Harry Potter's Provocative Moral World:
Is There a Place for Good and Evil in Moral Education?

By Perry L. Glanzer

The public schools may be afraid to explore the complex moral territory of the Harry Potter books. But Mr. Glanzer suggests that moral education programs could profitably — and legally — address some of the same big themes that engage the young readers of the series.

ALTHOUGH I count myself among the many educators who relish the Harry Potter series, I sometimes wonder if we should not think more about the controversial implications of the moral world J. K. Rowling created. While we applaud the way the series motivates kids to read, perhaps we should also contemplate how its moral outlook differs from the moral reality of most public schools in critical ways. In this respect, public educators should be challenged by Rowling's provocative moral world, but they should also think about how to borrow something from it that would embolden the moral education they provide.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS WITHOUT GOOD AND EVIL?

In a challenging critique of moral education in public schools, James Davison Hunter argues that the unspoken imperative of all moral education is to teach only those virtues, principles, and other moral teach-

ings about which there is essentially no disagreement in American society.[1] Hunter claims that almost every major form of moral education in public schools falls prey to this quest for inclusiveness. The psychological approaches championed by Lawrence Kohlberg, the recent forms of character education, and the communitarian alternatives recommended by Amitai Etzioni are all subject to Hunter's critique. "The effort to affirm an inclusive morality," Hunter argues, "reduces morality to the thinnest of platitudes, severed from the social, historical, and cultural encumbrances that make it concrete and ultimately compelling."[2] Words such as "good" and "evil" become obsolete in light of this strategy, and instead the moral education establishment replaces them with words like "prosocial." "By inventing a new vocabulary," Hunter maintains, "the moral education establishment literally creates a new way of seeing reality. Altogether, *we end up epistemologically and linguistically with a moral cosmology that is beyond good and evil*" (emphasis in original).[3]

If Hunter accurately represents the moral cosmology presented in the theories, curricula, and actual lessons of moral education — and I believe in many respects he does — public educators should be concerned about this subtle form of epistemological and linguis-

■ *PERRY L. GLANZER is an associate professor in the School of Education at Baylor University, Waco, Tex.*

tic bias. After all, public schools should show fairness to diverse visions of the good life and not merely replace them with neutered and safe substitutes. In addition, the sterile and safe substitutes, as Hunter points out, may be ineffective and contribute to narcissism among young people and adults. Hunter would no doubt find studies confirming the growing narcissism among college students unsurprising.[4] I would also suggest that part of the reason these forms of moral education may be ineffective is that a moral education without good and evil becomes boring.

HARRY POTTER'S EXCITING MORAL WORLD

It is fascinating to compare the moral world presented to public school students with the exciting moral world presented in the Harry Potter books. Clearly, one attraction of the Potter series is that it enlists students on the side of good in a cosmic battle against evil. Within the Potter story, this struggle between good and evil gives meaning and excitement to everything that happens at school. In *The Sorcerer's Stone*, Hermione saves Ron, Harry, and herself from a nasty encounter with a plant called devil's snare through her knowledge of spells. As Ron quips after the encounter, "Lucky you pay attention in Herbology, Hermione."[5] What Harry learns in Quidditch pays dividends in his efforts to defeat Voldemort. Thus Rowling provides a clear connection between learning and school activities and a larger moral struggle, something that American public school students may not always perceive. In the wizarding world, what one learns and experiences at school can actually help in the battle between good and evil.

The battle between good and evil not only provides a larger reason for learning, but it also allows us to make sense of Harry's moral choices. Some conservative Christian critics have noted that Harry breaks school rules and even lies at times. What these traditionalists fail to realize about Harry's moral world is that school rules may actually get in the way of furthering good or preventing evil. In that case, observing conventions becomes secondary. Staying out past curfew and breaking into a restricted section of the library are hardly major transgressions, although they do cause problems for school bureaucrats. When issues of ultimate good and evil are at stake, one can excuse Harry and his friends for staying out past midnight.
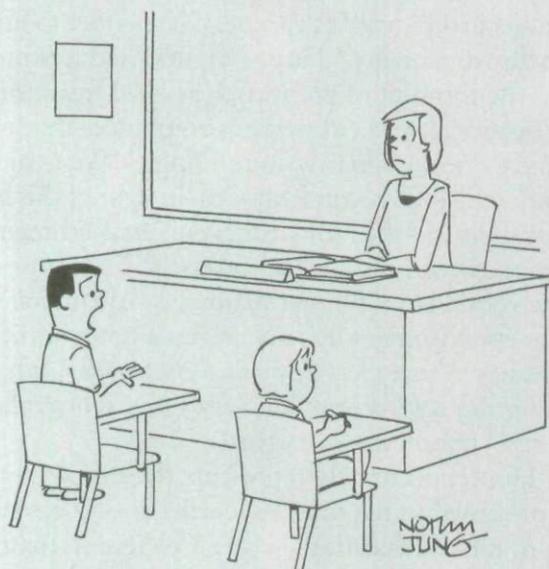
Moreover, Harry's autonomous choices are not considered in and of themselves good or evil; they make sense in Rowling's world only as part of the larger battle going on between good and evil. Nor are the choices Harry and his friends make considered good because they demonstrate a certain type of moral reasoning, although a group of Kohlbergians have tried to shape Harry's moral reasoning into a Kohlbergian construct.[6] In *The Sorcerer's Stone*, when Harry must choose between giving up the battle for the good or being expelled from Hogwarts for breaking another rule, he chooses the latter — even when his friends oppose him:

> "I'm going out of here tonight and I'm going to try and get to the Stone first."
> "You're mad!" said Ron.
> "You can't!" said Hermione. "After what [Professors] McGonagall and Snape have said? You'll be expelled!"
> "SO WHAT?" Harry shouted. "Don't you understand? If Snape gets hold of the Stone, Voldemort's coming back! Haven't you heard what it was like when he was trying to take over? There won't be any Hogwarts to get expelled from! He'll flatten it, or turn it into a school for the Dark Arts! Losing points doesn't matter anymore, can't you see? D'you think he'll leave you and your families alone if Gryffindor wins the house cup? (p. 270)

In this scene, Rowling clearly defends the existence of an objective moral universe. In fact, it is the villains who tend to speak in Nietzschean terms. For example, the main villain in the first book claims that Voldemort, who embodies evil in all the books, provided a bit of helpful deconstruction for him: "A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it" (p. 291).

Of course, talking about a battle between good and

"The English Channel? That's the BBC, isn't it?"

evil — especially talking about evil — can be explosive in real life. Witness the controversy over George Bush's use of the phrase "axis of evil" to describe Iran, Iraq, and North Korea or Ronald Reagan's designation of the former Soviet Union as an "evil empire." Should a public school teacher wade into such treacherous waters? Should a teacher help students decide if there even are such battles? Isn't it better simply to avoid such dicey topics altogether? But dodging the issue would prove tragic for the consideration of ethics in public schools. After all, ethics is usually defined as "the study of good

children's own character. Too often, critics of character education want to talk about evil or injustice in the greater world without considering our own character. Yet, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn reminded us in the well-known critique of the evils perpetrated by Soviet Communism in *The Gulag Archipelago*, "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."[9]

> Too often, critics of character education want to talk about evil or injustice in the greater world without considering our own character.

and evil, of right and wrong, of duty and obligation in human conduct and of reasoning and choice about them."[7] I would suggest there are at least three strands that public schools can take up with their students instead of offering a bland moral education that fails to address good and evil.

1. *The temptation of evil or vices within.* First, while the character education movement has proved that public educators can talk about good character, we also need to remember that virtue cannot be separated from vice or from a larger narrative that makes sense of both virtue and vice. As Thomas Hibbs, a philosopher and my colleague at Baylor, notes, "Voldemort, Harry's demonic nemesis, specializes in what appears to be courage: the powerful overcoming of obstacles and the ability to do without flinching what others fear." Yet, to ascribe courage to Voldemort, one must think about actions and virtue atomistically. Hibbs continues, "But if, as is true of Voldemort, we separate valor from the common good, from justice and friendship, then we are left with nihilism, the empty expression of power for its own sake — a position advocated explicitly by Voldemort in the first film."[8]

In reality, we evaluate each character's actions in light of grand narratives with a particular end. Both Harry and his Hogwarts nemesis Draco Malfoy have loyal friends. Yet Harry's friends exhibit loyalty in the midst of a larger battle for good. Draco's friends exhibit "loyalty" while engaging in evil; therefore we consider their loyalty a vice. In other words, to identify virtuous actions, we often need a larger narrative context that contains a grand moral battle.

If public educators start talking about good and evil, it is best to start with this strand, which focuses on the

2. *External social evils.* The second real-life battle students could understand is the one against injustice in the world. Of course, there are numerous interpretations of what exactly are the most important injustices, and many advocates of educating kids about battling social evils (usually articulated as "problems" or "injustices") do so with a political agenda in mind. This tendency of politics — even explicitly partisan politics — to overwhelm our efforts at moral education is why we mustn't merely talk about the common good or virtue but must also identify common evils and encourage children to battle them.

I do not want my sons or my students merely to grapple with ideas of the good. I also want them to learn to choose and fight for the good and against evil. I want them to learn to engage in moral battles (not necessarily in violent ways). George Counts' criticism of the liberal progressive moral vision that attempted to avoid this perspective in 1932 still applies today:

> There is the fallacy that the great object of education is to produce the college professor, that is, the individual who adopts an agnostic attitude towards every important social issue, who can balance the pros against the cons with the skill of a juggler, who sees all sides of every question and never commits himself to any, who delays action until all the facts are in, who knows that all the facts will never come in, who consequently holds his judgment in a state of indefinite suspension, and who before the approach of middle age sees his powers of action atrophy and his social sympathies decay. . . . Although college professors, if not too numerous, perform a valuable social function, society requires great numbers of persons who, while capable of gathering and digesting facts, are at the same time able to think in terms of life, make decisions, and act. From such persons will come our real social leaders.[10]

I look back with appreciation on my high school English teacher who had us read John Woolman's journal, which recounted his efforts to fight against the evil of slavery in early America. Barbara Vogel's experience with a group of fourth-graders in a suburban Denver school provides another example of teaching students about confronting evil. She read a newspaper article about slavery in Sudan and Mauritania to her class after the children had finished lessons on American history and slavery. She recalled:

I saw this article and wanted to share it with the students. I have been teaching for 25 years and saw the shuttle blow up with my children watching, and we have talked about the Oklahoma City bombing, but I have never seen children touched like this. I saw boys and girls crying, and they said, "We thought slavery was over," and I said, "So did I." . . . They asked me, "What are we going to do about this?"[11]

Their response was to create a campaign called STOP: Slavery That Oppresses People to raise public awareness of the issue. Children need to be made aware of common evil and allowed to take actions to fight it.

3. *A metaphysical battle?* It is the last battle, though, that worries most teachers when approaching this subject. Is there a larger, metaphysical battle between good and evil going on in the world? Of course, public schools cannot constitutionally take sides in the metaphysical debates on which world religions and philosophers dwell. This is one of the fundamental virtues of political liberalism, but it is also one of its difficult limitations. It leaves moral education in public schools without a clear metaphysical narrative. This limitation is what can make moral education ineffective and boring. Hunter notes:

When moral discourse is taken out of the particularity of the moral community — the social networks and rituals that define its practice, the *Weltanschauung* that gives it significance and coherence, and the communal narrative that forms its memory — both the self and the morality it seeks to inculcate operate in a void.[12]

Still, public school teachers, especially in high school literature and history classes, can educate students about what some of the major religious and philosophical traditions think regarding this battle. After all, high school seniors should have some idea of the story line in *Paradise Lost* or *The Communist Manifesto*. They should have at least some understanding of the most important moral struggles in the universe. And the example of Marx reminds us that secular world views also offer moral visions. As Robert Kunzman notes in his excellent guide

for teachers interested in exploring this difficult terrain:

Visions of the good life are not restricted to religious frameworks, of course. Secular ethical frameworks that offer a robust vision of the good life are hardly neutral; both secular and religious frameworks express fundamental convictions about meaning and value in life.[13]

Best of all, teachers can allow students to give voice to their own burgeoning thoughts on this issue through writings and readings.

In the end, though, we must recognize that moral education within the public schools of a liberal democracy — whether character education or a version based on Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development or on Nel Noddings' ethic of caring — will never be able to fully capture children's moral vision and imagination. Children need more than a set of virtues to emulate, values to choose, or higher forms of moral reasoning to attain. They long to be caught up in a larger struggle between good and evil. Public schools can help them clarify, identify, and understand the details of metaphysical tournament of narratives, but they cannot take sides. It's what makes moral education in public schools limited, tolerant, and at times metaphysically boring. It's also why children want to read more about Harry.

1. James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

2. Ibid., p. 213.

3. Ibid.

4. David Crary, "College Students More Narcissistic, Study Finds," Associated Press, 27 February 2007, http://redding.com/news/2007/feb/27/college-students-more-narcissistic-study-finds/.

5. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1997), p. 278. Subsequent references to this volume will be made parenthetically in the text.

6. Lauren Binnendyk and Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl, "Harry Potter and Moral Development in Preadolescent Children," *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 31, 2002, pp. 195-201.

7. *The Teaching of Ethics in Higher Education* (New York: Hastings Center, 1980), p. 13.

8. Thomas Hibbs, "He's Such a Character: Harry Potter, Elizabeth Bennet, and Moral Education," National Review Online, 28 November 2005, available at www.nationalreview.com/hibbs/hibbs200511280820.asp.

9. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-56: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (I-IV) and Harry Willetts (V-VII), abridged Edward Ericson, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 75.

10. George S. Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p. 18.

11. Mindy Sink, "Schoolchildren Set Out to Liberate Slaves in Sudan," *New York Times*, 2 December 1998, p. B-14.

12. Hunter, p. 216.

13. Robert Kunzman, *Grappling with the Good: Talking About Religion and Morality in Public Schools* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 49.