

## Heroic Hermione: Celebrating the Love of Learning

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### 1. Introduction

The pragmatic turn in philosophy signals renewed interest in the significance of our practical nature. Even as pragmatists remind us of the ways our needs and purposes issue in meaningful action that provides a touchstone for truth and value, they also recognize the limitations of purposive action. Purposes give our acts focus, providing a principle of selection that makes decision and subsequent action possible. The price of selective emphasis, though, is subordination or exclusion of facts or features that lack relevance to our desired goals. To the extent that we do not supplement our perspectives, they remain a constant source of blindness to the needs, interests, and unique contributions of others. Recognizing this point, William James argues that

[w]e are practical beings, each of us with limited functions and duties to perform. Each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties and the significance of the situations that call these forth. But this feeling is in each of us a vital secret, for sympathy with which we vainly look to others. The others are too much absorbed in their own vital secrets to take an interest in ours.<sup>1</sup>

Our vital projects generate meaning and focus but require so much time, energy, attention, and devotion of our abilities that we can scarcely

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<sup>1</sup> William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology, and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 132. The language of "selective emphasis" is from John Dewey's explanation of the purposiveness underlying the experimental method; see John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 1, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), chap. 1, esp. p. 31. Dewey argues that selective emphasis proves only a temporary restriction unless we deem the concepts derived from such to be acontextual and absolute. Philosophers are notorious for just such a move.

acknowledge those of others. Since we cannot escape our practical nature, this blindness is always a potential malady. At a minimum, James urges tolerance of different purposes and perspectives as a remedy.

Pragmatic insight into the advantages and limits of purposive activity offers us a useful lens for exploring the complex intellectual, moral, and social factors that affect key characters in the *Harry Potter* series. For instance, the blindness of such divergent figures as Lord Voldemort and Albus Dumbledore can be traced to the unique purposes that define their acts and their characters. Hermione Granger, the most important female character in the series, possesses her own unique forms of blindness, but, as I will argue, she also has compensatory abilities. Her breadth of knowledge renders her a vital aid to Harry in solving problems and finding a practical course of action, but her comportment toward learning also informs her character and shapes her ideals, most notably her devotion to the cause of justice. Possessing a blend of curiosity, discipline, and self-direction that distinguishes her from the other characters, Hermione's eagerness to learn renders her open to new perspectives and capable of broadening her understanding of diverse people and complex events. As a result, her story demonstrates the liberating capacity that the love of learning has in overcoming the provincial limitations of powerful purposes.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Our Human Blindness

Before examining Hermione's love of learning in greater detail, we will consider how readily James's thesis concerning our human blindness helps us to understand the limits of various characters in the series. An intriguing contrast between Lord Voldemort and Albus Dumbledore arises from their devotion to radically distinct causes. To sharpen this contrast, we need to attend not only to their explicit purposes, but also to their needs and reactions to early traumatic events that helped to shape these goals. Just as we should not forget the context that purposes give our achievements and blindednesses, so too should we not ignore the generative context of our interests and desires. Lord Voldemort's plan to purge the Wizarding World of impure blood, for instance, stems from his hatred of his muggle father. Voldemort's birth is due not to a natural love but to a love potion. When his father realizes the enchanted nature of his relationship, he abandons Voldemort's pregnant mother, who in turn dies shortly after Voldemort's birth. The absence of a mother's love and the hatred of the muggle father who

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<sup>2</sup> For a complementary treatment of Hermione as a unique figure, see Eliza T. Dresang, "Hermione Granger and the Heritage of Gender," in *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter*, ed. Lana A. Whited (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), pp. 211-42. Also relevant is Katrin Berndt, "Hermione Granger, or, A Vindication of the Rights of Girl," in *Heroism in the Harry Potter Series*, ed. Katrin Berndt and Lena Steveker (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2011), pp. 159-76.

abandoned him leave Voldemort consumed with disdain for others. Consequently, he is blind to the power of love and also to the unique gifts of others, especially non-wizards.

Voldemort's prejudices are an obvious ingredient in his evil acts and also the limitations that lead to his demise. His ignorance of a mother's protective love nearly costs him his life when he attempts to kill the infant Harry. Moreover, because he deems his own powers to be vastly superior to those of others, he fails even to consider the unique abilities non-wizards may possess. This proves a serious oversight, for the talents of house-elves Dobby and Kreacher play a vital role in foiling the Dark Lord's agenda. When he needs to test the enchantments protecting the locket-Horcrux, for instance, Voldemort takes Kreacher to a cave, forces him to drink poison from the basin in which the locket is housed, and then leaves him stranded to die. Wizards cannot apparate out of the cave, and in his indifference to "lower" creatures, Voldemort assumes the same is true of house-elves. He is wrong, of course. Kreacher does in fact apparate and escape, later returning to the cave with his master, Regulus Black, to retrieve the locket-Horcrux. As Hermione rightly observes, "Of course, Voldemort would have considered the ways of house-elves far beneath his notice . . . . It would never have occurred to him that they might have magic that he didn't" (*DH* p. 195). Dobby similarly apparates into and out of the Malfoys' dungeon to help Harry and his friends escape, just moments before Voldemort arrives to catch his prey. Voldemort's disdain for others similarly prompts him carelessly to leave the diadem-Horcrux in the Room of Requirement, where Harry eventually finds it. As Harry notes, Voldemort "thought he was the only one" who could get into the Room (*DH* p. 627).

Dumbledore's purposes comparably blind him. On falling in love with the young Gellert Grindelwald, Dumbledore carelessly joins his beloved in a quest for wizard domination of the Muggle World.<sup>3</sup> Though he initially justifies his goal by arguing that it is for the greater good, his youthful quest for power proves too costly to him when it results in a battle with Grindelwald that leaves Dumbledore's sister, Ariana, dead. Unlike Voldemort, whose blindness only seems to grow, Dumbledore learns from his tragedy. Because he cares for others, especially his sister, his acts' negative consequences to others matter and produce a profound effect on him. Dumbledore is able to

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<sup>3</sup> Rowling reveals the romantic connection not in the books themselves, but in a live reading of *Deathly Hallows* at Carnegie Hall; reported at "J. K. Rowling Outs Hogwarts Character," Associated Press, October 20, 2007, accessed online at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20071021081806/http://365gay.com/Newscon07/10/102007potter.htm>. Rowling told her audience that "[f]alling in love can blind us to an extent." Dumbledore's family history with muggles—and so his own goals relative to them—is also complicated by the fact that three of them attack his young sister. His father, Percival, was later sent to Azkaban prison for torturing the three boys.

learn from his experience and abandons his originally reckless pursuit. His later commitment to the welfare of all creatures, whether magical or not, arises in part because of his combined wisdom and benevolence, each of which, we can reasonably infer, was sharpened by this tragic situation.

This brief contrast of Voldemort and Dumbledore underscores the fact that the blinding and hence limiting nature of prejudice toward others who are different is a theme Rowling weaves throughout the series. One might object, however, that only *some* purposes have a blinding effect. Voldemort's and Dumbledore's purposes are inherently selfish, which accounts for the resulting restricted perspective each possesses. If the pragmatist analysis of purposive action is correct, however, the blindness resulting from purposes is due to the selectivity inherent in them. Each purpose provides a focus relative to which some things, whether facts or perspectives, are included and some excluded. If this is true, we should expect to find some form of blindness attending even seemingly good, other-directed purposes. Indeed, we do. A good example is Hermione's crusade to ameliorate the working conditions of house-elves. Once she becomes aware of and committed to overcoming their centuries-old servitude, Hermione forms an organization (at first called S.P.E.W., or the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, but later renamed the House-Elf Liberation Front) whose explicit aim is to secure fair wages and working conditions for the elves. Much to her surprise, the response from wizards and house-elves alike is negative. We will examine the larger trajectory of this story more fully below, but it quickly becomes apparent that Hermione underestimates the resistance of all relevant parties. As George Weasley points out, she has not even observed the elves' working conditions (*GoF* p. 239). Her goal seems so meritorious that it blinds her to the realities behind elf servitude, including the elves' own resistance to change. While it is not impossible for Hermione to step back from her purpose and survey the situation more fully, such a move requires time and a more sophisticated approach.

### **3. The Love of Learning**

Despite her limitations, Hermione possesses a breadth of perspective that is grounded in and fueled by her eager, unfailing commitment to learn. Before exploring Hermione's case more fully, we should reflect on what we mean by "the love of learning." It is not uncommon, especially for teachers, to use the phrase as though its meaning and value were obvious. This use has some justification. One who loves learning prizes learning itself; she thus does not require external motivation in the classroom and will continue learning outside of school. Each of these goods, of course, has considerable value. As with many common ideas, though, offering a detailed account of the love of learning will help us more fully to appreciate its force and efficacy, both in general and in the context of Hermione's story. Discussions of learning date back to Plato's investigation of teaching and learning in the *Meno*, but a natural presentation for our purposes is that of John Dewey. Dewey had an abiding interest in education, producing major works on it

throughout his lengthy career.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, his account accords with the pragmatic perspective we have already employed in interpreting our characters. Inspired by his position, I will provide a sketch of the process of learning and then further characterize the love of learning.<sup>5</sup> As we will see, learning is a cumulative process; at the heart of the love of learning is a continuity that is a natural extension of this process.

How one understands learning is largely a function of how one understands children and their development. The modern empiricist conception, for instance, views each child as a *tabula rasa*, a passive being whose experiences furnish the mind with its contents. On this view, forces external to the child are largely responsible for shaping and impressing the mind. The pragmatist conception is influenced by a Darwinian understanding of humans as energetic and active organisms who develop and grow through

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<sup>4</sup> Key texts include two monographs born out of Dewey's experiment with the Laboratory School in Chicago, *The School and Society* (in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, Vol. 1, ed. JoAnn Boydston [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976], pp. 1-112), and *The Child and the Curriculum* (in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, Vol. 2, ed. JoAnn Boydston [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976], pp. 271-92). Also relevant are *How We Think*, the 1910 first edition (in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, Vol. 6, ed. JoAnn Boydston [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978], pp. 177-356) and the 1933 second revised edition (in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, Vol. 8, ed. JoAnn Boydston [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986], pp. 105-354), *Democracy and Education* (in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, Vol. 9, ed. JoAnn Boydston [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980]), and *Experience and Education* (in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, 1925-1953, Vol. 13, ed. JoAnn Boydston [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988], pp. 1-62). Diverse articles on this topic can also be found throughout his career.

<sup>5</sup> Dewey did not use the phrase "the love of learning," but the idea is present throughout his works. He often speaks of the value of "learning to learn" or of cultivating "an eagerness to learn." Moreover, when identifying growth as the end of education, Dewey contends that "[t]he criterion of the value of school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact"; see Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, Vol. 9, ed. Boydston, p. 58. Similarly, he argues that "the result of the educative process is capacity for further education"; *ibid.*, p. 73.

their transactions with the environment.<sup>6</sup> Children have needs and interests that quickly prompt the development of skills and habits. Their needs indicate not only deficits requiring an influx of food and water, but also energies seeking opportunities for expression and development. As Dewey explains,

[t]he child learns, not because the mind is like a piece of blank paper . . . nor like a wax tablet on which the natural world makes impressions. The people who said those things had evidently never watched babies. Instead of being passive and waiting for things to impress them, children are usually so active, so overflowing with energy of all sorts, that much of the difficulty parents have with them is not to draw out their activities but rather to keep some of them in.<sup>7</sup>

Children possess a natural interest in and curiosity about the world, for it is their home and the natural site of their development. Their transactions with it acquaint them with both the properties of objects and the nature and scope of their own abilities. Objects are interesting insofar as they satisfy needs or secure emerging purposes. Learning thus dominates life from the start.

In the early years, a child learns how to stand, walk, and talk as well as how to see and hear discriminately; she also comes to understand social roles and relations. Play is an effective context in which much of this occurs; information and abilities are not developed via impression alone but via expression through use in action. Roundness is not understood by simply being confronted by round objects, but is learned in the context of playing with objects that bounce or slip from one's grasp when reached for. In using objects or information, a child observes, investigates, and experiments until the properties of things become familiar and their uses meaningful. The process is cumulative in that she uses the fruits of her learning to solve new

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<sup>6</sup> Because "interaction" can suggest a static relation, Dewey later favored the term "transaction" to characterize the relation of humans to their environment. See Henry Miller, "Transaction: Dewey's Last Contribution to the Theory of Learning," *Educational Theory* 13 (1963), pp. 13-28, esp. pp. 13-15, for an apt discussion of this term in educational contexts. Additionally, I use the phrase "the environment" as shorthand for the variety of environmental contexts in which we act. These include those dominated by biological considerations as well as those characterized by cultural and personal norms and habits.

<sup>7</sup> John Dewey, "How the Mind Learns," in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 17, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 214. For a related discussion of early learning, see John Dewey, "What Is Learning?" in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 11, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), pp. 238-42. Dewey surveys and critiques different theories of learning in the early chapters of *Democracy and Education*; see esp. chaps. 5 and 6.

problems, meet needs, and find satisfactions tied to what is of interest to her. What is learned shapes her character by guiding and informing her energies and conduct.

Early learning concerns more direct and physical forms of interaction and so tends to implicate an immediate or proximate environment. But since learning is progressive, knowledge and abilities grow and become more complex so that more indirect imaginative and reflective forms of growth are possible. With them, the environment extends spatially and temporally to include the products and insights of the wider human heritage. Learning increasingly occurs through symbols, each of which conveys information about what is not present but is vital in meeting new needs and realizing more complex purposes. The understanding and manipulation of symbols through reading and writing signifies a dramatic expansion in the scope of the world with which the child can become familiar and interact; new meanings and activities are thereby made possible. Books possess a special value in that they make available experiences that are either impossible (because they require objects or agents long since extinct) or too costly for young learners to undergo themselves. Reading thus transmits with great economy a wealth of insight and advancement. Since mastery and use of symbols requires working beyond the parameters of the present environment, attention and memory play an increasingly important role in learning. Self-control is a natural part of the process, for attention needs to be disciplined so that more than the present environment can be considered. Present interests are not thereby abandoned but temporarily set aside for the sake of finding new means and so of establishing meaningful new connections.

Schooling provides a structured environment in which the human legacy is transmitted from one generation to the next.<sup>8</sup> History, literature, and scientific enterprise enlarge the context for meaningful action. Their transmission from one generation to the next is achieved not through drilling and repetition, but through use and transformation, so that the emerging generation participates in and extends, rather than simply providing a conduit for, the trans-generational heritage. Since learning builds on past information and abilities, its achievement requires making meaningful connections between what is known or valued by the learner and what is new and indeterminate. A child's initial acquisition of information and skills meets needs, cultivates abilities, and realizes interests and purposes; later education that becomes too abstract and divorced from needs, abilities, and interests risks becoming external and disconnected, a chore rather than a meaningful growth process. Successful teachers, then, do not spoon-feed past knowledge to their students. Instead, they structure the learning environment so that students can find opportunities for discovering and using objects in

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<sup>8</sup> Dewey begins *Democracy and Education* (chap. 1) by arguing that education renews life by transmitting past achievements and projects through communicative processes that render them common possessions of different generations.

meaningful ways that extend existing interests and abilities. In this way, our human heritage functions not as a deposit to be replicated but as a fund of meanings useful for variously meeting, enriching, and critiquing current needs and interests.<sup>9</sup> Formal education is best considered, then, as an extension of early learning, notable not for initiating learning but for extending and refining it.

One who loves learning cultivates the curiosity and discipline of early learning and liberally applies them to a broader range of topics and issues. In such a person, the cumulative nature of learning, with each phase building on but transforming its predecessors, faces no necessary limit apart from the fact that finite creatures require rest and rejuvenation. Unfortunately, some people lose their interest in continuous learning, preferring the comforts of a familiar environment and established habits; for them, growth belongs solely or primarily to childhood. Tragically, this attitude often results from school experiences that are dry and mechanical. Other people actively nurture the propensity to learn so that it is an integral part of their character; their endeavor to learn becomes a lifelong occupation. Historical examples of this sort of learner include systematic and revolutionary thinkers such as Aristotle (whose creative and insightful work encompasses nearly every field of study) and Charles Darwin (whose careful and exhaustive reflection on the connections and distinctions of diverse organisms transformed the way we think about life). Peter Abelard provides another example, for his desire to study prompted him to give up a comfortable life of inherited wealth and privilege. Lovers of learning possess, as the term “love” suggests, a vital interest and eagerness in continued learning, even in the face of impediments. Their chief characteristics include an animating curiosity, disciplined attention and memory, and creative self-direction. The interrelation of these features generates the continuity that lies at the heart of the love of learning.

Curiosity fuels the openness and eagerness that define the learner’s comportment toward experience. As noted above, curiosity signifies interest in the world about us, an arena that arouses both wonder and apprehension. Children take great joy in discovering new things, and novelty dominates the environment that gradually comes into focus for them. This novelty is a function of the complexity and diversity of the world; it can ignite interest but sometimes also threatens to overwhelm us. Learning produces skills and insights that help us to organize and thereby simplify the world. Simplifications that are taken as final and exhaustive categories of reality can have a blinding effect, especially when they readily promote our proximate purposes. In such cases, learning may close in on itself so that directive beliefs ossify into dogma. Such a result is not necessary, however, and experience—whether our own or that of our fellows—is diverse and precarious enough constantly to challenge our habits and perspective. The

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<sup>9</sup> Dewey’s analysis of understanding focuses on the significance of linking the familiar with the unfamiliar; see his discussion in *How We Think* (rev. ed. 1933), chap. 9.



love of learning means possessing an attitude of openness and receptivity to the world that is complemented by a readiness to attend to, reflect on, study, relate, and revisit. Dewey captures the spirit of this love when he observes that “[t]he open mind is the mark of those who have (in all their special learning) learned the eagerness to go on learning and the ability to make this desire a reality.”<sup>10</sup> Learning is less likely to be terminal, and curiosity best kept alive, when we view its results as instruments—and not finalities—that offer pathways for connecting previously unknown features with what is known and familiar, thereby generating further understanding. Curiosity, then, signifies a wide-ranging interest in the new or newly enhanced; it represents the continual growth of interest.

Since such growth requires alertness to connections and retention of the results of previous learning, a lover of learning needs to possess strong but flexible habits of attention and memory.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of these habits, interest sparks and fizzles, failing to initiate new, further modes of exploration and discovery. Without an attentive eye, new connections are not sought or seen; without a keen and active memory, even if information is retained, it remains in discrete units such that understanding does not grow. The self-control required for a child initially to observe and experiment with objects also needs to continue to develop into a disciplined comportment toward new perspectives and challenges, if she is to love learning. Patience and self-restraint form significant parts of learning’s ongoing discipline. Additionally, using and acting on ideas plays a vital role in nurturing discipline, since acting reinforces and transforms our habits and so our character.

While all learning involves self-control, a lover of learning possesses within herself sufficient direction to pursue learning throughout her life in diverse contexts. Her self-direction motivates and guides her explorations; as we shall see, it also protects her from impediments to learning. In early childhood, a child’s needs and interests provide the directing force for learning activities. Schooling inevitably introduces the new purposes of

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<sup>10</sup> John Dewey, “Between Two Worlds,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 17, ed. Boydston, p. 463.

<sup>11</sup> Dewey describes such habits as flexible, in distinction from more static routine habits. The former (which Dewey calls ‘intelligent’) are formed in such a manner that they retain their original plasticity and so can be modified and applied in different contexts. Such flexibility is common to talented musicians and athletes. A fine pitcher can adjust the spin on the ball he throws to take advantage of a batter’s weakness, just as the first-class pianist knows how to modify her accompaniment to the needs of a soloist. In each case, flexibility is not an accident but is a byproduct of responsive habits. For a fuller discussion of the distinction between routine and intelligent habits, see Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, chap. 4, and Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, Vol. 14, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), chap. 4, esp. p. 51.

teachers who aim to extend and refine the child's learning. Such purposes should not be external to or at odds with the child's own interests,<sup>12</sup> but they nevertheless enrich and make more complex the learning process. Since she is the source of her desire to learn, possessing her own motive energy, the lover of learning actively seeks to connect (and perhaps revise) her interests to new learning opportunities. Her education does not consist in simply completing assignments or following directions, for she has her own purposes and sees how her resources can be employed in further learning. Thus, her curiosity funds her with rich interests that prompt her to look for new connections, which her discipline enables her to see or generate. She has an interest in learning itself, prizing it for itself as well as for its fruits, and her eagerness to learn is a function of the joy she finds in each stage of learning. For such a person, study and skill acquisition generate revitalizing energy, while new information and insights provide food for future explorations. Because learning is an integral part of her character and not simply a function of her role as a student in a structured learning environment, she is genuinely self-directed. Her learning possesses the regenerative continuity that is the signature of the lover of learning.

#### 4. Hermione's Love of Learning

Hermione demonstrates these characteristics both individually and collectively, as a review of her profile demonstrates. From the beginning of the series, Hermione's relation to books distinguishes her from others. She is a voracious reader, a fact about which she boasts, telling Harry and Ron Weasley, "I've learned all our course books by heart, of course" (SS p. 105), even before the school year has begun. She checks out extra, often voluminous, books for background reading and is repeatedly exasperated that she appears to be the only student who has read *Hogwarts, A History*. Of course, loving to read is not synonymous with loving to learn. Many bookworms can navigate the realm of the written word but not the "real" world; as Ralph Waldo Emerson notes, the bookworm values "books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul."<sup>13</sup> A "bookish" person is typically

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<sup>12</sup> Dewey was sometimes wrongly charged with emphasizing a child-centered pedagogy, when in fact he argues that new purposes and challenges should be tied (but not reduced) to each child's existing abilities and interests. For example, in *Democracy and Education*, he argues that "[t]he problem of instruction is thus that of finding material which will engage a person in specific activities having an aim or purpose of moment or interest to him, and dealing with things not as gymnastic appliances but as conditions for the attainment of ends" (p. 139). Teachers—especially good ones—extend and modify, rather than instill or usurp, the interests of children through the educative process.

<sup>13</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 88.

one who retreats from, rather than has breadth and insight into, the world in which we live, her nose in a book as events pass her by. Her learning thus has clear limits.

Consequently, both how and what one reads matters. For one who loves learning, reading provides a gateway to a seemingly inexhaustible supply of information that may enhance knowledge and understanding. Darwin, for instance, tells in his *Autobiography* of reading and re-reading with great care many books during his youth, typically about the natural world. Reflecting on his teen years, he reports that “[t]he school as a means of education to me was simply a blank.” Indeed, Darwin’s performance in school prompted his father to fear that his son was “rather below the standard in intellect.” Nevertheless, Darwin pursued a lifetime of careful and continuous study. Reading nurtured his development, supplementing his observations of the natural world and expanding his mind, even as schooling failed to do so. He notes, for instance, that “[e]arly in my school days a boy had a copy of the *Wonders of the World*, which I often read, and disputed with other boys about the veracity of some of the statements; and I believe that this book first gave me a wish to travel in remote countries, which was ultimately fulfilled by the voyage of the *Beagle*.”<sup>14</sup> In her own extensive reading, Hermione favors history and non-fiction. Reading is a natural extension of her abiding variegated interest in the world. Recall, for instance, her envy of Ron’s family trip to Egypt in *Prisoner of Azkaban*. In a letter to Harry, Hermione writes, “Did you see that picture of Ron and his family [in *The Daily Prophet*] a week ago? I bet he’s learning loads. I’m really jealous—the ancient Egyptian wizards were fascinating” (*PoA* p. 11). Hermione possesses a living curiosity and avoids the trappings of the bookworm who becomes a parrot of the past, anchored to an armchair. For her, reading provides access to a broader world than that available through her own direct experience.

Hermione has a rich and strong memory and so has extraordinary recall of most of what she reads.<sup>15</sup> She is thus able quickly to connect new information with old. For instance, upon learning of his work on alchemy, she

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, ed. Nora Barlow (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1958), accessed online at: <http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=F1497&viewtype=text&pageseq=1>.

<sup>15</sup> Rowling does not address why this is the case, but a suggestion from Dewey is illuminating. He includes in his syllabi the following advice: “Do not aim to understand by first memorizing, but rather to remember by means of first understanding,” and “Form the habit of thinking while you read, rather than trying to memorize. Take care of your understanding of the subject, and your memory will take care of itself”; see John Dewey, “History of Education Syllabus,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 17, ed. Boydston, pp. 161 and 162. This is a plausible explanation of Hermione’s strong recall.

is able to link the familiar name, Nicolas Flamel, to the Sorcerer's Stone, thereby understanding what Professor Quirinus Quirrell is after. Her mind is alert, so that she attends to and finds meaningful contexts in which to relate what she learns. As a consequence, even in the midst of a crisis, she is able to draw on her knowledge to identify the Devil's Snare plant that has entrapped the trio in their quest to stop Quirrell (*SS* p. 277). Additionally, she remembers that Professor Severus Snape "mentioned" Polyjuice Potions in class, and so she is able to propose a successful means for interrogating Draco Malfoy to see whether he is the Heir of Slytherin (*CoS* p. 159). Finally, Hermione also proves to be more observant of her present environment than others. She alone sees the trapdoor underneath Fluffy, the three-headed dog, and so properly concludes that he is guarding something (*SS* p. 162).

Hermione successfully uses her wide knowledge-base, derived largely from reading, in conjunction with her sharpened memory and attention so that she is an excellent investigator and problem-solver. For instance, she is able to discover that journalist Rita Skeeter, who seems to be able to eavesdrop on numerous private conversations, is an Animagus capable of transforming into a beetle. Knowing that electronic bugging would not work at Hogwarts (because she has read *Hogwarts, A History*), Hermione takes Harry's suggestion that Rita is using a bug to spy on conversations as a prompt to research possible magical means of bugging (*GoF* pp. 547-48, 613-14, and 727-28). Importantly, she employs her intellectual skills in a critical manner. Although she sets great store by the written word, she develops appropriate skepticism to question its authority. Hence, even though the official registry of Animagi does not include Rita, Hermione draws the reasonable conclusion that Rita, whose sly character she knows, is a *non*-registered Animagus.

Hermione's capacity for self-direction also plays a significant role in her commitment to continue learning. Before enrolling in Hogwarts, she has already learned to perform some spells, a fact that gives her a leg up on her colleagues in Charms class. Additionally, in her third year she maximizes the opportunity to take all five of the possible elective classes (though only two are required) by securing the use of a Time Turner. And, of course, Hermione pursues elf liberation not only despite the lack of any external support, but in the face of considerable ridicule and resistance. She has the dedication needed to cultivate her own projects regardless of the fact that doing so renders her an outsider, even in her own circle. Her attitude toward learning is all the more distinctive when compared to that of her friends. Ron and Harry study when doing so is required. They research problems only when there is a

pressing need, and this marks a limit to their learning.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, Hermione's own interests prompt her to make regular visits to the library. As a result, she has a greater reservoir of information on which to draw. It is Hermione who usually knows and remembers details from her studies, in and out of class, thereby providing the links needed to advance the trio's plans and interpretations of events.

It could be argued, however, that Hermione does not love learning for itself, but rather because of the power it provides her.<sup>17</sup> An outsider who is insecure in many ways, one could contend that knowing more than her classmates enables her to distinguish herself and gives her power over others. Snape interprets her behavior in this way, frequently dismissing her as a show-off and a know-it-all. Even if power motivates her learning, Hermione nevertheless amply demonstrates joy and fascination in learning itself, as *Chamber of Secrets* and *Prisoner of Azkaban* in particular show. In *Chamber of Secrets*, she responds enthusiastically at the prospect of attending a deathday party, saying "I bet there aren't many living people who can say they've been to one of those—it'll be fascinating!" (*CoS* p. 130). In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, as we have already noted, Hermione expresses jealousy that Ron has the opportunity (one he probably ignored) to learn first-hand about Egyptians. Moreover, Hermione actively seeks out new perspectives. Though muggle-born, for instance, she enrolls in Muggle Studies. When Ron suggests that she is wasting her time, she responds, "But it'll be fascinating to study them from the wizarding point of view" (*PoA* p. 57). As she absorbs herself in reading and her studies, Hermione prizes learning in itself.

### 5. Lessons on the Love of Learning

Hermione thus possesses numerous traits—curiosity, a reservoir of knowledge enhanced by attention and readily accessed via her quick memory, as well as the self-directed pursuit of learning—that qualify her as a lover of learning. Considering her story both clarifies her distinctive character and

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<sup>16</sup> Harry's interest in learning increases dramatically in the final book. As he connects the diverse pieces of the puzzle to figure out how to defeat Voldemort, he is animated and passionate. Even here, however, Harry's learning tends to focus on immediate problems; moreover, he pursues learning largely on his own. By contrast, Hermione shares her knowledge and develops plans of action collaboratively. Harry falls into the more traditional hero mode near the end of the series, discovering truths for himself and making decisions without much input from his friends. It is thus no surprise that Hermione becomes marginalized in the last part of the story, since her way of learning and sharing knowledge defies the conventions of the traditional hero's quest. The end of the series would have been quite unique and transformative had Harry collaborated more fully with his friends.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Janet Brennan Croft, "The Education of a Witch: Tiffany Aching, Hermione Granger, and Gendered Magic in Discworld and Potterworld," *Mythlore* 27, nos. 3/4 (2009), pp. 129-42.

also provides additional insights into the complex dynamics of learning. The first is that acting, especially in a social context, increases the value of learning. Two social contexts are especially relevant to Hermione's learning. The first is Hogwarts, though the school bears a complex relation to her development. On the one hand, it is largely a vocational school that offers students an opportunity to act on what they learn. Hermione has already practiced spells and learned much on her own, but classroom activities offer her new opportunities to apply and extend them. On the other hand, Hogwarts offers Hermione little direct nurturing. Some teachers, such as Professor Cuthbert Binns, are downright dreadful, lecturing in a droning manner that renders the material for most students as dead as he is. Others are outright incompetent, such as Gilderoy Lockhart, or hostile, like Snape and Dolores Umbridge. Significantly, Hermione never gets the one-on-one attention Harry receives from Remus Lupin (in learning to generate a Patronus), Snape (in developing the skill of Occlumency), and finally Dumbledore (in understanding Voldemort's history better to discover Horcruxes).<sup>18</sup> Neville Longbottom and Harry, but not Hermione, get some directive attention from Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody (though really Barty Crouch, Jr.) as well. To a certain extent, this state of affairs is less detrimental than it might otherwise be, since Hermione comes to Hogwarts already loving learning. She does not appear to need one-on-one training, for she has the resources, most notably her own self-direction, to go on learning, despite the impediment of bad teachers. Hermione does not complain about her teachers (with the exception of Umbridge, as noted below), but attentively gleans what she can from classes so that it may be retrieved later when it proves meaningful or useful. The challenges of the school environment thus do not appear to weaken her eagerness and capacity to learn.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In one notable exception, Professor Minerva McGonagall recognizes Hermione's excellence as a student, using that as the basis for securing for her the Time Turner that enables her to take an overload of classes.

<sup>19</sup> Darwin's story suggests a related message. Though he would later go on to study the natural world with great discipline and insight, his skills and interests do not appear to have been promoted by his formal schooling. He reports that as a child he had a penchant for collecting things and was, as we have noted, an active reader. Furthermore, the following reflection suggests that he was animated by a love of learning: "Looking back as well as I can at my character during my school life, the only qualities which at this period promised well for the future, were, that I had strong and diversified tastes, much zeal for whatever interested me, and a keen pleasure in understanding any complex subject or thing"; see Darwin, *Autobiography*. A reasonable conclusion is that his natural curiosity was neither extended nor, thankfully, extinguished by his schooling. His family environment may have proven more supportive and so more vital to his development. Once cultivated, the self-direction of lovers of learning protects them from the deadening effects of the institution. Of course, that schools threaten to squelch the enthusiasm of those who have not yet acquired a thirst for continued learning is a great tragedy.

Hermione's more intimate interaction with Ron and Harry provides the other significant context relevant to her love of learning. Acting with friends increases the scope of needs and interests in a manner that prompts further growth in learning. Hermione's knowledge has clear value in that it helps Harry to face numerous challenges throughout the series, from figuring out who Flamel is to defeating Voldemort by destroying Horcruxes rather than pursuing Hallows. Each puzzle she is able to help solve, largely because of her breadth of knowledge and her ability to apply it to novel situations, reinforces the value that learning has for her.

Hermione grows in self-confidence as a consequence, so much so that she is able critically to challenge the institution of education. In the early books, she frequently reminds Ron and Harry of school rules and expresses the fear of being expelled. When Professor Umbridge threatens to drain their education of any value, however, Hermione openly rebels. Umbridge teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts by having students read from their texts, without ever practicing or using any defensive spells. Hermione challenges the professor in class and, realizing the need to practice spells, prompts the formation of Dumbledore's Army. Contending that they lack a "proper" teacher and that "we've gone past the stage where we can just learn things out of books" (*OotP* p. 325), Hermione proposes that the students take matters into their own hands, "learning how to defend ourselves properly, not just theory but the real spells" (*OotP* p. 339). She prizes discipline not for its own sake, but for its capacity to promote truly desirable goods like a "proper" education. Her story suggests that the love of learning is itself a resource in motivating and directing her in the face of threats to further growth and education.

Hermione's development also shows the need and value of integrating the theoretical and the practical. Theory alone is insufficient—"not just theory but the real spells"—which she realizes as a consequence of Umbridge's anemic conception of learning. By acting on her beliefs in the context of friends, Hermione demonstrates that learning can be prized both in itself, for the joy and knowledge it produces, and also for the means it makes available. She thereby challenges those, like Umbridge, who would separate and unduly prioritize the theoretical over the practical. Dewey offers an extensive treatment of this separation in *The Quest for Certainty*, showing how social divisions and limited methods of control have reinforced a separation of knowing and doing.<sup>20</sup> Historically, *doing* implicated the changing material world over which humans in ancient times had little control; it promised temporary security at best and produced merely transitory goods. *Knowing*, by contrast, was viewed as the act of a mind capable of accessing a realm of stable and eternal truths. Given the divine status of its

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<sup>20</sup> See in particular, Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 4, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), chaps. 1 and 2.

object, theory and the life of the mind ranked much higher than practice; that the former was a privilege that only those freed from life's exigencies could pursue only sharpened the separation. Dewey argues that the scientific revolution placed in human hands greater means of control of the world about us, thereby undercutting the grounds for this separation. Nevertheless, it still persists, as in the distinction academics sometimes draw between the humanities and vocational studies. Hogwarts is in many ways a progressive institution insofar as it offers traditional humanities subjects, most notably History, alongside plenty of courses whose subject matter can only be learned through the interweaving of theory and practice, of book learning and application.<sup>21</sup> Hermione is distinctive in her capacity to recognize that learning is not only useful but also enjoyable. The theoretical is valuable to her as an end in itself but also as a means; it is both satisfying and useful in meeting further ends. As a result, then, Hermione integrates theory and practice as well as means and ends.<sup>22</sup>

A related lesson we can glean from Hermione's story concerns the way in which her learning produces intellectual virtues that supplement and are interwoven with the development of her moral virtues. Hermione's commitment to justice for house-elves is rooted in a variety of features. The first is her empathy, initially apparent when she reaches out when Neville is repeatedly embarrassed by Snape in Potions class, and then when Hermione recognizes the terror to which Winky, a house-elf, is driven in the name of serving her master. Unlike Ron, Hermione is both aware of and concerned that Winky is treated as though she has no feelings. Her distinctive response comes as no surprise, because she is not only generally very attentive but also, like the elves, an outsider. As if to heighten our awareness of this, Rowling offers us little knowledge of Hermione's family, a fact that contrasts sharply with the portrait she paints of Harry and Ron.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Hermione is female and muggle-born. Her status as a devoted student marginalizes her even more. Ron repeatedly ridicules her for reading, studying, and

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<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, the fact that Professor Binns teaches history with dreadfully dull lectures, being oblivious to the needs of his students, demonstrates a residue of the theory/practice split.

<sup>22</sup> Dewey undercuts the separation of means and ends by situating both in what he calls the means-end continuum. The continuity of means and ends is due to the fact that means are always means *for* ends. Ends themselves function as means in providing the focus or aim relative to which the means are chosen. Additionally, actualized ends serve as means in further processes. For more on the means-end continuum, see John Dewey, "Theory of Valuation," in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 13, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 189-251, esp. pp. 226-36.

<sup>23</sup> Hermione's parents do appear early in *Chamber of Secrets*, but we learn nothing significant about them.



researching, only acknowledging the value of her knowledge which has helped him and Harry rather late in the series.<sup>24</sup> Not even Hogwarts teachers show much appreciation for Hermione's investment in studying. Though Lupin praises her cleverness, Snape more regularly dismisses her as a know-it-all. Her empathy and personal experience as an outsider—the latter due in part to her devotion to learning—fuel her acknowledgement and commitment to the amelioration of elf servitude.

Hermione's eagerness to learn proves additionally relevant in that her passion for the cause is intensified and guided by her knowledge of the past. Once Hermione becomes aware of how poorly house-elves are treated, she turns to her books for a more informed perspective. As she explains to Ron and Harry, "I've been researching it thoroughly in the library. Elf enslavement goes back centuries. I can't believe no one's done anything about it before now" (*GoF* p. 224). Her curiosity to understand the state of things, supplemented by her disciplined approach to finding answers, makes her more determined to make a difference. It thus shapes her devotion to the cause of elf welfare and justice.

Of course, we have already noted that Hermione's approach is also limited. In her enthusiasm for the cause, she forms a plan without consulting any of the elves; her plan understandably generates no support. Hermione is initially deaf to criticisms that the elves are content with their lot, charging her critics with complicity and attributing the elves' failure to seek freedom to a lack of education. Importantly, however, Hermione is inquisitive and open to criticism, eventually taking seriously George Weasley's chastisement for never having visited the Hogwarts kitchen. She thus journeys to the kitchen to talk to the elves. Though she rightly interprets Dobby to be happy with his freedom, she faces a different reality in the kitchen. Winky, who has also been freed, is miserable, and the other elves have no interest in Hermione's crusade. Always attentive to possible connections, she leaves the kitchen experience with a revised plan. She reasons that since Dobby is now working in the kitchen as a freed and paid elf, his example will inspire the other elves, who "will see how happy he is, being free, and slowly it'll dawn on them that they want that too!" (*GoF* p. 383). Though an improvement, her new perspective, derived from her actual interaction with the elves, is also deficient, since Dobby does not want to serve as such an example. Hermione thus has made some progress, acting to discover the veracity of her beliefs, but her own sense of the righteousness of her cause is still an impediment to her understanding of the situation.

By the end of the series, Hermione has done little actually to change elf conditions, but she does appear to have grown more respectful of them. In

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, upon learning in *Deathly Hallows* that Hermione sent her parents to Australia to protect them from Voldemort, Ron exclaims, "You're a genius." Harry immediately chimes in, "Yeah, you are, Hermione . . . . I don't know what we'd do without you" (*DH* p. 425).

*Order of the Phoenix*, she continues to be blind to the elves' perspective, even camouflaging hats she has knitted for them in the hope that they will inadvertently pick them up and be freed. When Ron protests, she retorts that "of course [the elves] want to be free!" (*OotP* p. 255). She still fails to comprehend the elves' fear of freedom and the depth of devotion they feel to the families they serve. By *Deathly Hallows*, however, she demonstrates respect for and a better understanding of the elf perspective. Though Kreacher repeatedly insults her, and though Hermione longs to comfort him on learning of the horrible treatment he has endured, she nevertheless respects his preference for physical distance and refrains from touching him. She also demonstrates a deeper understanding of the effects servitude have had on him. Harry is dismayed that Kreacher could betray Sirius Black (as he did in *Order of the Phoenix*) even while demonstrating such devotion to his brother, Regulus. Hermione argues that Kreacher's divided loyalties to the House of Black can be explained by the fact that he was loyal to masters, like Mrs. Black and Regulus but unlike Sirius, who were kind to him (*DH* p. 198). Unlike other wizards who treat elves gruffly without a second thought, Hermione achieves a fuller appreciation for their behavior, rooted in her willingness to view them as beings with feelings. Harry seems affected by this perspective, since he freely gives Kreacher the gift of Regulus's locket, much to Kreacher's delight (*DH* pp. 199-200). In a Webchat, J. K. Rowling indicates that Hermione later embarks on a career in justice, helping both to improve the lives of house elves and to eradicate pro-pureblood laws.<sup>25</sup> This suggests that Hermione continues to grow in her understanding and approach to the issue. Given the advances she makes within the series, it is reasonable to assume that her openness and inquisitiveness aid her in becoming a more successful advocate for the cause.

If we consider Hermione's other blindnesses, we see similar progress. Though she loves to learn, Hermione is not above dismissing some beliefs, opinions, and purported bodies of knowledge as sheer nonsense or, to use her favorite phrase, "utter rubbish." She tends to favor systematic forms of knowledge. A methodical thinker and learner, she finds little value in subjects like Divination that depend on innate knack or talent. By contrast, Hermione praises and loves Arithmancy, presumably because its reliance on numbers renders it more systematic. After suffering through the better part of a year of the study of Divination, Hermione snaps under the pressure of taking so many classes and uncharacteristically storms out of Professor Sybill Trelawney's Divination class, never to return (*PoA* pp. 295-99). Yet after attempting to retrieve the prophecy in *Order of the Phoenix*, she comes to

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<sup>25</sup> "Webchat with J. K. Rowling," Bloomsbury Publishing, July 30, 2007; accessed online at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20090617201646/http://www.bloomsbury.com/harrypotter/default.aspx?sec=3>.

recognize the limits of her earlier understanding and shows a new respect for Divination. In response to Ron's comment that the whole subject is useless, Hermione asks, "How can you say that? . . . After we've just found out that there are real prophecies?" (*OotP* p. 849). Despite her strong preference for one type of learning over another, she proves open enough to be willing to admit when she is wrong and to revise her beliefs.

Even in *Deathly Hallows*, however, Hermione's blindness toward unstructured forms of knowledge is still evident. She initially scoffs at the *Tale of the Three Brothers*, since it is a fairy tale suggesting outlandish possibilities. In response, Xenophilius Lovegood pointedly describes her as "painfully limited. Narrow. Close-minded" (*DH* p. 410). Though she knows of the existence of one of the three Deathly Hallows, that is, the Cloak of Invisibility, Hermione contends that belief in the existence of the other two is a matter of "utter rubbish" (*DH* p. 414). Here too, though, Hermione's openness leaves her receptive to revision and so, room for growth. As Harry becomes increasingly convinced of the existence of the Hallows, Hermione uses logic to poke holes in his interpretation. She does not challenge wandmaker Garrick Ollivander, however, when he later confirms that the Elder Wand is very real (*DH* p. 497). And importantly, she remains supportive of Harry's mission, despite her initial misgivings. Harry later concedes that Hermione exercised influence over his decision to pursue Horcruxes over Hallows by keeping Dumbledore's directive in view (*DH* pp. 433 and 500). Her critical but not dogmatic engagement thus serves both to guide Harry and to open her to new possibilities.

## 6. Conclusion

Consequently, Hermione makes progress in overcoming her chief forms of blindness. We do not see a complete change—nor should we expect to, given the complexities of acknowledging and addressing blindness in real life—but we do witness both the exercise of tolerance, as James proposes, and a gradual expansion of her field of vision. James supplements tolerance, the first step for addressing our blindness, in his article "What Makes a Life Significant." The additional steps require discovering the features that make any life significant; James concludes that "[t]he solid meaning of life is the same eternal thing,—the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man's or woman's pains."<sup>26</sup> Hermione herself only gradually becomes aware of these factors in other beings, most notably the house-elves. But we readers see just such a marriage in her own drive to learn—which expresses itself in the ideal to know but to also serve others—supported by the interweaving of curiosity, discipline, and self-direction. Moreover, Hermione's story offers a

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<sup>26</sup> William James, "What Makes a Life Significant," in William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology, and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 166.

supplementary message to James's discourse. Her development throughout the series offers testimony to the value that the love of learning can possess both in meeting practical (and sometimes extraordinary) challenges and in compensating for one's blindness.

Hermione remains eager for new information, possessing curiosity and wide interests, and her discipline enables her to make meaningful connections to existing problems. That renders her an invaluable aid to Harry in his journey, but it also accounts for the progress she makes with respect to her own blindness. Hermione is not a perfect or one-note character; Rowling renders her a complex character by showing her capacity to grow. She places Hermione in an environment in which her passion stands out all the more for its rarity and its capacity to survive against considerable challenges. The kind of character Hermione develops is one that prizes continuous learning and so openness, an attitude that sharpens her attention to diverse perspectives and renders her willing to revise her views. In Hermione's arc, then, we find a complex character whose journey both supplements Harry's and provides us with a notable model for becoming less blind.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> With thanks to my friend Gail Streete, who inspired this discourse.

