Book Review of *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts*

This book in one of a series devoted to using popular literature and films (e.g. *Star Wars, the Matrix*, and *The Lord of The Rings*) to develop and discuss philosophical issues. Almost all of the contributing authors to this book series are professors of philosophy, and they do a marvelous job of bringing philosophy alive through Harry Potter’s many adventures.

Whether you are already a Harry Potter fan, or you simply enjoy applied philosophy through creative outlets, this book should work for you. Indeed, if you go on to teach philosophy, you may want to use this book to breathe life into abstract and sometimes stale philosophical problems.

The book can be divided between those sections which focus on (1) the mythical themes submerged in the literature of J.K. Rowling’s magical Hogwarts characters, and (2) various philosophical issues. Examples of (1) include an analysis and commentary on Harry Potter as an exemplar of courage and heroism. As the commentator rightly points out, Harry is courageous not because he feels no fear (as he actually feels deep fear and dread at many points in his adventures), but because of the way in which he copes with his fear. Harry does not allow his fear to paralyze him, but reacts to the challenge and necessity of the situation in spite of feeling great fear. Indeed, Harry does a number of things to help him to “psyche himself up,” to enable him to manage his fear successfully.
There are lessons here to be learned, or perhaps to be reminded of, which can help any of us better cope with fearful situations.

The symbolism is pervasive in the landscape of Hogwarts. The various houses in which students are placed each symbolize a particular virtue. Gryffindor symbolizes bravery, Ravenclaw cleverness, Hufflepuff hardworkers, and Slytherin great ambition. Another example of character myth is Hermonine, who stands for thoughtfulness, studiousness, feminine strength, and a keen eye for social injustice (i.e. the goblins’ slavery to various wizards).

Examples of (2) include a fine discussion of the nature of time and the metaphysics of time travel posed by magical technology in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. As the commentator points out, the plausibility of time travel hinges on whether we understand time to be “tensed” or “tenseless.” If time is like a river flowing into the past from the present (and flowing toward a future), then the only real dimension is change in the present moment, and neither the past nor the future really exist in any manner outside of our memories. If time is the integral fourth dimension of the changing spatial world, then the past-present-future has a reality which may allow for time travel. Aside from this splendid teaser on the metaphysics of time, the reader will encounter discussions of “other realities,” the value status of technology (whether mundane or magical), and the problematics of foreseeing the future in relation to human freedom.
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This book has other welcome features, including a short biography of each of the contributing authors (the “Current Hogwarts Faculty”). There is also a section where influential thinkers in the history of philosophy (the “Hogwarts Emeritus Faculty”) are listed with teaser quotes relevant to the issues covered in *Harry Potter and Philosophy*. Here the reader will find not only remarks from Thales and Quine, but Lao Tzu and Buddha.

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