormat” response—rather, it is the highest form of courage. Like aggression, it is a deliberately chosen act of resistance to evil for the sake of preserving some good. But unlike aggression, this form of resistance does not use force against evil, but rather takes the form of self-sacrifice. Death is *not* sought as a good, nor it *sought* out at all—rather, it is *endured* as the only way to preserve and stay faithful to the good you love. For Harry, to choose to live would have compromised the good of everyone he loved (as Peter Pettigrew’s failure to stand firm against fear did). For Harry, to choose to live would have betrayed everything he was and everything his parents’ died for. To face death was a choice demanded by love and faithfulness to the good.

Harry’s courage to endure death, to lay down his life, is the kind of courage Christian thinkers like Aquinas and Augustine were talking about. Aquinas says the martyrs give us a picture of this sort of courage, and the martyrs in turn are imitating Christ. Aquinas defines this act of courage in terms of the power of love—“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). This picture of courage is a picture of a love for others which is powerful enough to conquer fear, not (as in the first two models) of facing or eliminating fear on the basis of our *own* power, whether physical or magical. Harry deliberately

sets aside his wand “so that he would not be tempted to use it,” and he deliberately chooses to pursue the Horcruxes, not the Hallows. Harry follows Lily’s example, her courageous choice to lay down her life, to endure death, for the sake of love. And thus Rowling’s picture of courage stands in this tradition of thinking about it in terms of the power of love, not the power of human force or the quest for power over death. This is why Lily—a woman—and Harry—a teenager with inferior wizarding power—can be a picture of this sort of courage. And so can you. Because the only power courage ultimately needs is the power of love. Only this kind of love for another has the power to “bear all things” (I Cor 13). Voldemort cannot have courage because he “has not love” (*ibid.*).

A mark of courageous endurance and its understanding of power is that love is not self-sufficient or autonomous. The action-adventure hero is a rugged individualist—he works alone, depends on himself; Voldemort of course acts only for himself and uses others as disposable means to his own good; but Harry relies essentially on his friends throughout the books, and in his death, claims the power of the communion of the saints by using the Resurrection Stone to surround himself with those whose love has made him what he is. It is Harry’s decision and his act, but as Rowling writes, “their presence was his courage.” Love binds us together in community; love recognizes that we are not meant to be self-reliant. We flourish in solidarity, not solitary self-sufficiency.

Aquinas says that “fear is born of love”—what we fear most depends on what we love most. Voldemort fears death most because he loves his own life more than anything else. His fears are rooted in selfish self-love. Harry can face death courageously because he loves something beyond himself and his own life. His love of others and their good, and his desire to

protect them, is a love that is stronger than his fear of death. This is nothing less than charity, the greatest of the virtues.

In the end, it is a power that transcends him—the powerful protection of his mother’s love—that enables him to endure. It is not his own wizarding skill or intestinal fortitude that saves the day. Harry’s love for others ultimately transforms his view of power and defines his courage. And this picture of power and courage and love is one that itself echoes through many centuries of the Christian moral tradition. We are indebted to J.K. Rowling for her fresh articulation of this picture of moral virtue in Harry Potter, a role model of courage whose defining name should perhaps have been not ‘The Boy Who Lived’ but ‘The Boy Who Loved.’

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“Voldemort’s fear is death, ignominious death. I mean, he regards death itself as ignominious. He thinks that it’s a shameful human weakness...His worst fear is death.”

--J.K. Rowling (Mugglenet.com interview, 7/16/05; Edinburgh, Scotland)

“...[Harry wished] he could have launched himself in front of a wand to save someone he loved...He envied even his parents’ deaths now. This cold-blooded walk to his own destruction would require a different kind of bravery.” (Book 7, pg. 692)

“Beside him, making scarcely a sound, walked James, Sirius, Lupin, and Lily, and their presence was his courage.” (700)

Dumbledore to Harry (about Voldemort): “He was more afraid than you were that night, Harry. You had accepted, even embraced, the possibility of death, something Lord Voldemort has never been able to do. Your courage won, your wand overpowered his.” (the “power of your enormous courage”) (711)

Dumbledore: “Yet I too [like Voldemort] sought a way to conquer death, Harry.” (713)

Dumbledore to Harry (about Voldemort): “He believes the Elder Wand removes his last weakness and makes him truly invincible.” (721)

“I think there are distinctions in courage. James was immensely brave. But the caliber of Lily’s bravery was, I think in this instance, higher because she could have saved herself...[for James it was] like an intruder entering your house...You would instinctively rush them. But if in cold blood you were told, ‘Get out of the way,’ ...what would you do?...[Lily] very consciously [laid] down her life. She had a clear choice.”
--J. K. Rowling

“Voldemort’s fear is death, ignominious death. I mean, he regards death itself as ignominious. He thinks that it’s a shameful human weakness...His worst fear is death.” --J.K. Rowling

“ES: What would [Voldemort] see if he were in front of the Mirror of Erised?
JKR: Himself, all-powerful and eternal. That’s what he wants.”

Dumbledore: “Of house-elves and children’s tales, of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. Nothing. That they have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped.” (710)

“Now of all virtuous acts, martyrdom is the proof of the perfection of charity” and “a sign of the greatest charity, according to John 15:13: ‘Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.’”

--Thomas Aquinas, the Treatise on Courage, *Summa theologiae* IIaIIae.124.3

“Courage is...love bearing all things for the sake of the beloved.”

--St Augustine, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* 15.25

“I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.”

--Martin Luther King, Jr, Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Dec 10, 1964



Models of Courage I:

The American Action-Adventure Hero (aggression)

What’s right about this model: _____

What’s worrisome about this model: _____

The Anti-thesis of Courage:

Voldemort

Courage requires that we stand firm against fear (even fear of death) for the sake of _____

Voldemort’s greatest love: _____

Voldemort’s quest: to _____ fear

How? by becoming _____

Models of Courage II:

Harry Potter, Book 7 (endurance)

His ability to stand firm against fear is rooted in _____

2 forms of courage: A _____ and E _____

2 kinds of power

The Boy Who L _____