

# The Ravenclaw Chronicles



The Ravenclaw Chronicles:  
Reflections from Edinboro

Edited by

Corbin Fowler

**CAMBRIDGE**  
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**P U B L I S H I N G**

The Ravensclaw Chronicles: Reflections from Edinboro  
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## PREFACE

This book features the reflections of scholars presented at the Ravenclaw academic conferences: 2011-2013. Beginning in 2011, these conferences at Edinboro University were one event in the larger Edinboro Potterfest, a festival created to memorialize the worldwide cultural impact of the *Harry Potter* saga by J.K. Rowling. The festival is a week-long series of events aimed at providing inexpensive family fun, intellectual stimulation, and a boost to the local economy in these hard times. The Ravenclaw Conferences, held once a year, usually in mid-October, feature both faculty and students from a variety of academic backgrounds: philosophy, English literature, world languages, sociology, media studies, and history. Festival events can be followed online at [potterfest.com](http://potterfest.com).

My interest in Harry Potter began when my wife was reading *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone* to our very young son. I paid little heed to Harry Potter in those days, except for going with them to see the first two movies. I enjoyed them very much, and because our son was, by then, reading the Harry Potter books on his own, I decided I would read the third book, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, before the third film was released. I loved it. As I read the books and watched the movies, I began to realize that they were not only great fantasy adventures, but also raised many philosophical and ethical issues. I no longer looked at the Harry Potter saga as simply a fun kids' book, but also as a book for grown-ups and very grown-up issues.

I created a new philosophy course, Philosophy in Popular Culture, which emphasized mythical analysis, but the particular course content could focus on any number of popular culture phenomena. The first several times I offered the course, Harry Potter was the focus. Later, as the books and movies were coming to a conclusion, the idea of Edinboro Potterfest and the Ravenclaw Conference began to fill my thoughts. I imagined the books and movies about this orphan boy would continue to be a worldwide cultural legacy for generations to come, a phenomenon likely to far surpass family movie traditions like *The Wizard of Oz*. Potterfest and Ravenclaw are ways to celebrate the Harry Potter saga and to stimulate intellectual insight and creativity on a wide variety of themes in this series: artistic, philosophical, political, mythical, psychological, sociological, and historical. Finally, this is the only case I knew of where a



new sport, Muggle quidditch, became a worldwide phenomenon as the result of a story about a purely fictional sport. The stories by Rowling are an academically complete celebration of both mind and body, intellectual and physical competition.

Ravenclaw was always meant to be an interdisciplinary academic conference for both faculty and budding student scholars. In this collection, there is written work from three students whose undergraduate degrees will come from three different universities, two in Pennsylvania and one in Ohio. The faculty articles are from a variety of academic traditions and include reflections of faculty from universities in the United States and Canada. Careful readers who read articles by these different authors will notice that some authors refer to the first book in the Harry Potter series as “Harry Potter and The Philosopher’s Stone,” while others refer to “Harry Potter and The Sorcerer’s Stone.” The book content is the same, but the book title “The Philosopher’s Stone” was used in Rowling’s original manuscript. It was published that way everywhere in the world except the United States. Her publishers advised her that Americans would be more likely to buy a book about sorcery than philosophy.

In Part One, I explore the intellectual, mythical, and philosophical issues presented in the Harry Potter stories. I also examine and try to clarify the concept of magic. Overall, I argue that magic is very real if understood from a proper perspective. In Part Two, Professor Liedl explains how the Harry Potter text both hides and reveals real world historical facts. Professor Bassham argues that there are certain ways to plausibly interpret Rowling’s stories, while other approaches are likely dead ends. In Part Three, Professor Garver examines the themes of caring for wild animals in the Harry Potter saga. He argues it is possible to adduce from this a consistent ethic of animal welfare for our Muggle world. Professor Sutton-Ramspeck discusses the use of spells, especially the absolute ban on the domination spell known as the imperius curse. She explores real tensions between the good of protecting personal autonomy versus our need to intervene in order to stop someone from doing moral evil.

In Part Four, Professor Gruber examines the many instances of safe havens in the Harry Potter stories and how this is relevant, in general, to our real world need, especially children’s need, to be safe. Professor Wertz briefly explores how children have been portrayed in cinema, sometimes by persons much older than the child character portrayed and other times by child actors close in age to the characters they portray. Here the main issue is whether it is ethical to place children in age-appropriate roles, given how this might interfere with normal emotional development or put

them at risk of being exploited by unscrupulous parents or adults. In Part Five, Bonnie Huckaby discusses the relationship between the heroic Harry Potter and other hero figures in classic literature. Ashley Taylor presents an argument that the character of Hermione Granger represents not only a young female hero figure, but the full blown sort of feminist fiction hero especially suited to the expectations of 21<sup>st</sup> century females.

In Part Six, Professor Sutton-Ramspeck discusses the various ways being creative is portrayed in the Harry Potter series. As she points out, sometimes it is presented in contexts where the creativity is very positive, morally speaking, while other times it seems more anarchistic if not downright negative in moral terms. Professors Richardson and Wagner point out the vital role the library and reading play in the Rowling saga about young and old wizards. They examine how the library and librarians are frequently portrayed in stereotypical ways, and they discuss how the Hogwarts Library Restricted Section raises serious issues about censored books and forbidden knowledge in our contemporary real world.

In Part Seven, Professor Gruber points out the many ways in which the Harry Potter “story-scape” reflects British locations, customs and traditions. Professor Hunter discusses the fictional team sport of quidditch and the skewed weight put on catching the snitch. He argues this reflects the on-going tension in society between the importance of team effort versus the glorification of individual achievement. In the Hogwarts world, primary importance is put on the heroic individual, and in our real world, there is much emphasis on superstars and all-star competitors as the reason for successful outcomes, whether in sports or other life endeavors.

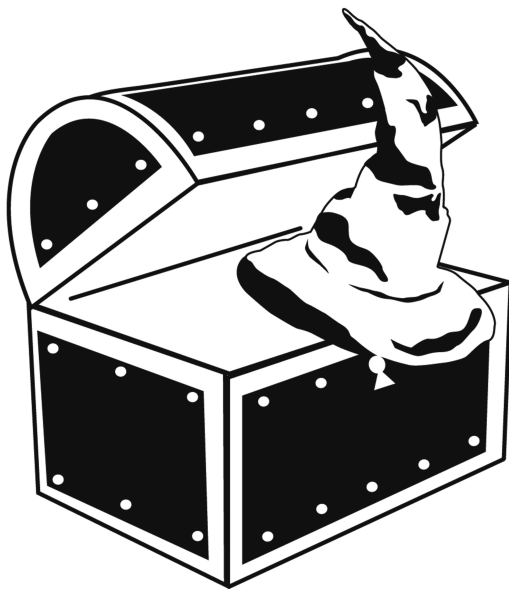
This book concludes with an original story of fan fiction by Weinelt. Could a romantic love interest have developed in the Harry Potter world between Luna Lovegood and Draco Malfoy? In this short story, Weinelt’s answer is yes, and it begins in a most unromantic setting, the Malfoy Manor where Luna and others are being harshly interrogated by the Death Eaters, led by the sadistic Bellatrix.

I would like to thank those people who have played a major role in completing this book. I am grateful to Shannon McCarthy for the graphic designs she contributed to each of the eight parts of this collection. I am also grateful to my wife, Patrice Fowler, for the photo used for the dust cover and for her on-going support in life and love.

For the tedious task of proof-reading, I would like to thank C. S. Fowler, Bill Hunter, and Greg Bassham, for reviewing portions of this book. Special thanks go to Elisa Mason, from our EU library staff, and Carrie Hohmann Campbell, from our EU English faculty, for their yeomen job of proof-reading the entire collection.

**PART I**

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HARRY POTTER  
AND MAGIC**



# CHAPTER ONE

## THE INTELLECTUAL TREASURE IN HARRY POTTER

### CORBIN FOWLER

Seldom has a book fantasy adventure series been more adored, ignored, denounced, and dismissed as J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter saga. For many, the Harry Potter saga (HP)<sup>1</sup> is simply a fun fairy tale of good versus evil, of primary interest to children. If the stories inspire more kids to read and enjoy reading, then that is wonderful, but there is nothing there for serious adult consideration. On the other side, there are those who are concerned that HP will just seduce young minds away from good Christian values in favor of pagan witchcraft and black magic.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, there is at least one philosopher, Richard Dawkins, who has expressed concern that the magical world of Harry Potter may seduce children away from science into superstition<sup>3</sup>. In sum, aside from the many adoring fans around the world, some say that HP is either harmless fun for kids only, while others say HP is just downright harmful to kids. Finally, for lots of people who don't care much for children's fantasy adventures, there is simply not much substance to Rowling's Harry Potter.

This last reaction seems ill-informed at best. True, the Potter saga is great fantasy adventure, a welcome escape into heroes fighting against and eventually defeating great evil—but there is far more going on in this saga about two orphans: one who became very evil and the other who became very good. Recall that Rowling's first HP book was titled (for the whole world except the USA) "Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone." Aside

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay, 'HP' will often abbreviate 'Harry Potter' or 'the Harry Potter saga'.

<sup>2</sup> "God Hates Harry Potter," <http://www.godhatesgoths.com/godhatesharrypotter.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Atheist Richard Dawkins warns Harry Potter could have 'negative effects' on children," *Daily Mail Reporter* (Oct 25, 2008). <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1080525/Atheist-Richard-Dawkins-warns-Harry-Potter-negative-effect-children.html>.

from knowing the story of the alchemists' centuries of quest to find the philosopher's stone, and aside from knowing that Sir Isaac Newton was one of those alchemists, such a book title is bound to catch the eye of a philosopher. From the beginning, Rowling's HP was immersed in mythical themes, allegory, and philosophy. Some philosophers did take notice, and there emerged two books on teaching philosophical issues as intro-level texts: *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts* and *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy*.<sup>4</sup>

For those of us who view mythical symbols and tales as a philosophical invitation to examine who we are, where we came from, and what our deepest values are—the HP stories are a treasure trove of shiny jewels. As David Colbert wrote in his *Magical Worlds of Harry Potter*, “One of the pleasures of reading J.K. Rowling is discovering the playful references to history, legend, and literature that she hides in her books.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, this is an invitation to explore and clarify spiritual underpinnings, which might remind us of a Greek word for soul: *anima*, the moving principle of action. *Anima* is where we derive the word “animation.” After all, what animates us is what energizes our lives. As Socrates said, “An unexamined life is not worth living.” Even if we don't go as far as Socrates, perhaps we can grant that an unexamined life is less worthy because the less we understand ourselves, the misunderstanding devalues our life and puts us at risk. Aside from the mythical layers present in HP, there are many philosophical issues raised including: the difference between appearance and reality, how we know what we know, the metaphysics of space & time, the nature of death, the normal virtues of a moral life, and what behaviors are moral taboos. If we agree with the ancient Greeks that philosophy begins in wonder and amazement, there is much to wonder about in the HP saga.

There are many references to mythical icons in HP (e.g. the house of Gryffindor takes its name from the mythical griffin, a fabled monster, usually having the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion), and Rowling deliberately engages in massive symbolism and allegory. The four houses of the young wizard's prep school of Hogwarts are each associated with a particular virtue. Ravenclaw symbolizes the virtue of intellectual studiousness. Hufflepuff stands for hard work and perseverance. Slytherin symbolizes keen ambition, and Gryffindor stands

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<sup>4</sup> Baggett, David and Shawn Klein, ed. *Harry Potter & Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts* (Chicago & La Salle: Open Court, 2004), Bassham, Gregory, ed. *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Colbert, David. *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter: A Treasury of Myths, Legends, and Fascinating Facts* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 15.

for courage. In the first HP book, when young Harry is placed into the Gryffindor house, the story makes clear that he could just as well have been placed in Slytherin, indicating that the categories of moral virtue are not mutually exclusive and that a person can be characterized by more than one virtue of temperament. The allegory here is that categorizing a person is not a simple-minded, black and white affair. Harry will turn out to be both very ambitious and very brave. Hermione is placed in Gryffindor, but she is very intellectual, studious, hard-working, and ambitious. She could have been placed in any of the four houses of Hogwarts.

Still, Rowling is not willing to leave it at that. There is more to say about the nature of character and what defines us. Harry will have a discussion with Headmaster Dumbledore about this, and the Headmaster will tell him, “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”<sup>6</sup> It is not important whether we agree with Dumbledore on this, but it does invite the reader to consider the relationship between abilities, choices, and character—a chore Aristotle took up at length in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>7</sup>

## Mythical Themes and Life Lessons

HP is saturated with allegory and myths, and myths (whether personal or cultural) usually reveal a lot about who we are and where we think we are headed. When it comes to extremely popular stories like HP, we can assume that the mythical themes in HP are connecting with the myths that already deeply influence people in their everyday lives. Popular fiction is a key which can help us surface and explore our worldview, self-image, and the value system operating in society at large, a code to help us examine our lives in the Socratic spirit.

Campbell<sup>8</sup> said there are four functions of myth which can and often do overlap: cosmology (our origins), sociological (how to fit into the customs of our society), pedagogical (to teach a lesson, often a moral lesson), and mystical (to inspire in us a sense of wonder and amazement about our world). We find all of these mythical functions at work in the fictional world of wizardry and Hogwarts.

The mythical story that stands out foremost in HP is the hero’s journey, and it is not only Harry that embarks on this journey. Joining him are

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<sup>6</sup> Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York: Scholastic, September 2000), 333.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books II-V.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991). 38-9.

Hermione, Ron, their peers in Dumbledore's Army, and Dumbledore (among others). Harry is the focus, of course, and he illustrates two of the hero motifs discussed by Joseph Campbell: the quest for self-discovery and the quest to overcome powerful obstacles. Harry proves a hero in both regards. He is born into a circumstance that leaves him deceived about who he is for many years. He is an orphan who is told a false story about his parents, their history, and his history. This story leaves him feeling insignificant and unloved, but circumstances force him to leave his familiar surroundings and begin discovering the truth about his origins and family history. Being forced, or seduced, to leave the familiar for more uncertain grounds is a typical element in the archetypal hero's journey. It is how a person reacts in navigating his path through strange territory that makes the person a hero or a failure. Harry finds the whole process daunting and disorienting from the start, but he gradually becomes more and more aware of who he is, and the price of this growing self-knowledge rests on disturbing and painful experiences. Harry has been targeted for death from his very birth (as are we all), and the boy becoming a young man continues to face intense efforts to do him harm. But, though he feels fear deeply, he confronts his enemies and manages to keep them from defeating him. The more he learns about who he really is and who "his people" really are, the more he is forced to appreciate just how difficult his circumstance is.

Wandering in unfamiliar places and choosing to face danger, rather than hiding from it or denying it, is a universal feature of the hero's journey. Furthermore, the peril and the unknown can either be internal or external. Harry has to face the fact that he is "different" than ordinary folks in so far as he comes from a "different" family and has strange powers that ordinary folks lack. He has to face being bullied by Dudley Dursley because Harry is different, not being the biological child of the Dursleys. More than this, Harry has to struggle with whether his unique powers are making him become more like the evil Voldemort. After all, he has a special, mysterious connection with the Dark Lord—giving him dark visions, lots of anxiety, and allowing him to speak "snake tongue" just like Voldemort. As the Sorting Hat asserts, Harry could just as well have been placed in Slytherin as Gryffindor house. Over the years, Harry struggles more and more with whether his identity has a dark side. He even frets about this openly with his godfather, Sirius Black, as well as with Headmaster Dumbledore, worrying that he is becoming more and more like Voldemort.

Harry's story is, perhaps, the most authentic sort of vision quest. Harry does not flee from intense self-examination and self-criticism. He allows

himself to be aware of his dark side potential, even at great risk to himself, because he wants to know his true identity. True, he wants to think only good and glorious thoughts about the parents he never knew, but his vision quest forces him to confront the fact that his dad was not the saint Harry had thought he was. His dad, James Potter, had enjoyed teasing and bullying young Severus Snape.

As young Harry grows older and becomes involved in increasingly dangerous adventures, he discovers many things about himself and what is most important to him. He discovers that he is much stronger and more powerful than he believed, as well as being committed to being honest even at the cost of harsh punishment. Perhaps more than anything else, Harry discovers over and over the immense saving power of love and friendship. Harry's journey has all the marks of Campbell's archetypal hero. He faces his own fear and great danger, and though he faces sorrow and set-backs, he triumphs in the end. He leaves familiar territory in order to quest for self-discovery and to battle successfully with obstacles and evil forces. He goes into battle not only for himself, but to save friends, family, and community. He never ceases wanting to be near the home of friends and family, and in the end he returns there to live a normal life (for a wizard, anyway). Thus, the cycle of the hero's journey is completed: a leaving the familiar to joust in unfamiliar territory, then a return home as a transformed person. It's an old story. Eve and Adam did it by preferring the quest for knowledge over the paradise of ignorant bliss. Moses climbed the mountain and wandered in the wilderness, and Muhammad left the comforts of Mecca for the caves and wilderness. Jesus and Buddha went into the wild in order to do battle with temptation and be spiritually transformed. Buddha did this after leaving behind the life of royal comfort that was his without asking. The hero of Plato's Cave allegory<sup>9</sup> is set free from his ignorant, familiar surroundings to explore the (formerly) hidden higher levels of reality, then returns home in the hopes of sharing his enlightenment with his ignorant fellow humans.

The story of Harry Potter is also a salvation story, a story of the Chosen One, destined from birth for greatness though born in great peril. We find this mythical theme in the Bible stories of Moses and Jesus. They are destined for greatness, but at birth their specialness and destiny put them at risk of being killed. The Bible story holds that both the Pharaoh and Herod were rulers bent on finding the alleged child of destiny (destined to topple their rule) so that the child could be killed. Moses' parents and Jesus' parents had to take great care to keep their infant sons hidden from the Ruler's quest to do away with the infants' threat to their power. Moses'

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<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Republic*. Book VII.



parents felt it necessary to abandon their son to ensure his safety. Both Moses and Jesus struggle with their destiny, but after much trouble and pain, both end up as savior-agents, though the way they save is very different. Harry Potter is only an infant when the Dark Lord comes to kill him. His parents are murdered by Voldemort, but even at that age, he demonstrates power that leaves the wizard world in awe of him. Voldemort tries to kill Harry, but his murderous effort only leaves a scar on Harry's forehead while Voldemort is hideously wounded and almost perishes.

Harry becomes known as "the boy who lived," and the wizard world begins to think he must be the One who will grow up to save the world from the evil of Voldemort and his Death Eaters. The Headmaster of Hogwarts arranges for young Harry to be raised by foster parents in the Muggle world, the foster mom being the sister of Harry's dead mother, Lily. Harry is treated in an emotionally abusive way by his foster parents, and much later discovers not only that he is a wizard, but that he may be the child of destiny predicted in prophecy. Harry struggles with his destiny, encounters great pain and danger, yet in the end fulfills the prophecy by defeating the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters.

What is the single most important factor allowing Harry to escape Voldemort's many efforts to kill him and which allows Harry to overcome evil in the end? Love. It was the love of his mother and father which protected Harry from much danger, especially Lily's sacrifice of her own life to save her infant son. The power of love, parental love, and self-sacrifice are mythical themes which recur inside and outside of traditional religions. Jesus, of course, was not only a child prodigy who discussed and debated theology with his Jewish elders in the temple, but he sacrificed his own life (suffering great torture) in order to save the rest of us, and because God The Father so loved us. Hence, the salvation story is spiritually a tale of the power of love and the immense value of overcoming selfishness in order to help others. A mythical lesson here is that such love and self-sacrifice will not enable a person to avoid pain and trouble, no matter how great, but in the end, the power of such love will conquer even the greatest evil.

## **History and Philosophy**

Aside from other mythical themes in HP (e.g. good ways and bad ways to face death and the fear of death), there are profound philosophical issues raised in the JKR tale of the Muggle-wizard world. Hogwarts has a

history<sup>10</sup> which dates back many centuries. The school was founded by four of the greatest wizards of their time: Godrick Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin. All but Salazar Slytherin agreed that the school should be open to kids from non-magical parents as well as to kids from “pure” wizard families. Slytherin wanted only “pure bloods” to attend the school, and left the school (putting a curse on it) in anger when he could not have his way. In the world today and in days long gone, there has been a struggle between those who wanted society to remain “pure” (to avoid “mongrelizing” their citizenry) versus those who reject such fascism and see beauty in a diverse and mixed society. We can think of the Nazi ideology, the American KKK, and the fundamentalist Hindus who assassinated Gandhi. Those right wing Hindus conspired to kill him because Gandhi sought a society in which Hindus and Muslims could live and love together. Even in contemporary America, we hear some cry out to make English our official language and to prevent “true” American culture from being overwhelmed by immigrants from Latin America, Japan, and China. People worry about foreign minorities becoming the new American majority. As we discover from the unfolding HP saga, some wizards, and especially those with strong Slytherin ties, believe strongly that only pure blood kids should be educated at Hogwarts. They believe pure bloods should rule both the wizard and Muggle world, and those of Muggle “mudblood” deserve only to be subjugated. According to wizard world history, there was a time long ago when wizards were persecuted by the Muggle world (because of their powers and because they were so different from ordinary Muggle folk). This, they think, is a condition which can be prevented from recurring by doing a much better job of concealing the magic world from Muggles.

The existential relationship between the Muggle and wizard worlds in HP is a gold mine for metaphysical themes, and epistemology. In Rowling’s HP world, the two communities exist side by side on planet Earth, not in different dimensions or different planets.

The relationship between reality and appearance is one of the oldest philosophical topics. Even before Aristotle wrote his *Metaphysics*, philosophers were debating which first principle or principles were present as the thread to explain the rational order in our world. Some argued for water, some for fire, some for air, and eventually the debate turned more abstract as Parmenides argued for Being while Heraclitus argued for Flux. Parmenides argued that there existed only Being in the world, that it was a unity, and that our perceptions of motion and change were only

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<sup>10</sup> The importance of history in the HP saga did not go unnoticed by historians. See *Harry Potter & History*, Reagin, Nancy, ed. (New Jersey: Wiley, 2011).

appearances or illusions. He wrote treatises on the Way of Seeming and the Way of Being and argued that it was only the second that qualified as reality.<sup>11</sup> Heavily influenced by Parmenides, Plato<sup>12</sup> argued that there were levels of reality and that the highest level contained only that which was eternal and unchanging. He claimed that common foolishness led most people to think that the world of changeable things was the most real of all real things. In a manner similar to the theologies of Hinduism, Buddhism, and much of Christian doctrine, he asserted that our bodily desires and five senses distract and mislead us. They are like prisons which seduce us so much that we never even think about escaping. We don't even think there is a prison from which we need to escape. According to Plato, Heraclitus was right to note the important principle of Flux as the governing principle of the ordinary world of our five senses, but wrong to deny that there existed another realm of invisible and intangible eternal things. Indeed, Plato argued that the wise person knows that the visible and tangible world is somehow a copy of the eternal realm. The wise person wants to get beyond this world of fleeting and transitory things to a higher reality.

Ordinary folks and philosophers have acknowledged the importance of distinguishing reality from appearances and valuing reality more than images. Still, many thinkers have felt that even if image is not everything, it is extremely valuable and at least as valuable as "reality." There are too many examples of this to cite, but suffice it to say that most of us realize that if our appearances are not good, then our reality is likely to suffer. The very fact that magicians and P-R experts can manipulate us so efficiently shows that, in some important sense, there is no hard and fast distinction to be drawn between reality versus appearance. Images and appearances have their own reality which, when aimed at us, can produce real effects.

This fact is mirrored in the way Rowling's Muggle world coexists with the wizard realm. They exist in the same world, but for several reasons, the reality of the wizard world is concealed from Muggles most of the time. It is true that the wizards use magical spells to keep their world hidden from Muggle perception, but in large measure, the wizard world remains concealed from Muggles' attention simply by the way Muggles focus (or fail to focus) on the world. When magical folk are seen by Muggles, their appearances are dismissed and downplayed. After all, in the ordinary world of ordinary people, it is well known that there are strange folks and weirdos, and for the most part, ordinary ones just try to ignore them or stay away from them. As for magic performed by wizards, witches, elves, and

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<sup>11</sup> There are many books written about the so-called "presocratics." A recent one is by Warren, James. *Presocratics* (University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Especially in this most famous book, *The Republic*. Books VI-VII.

goblins—ordinary people know that strange events happen. Unless they happen too frequently, they are easily dismissed in any number of ways. Thus, for the wizards, it becomes much easier not to be noticed by the muggle world simply because Muggles really don't want to pay heed to such things. As Alan Watts<sup>13</sup> long ago noted, paying attention is a form of ignorance. The more we focus on any one thing, the more we are ignorant of everything else. To go unnoticed, therefore, it pays to know what someone else is prepared to notice, then simply avoid that circle of attention.

Magicians of all sorts know that human beings have blind spots and that their attention can be easily distracted. They depend on this knowledge to create illusions and make things appear and disappear in intriguing ways. What we think really exists is dependent on our perception, our blind spots, and how much we are distracted at any given time. When the magician, David Copperfield, made the Statue of Liberty disappear in front of a number of people, he made it disappear *to them*. To them and those who saw film of this magic, Lady Liberty had vanished.<sup>14</sup> He created this illusion for a select audience, but not for everyone. Naturally, this raises the issue of the relation between reality and appearances, between physics and metaphysics, and how we know what is real versus what we simply believe to be true.

Still, there may well be other messages communicated here as well. For example, if we normally perceive what we expect to perceive, we may be missing important parts of reality simply because we are accustomed not to look for them, or even *at* them. If custom is the great guide to human conduct (as Hume argued<sup>15</sup>), it may well do us good to look at our world in uncustomary ways from time to time. After all, habit and practice do not make something perfect, but they do tend to make it permanent, and it is not in our survival interests to wear permanent blinders. Doing so harms our ability to adapt because we don't perceive the changes which call on us to make adjustments in our customary behavior patterns. We know from experience that old, familiar ways can cease to be helpful to happiness or survival. To insist that the familiar and customary is the only reality is to engage in a kind of harmful denial.

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<sup>13</sup> Watts, Allen. *The Book on Taboo on Knowing Who You Are* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 29.

<sup>14</sup> "David Copperfield: Vanishing the Statue of Liberty," <http://youtu.be/VAEw-gtDkO4>.

<sup>15</sup> Hume, David. *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Texas: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 58.

Let us press on more deeply here. As science has informed us, existing side by side with us are many life forms that we scarcely notice if we notice them at all. Many micro-organisms live with us, on us, and in us, and we can't even see them...at least not ordinarily and not without the aid of special microscopes and photography. We do experience their effects, and they do experience our effects. For example, living on us and with us are dust mites, too tiny to see with the naked eye, and they feast on our dead skin, whether on the floor or on our body. There are also tiny mole-like creatures that live in our hair follicles, and if it weren't for the fact that they are too tiny for our nerve fibers to detect, we would be constantly scratching ourselves.<sup>16</sup> In our digestive system are many bacteria that aid in our digestion of food, and when things go wrong with them (perhaps because of things we eat), we can get a case of indigestion or a stomach ulcer. At a more metaphysical level, scientists assume that our macro world interacts continually with the atomic world of quantum things, although the exact nature of this relationship remains mostly a mystery. From the famous "double slit" experiment in physics<sup>17</sup>, it does really appear that electrons change their behavior when we try to observe them in certain ways. Is that strange? Is it weird? Is it magical? Who knows, but the observed, odd behavior is a part of our real world, though seldom witnessed by the average person.

Long ago, Aristotle wrote that matter in its most primary sense<sup>18</sup> is simply what has the potential to take another form or to become something else. This is a rather negative and elastic conception, and it is mirrored in modern physics' understanding of matter as simply a form of energy. The atheist philosopher, Milton Munitz, has written that the universe always contains a deep ineffable quality<sup>19</sup>, and now physics informs us that most of the universe is composed of "dark matter." Perhaps, the mystery and magic that pervades the wizarding world of Harry Potter is just a metaphor for the deep mystery in our world, a reminder that the Cosmos will always keep its secrets. No matter how much is revealed to us, much more will remain hidden.

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<sup>16</sup> Watch, for example, "Odyssey of Life: Part II, The Unknown World," NOVA (PBS: Nov 26, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Dr Quantum: Double Slit Experiment, <http://youtu.be/Q1YqgPAtzho>.

<sup>18</sup> "By matter I mean that which in itself is neither a particular thing nor of a certain quantity nor assigned to any other of the categories by which being is determined." *Metaphysics*. Book VII, 1029a-1029b.

<sup>19</sup> "Boundless Existence cannot be classified at all: it transcends all possible classifications." Munitz, Milton. *Does Life Have A Meaning?* (New York: Prometheus, 1993), 61.

This discussion and debate has continued over the centuries and still engages philosophers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The most widespread view accepted by today's Western philosophers is that the common sense, ordinary world of perceptual objects is not the most accurate representation of the "real world." For this, the most common attitude is that we must turn to the empirical science discoveries that inform us how our naïve worldview needs to be modified and improved. These scientific discoveries refer us to realms of things not seen by the naked eye, from microscopic organisms to the weird world of "quantum" atomic behavior. After all, as astrophysics informs us, the light from the stars takes so long to reach our retinas that many of the objects we see as stars are entities that have long since perished.

In the world of HP, wizards are regularly in need of moving back and forth between the way things really are in contrast to how they seem to be. The wizard world exists side by side with the Muggle world. Wizard reality manages to stay concealed from ordinary folks due to a variety of contrived appearances and the human inclination to ignore, downplay, or explain away the unusual. Some wizards are "shape shifters" that can change their appearance in a variety of ways. Nymphadora Tonks has this ability, Peter Pedigrew can transform himself into a rat, Professor McGonagall can turn herself into a cat, and Sirius can make himself into a dog. Some wizards change into other life forms against their will. Professor Lupin is a werewolf who transforms (if not taking his meds) into a terrifying wolf-creature when the moon is full. In our Muggle world, people sometimes commit awful crimes when they fail to take their medication. We don't have to press the symbolism too far here to see how this raises a host of philosophical and social/political issues. For example, how ethical is it and how wise is it for us to try to appear to be someone or something we are not? Spies do this for purposes of national defense and to wage competition with other nations during wartime and peacetime. Is such behavior always wise or ethical? What if the national defense policy is stupid, reckless, or immoral? In relationships and in job interviews, we often try to sell others on an appearance that is not really who we are. Is that a necessary evil, or just foolishness we have trouble avoiding?

Philosophers have published on a variety of philosophical issues raised in the HP saga. Among these are the following. One is the nature of time and the possibility of time travel. J. K. Rowling does not attempt to resolve the conceptual issues posed by time travel, but Harry and Hermione do use a time travel device to go back in time to free Sirius from his imprisonment. Hermione also uses the device in order to take various classes at the same time. Rowling is careful to unfold this time travel

episode in a way that honors a venerable caution about such travel: in doing-so, you must not change anything, or at least any significant thing. If you ignore this warning and change something in the past, you risk changing the subsequent chain of events in such a way that you, or the world you care for, may no longer exist. “Do not tamper with past events” is a major “Thou Shalt Not” of science fiction tales. How does she manage this in the story line? The main ploy is that what Harry, Ron and Hermione assumed were the actual events of their lived present, as it turned out, were not what really what they seemed to be. For example, they thought the Ministry’s appointed executioner had chopped off the head of the hippogriff, but as it turned out, what really happened was that he chopped up a big pumpkin, out of frustration. Various mysterious events which gained their attention before they used the time-travel device turned out to have an unexpected explanation, and these events turned out to be caused by changes Harry and Hermione made when they travelled back in time. This plot suggests strongly that the nature of the real world is, at least, in part determined by how we perceive it, a thesis well known in the world of quantum physics. In effect, the two heroes did not actually change what happened in the past so much as they altered how events were perceived or interpreted in their present. The plot also strongly suggests that temporal events unfold in a conditionally determined way rather than there being a single, unconditionally determined set of worldly events. For example, in one possible universe, Hagrid’s hippogriff is executed and Harry’s godfather, Sirius is returned to Azkaban Prison, while in another possible universe, the hippogriff is freed and so is Sirius. As it happened, the second result is determined, but the first could have also been determined if Hermione and Harry had not acted as they did.

There are various metaphysical and epistemic issues raised by this HP time travel story, but here are two. First, when Harry and Hermione travel back in time, they encounter themselves, and of course, their “past twins” are different from them. This makes one wonder if an ontological principle of self-identity is being violated. How can Hermione be herself in one place and acting in one way while Hermione is also in another place watching her “twin?” It seems both Hermiones cannot be the same person, yet they are the same person. That cannot be, can it?

How we answer this depends mightily on how we understand the qualities that determine a person’s self-identity. We assume, for example, that a person can be “the same person” from womb to tomb, ignoring all the changes that take place in a person on that journey. Philosophers are still discussing and debating what exactly is involved in personal identity over time, but in HP, we can at least say that the time travelling Harry and

Hermione are not strictly the same as their “past twins.” One pair is modified by their action of time travel into the past while the other pair is merely living in their present. Put differently, the present of the time travelling duo is not the present of their “past twins.” Hence, it is not implied by the story that, for example, Harry is *and* is not himself at any time. The time travelling Hermione and Harry arise out of their non-time travelling “twins,” hence are intimately related to them, yet not identical. In non-fiction terms, each of our present and future selves develop out of our past selves in an intimate way, yet we are not identical with our past selves. The 85-year-old is hardly the same person he was when he was at the age of 1.

Can such time travel into the past really happen? This brings up a new issue. Is there any existent past for us to travel to or into? This depends on the metaphysical nature of time. As others have noted, it depends on whether time is “tensed” or “non-tensed.”<sup>20</sup> Suppose the nature of time is “tensed.” This means that the change we experience as time is a sequence of now-then, now-then, now-then, etc...where “the now” exists and “the then” no longer does. In our present now, we imagine that all those “thens” form an extending sequence into a dimension we think of as “past.” What used to be in sequence is retained or recalled as a constantly expanding “yardstick” or “river” of moments, a quasi-spatial dimension. Nevertheless, if time is tensed in this way, then all those “thens” or “past nows” simply no longer exist anywhere except in so far as we remember them. All that exists is the presently changing world and our presently changing selves as a part of that changing-now. Thus, if time is like this, there is no way for us to travel forward or backward into anything. The past and the future simply do not exist; only the world of now exists.

But suppose time is non-tensed, and is like a 4<sup>th</sup> dimension which contains all things and all events past, present, and future. Suppose it is like a four dimensional “cube” or “sphere” on (or in) which is contained everything that was, is, or will be. If so, it would seem to be a thoroughly determinate space-time continuum, and everything that has happened or will happen, including perhaps people at some juncture travelling to the past or to the future, is fixed on that 4<sup>th</sup> dimensional field. If so, time travel would seem to be possible. Time travelling events would be located in the 4<sup>th</sup> dimensional topography just like non-time travelling events.

So which is it? There seems no clear cut answer to this question. The idea of time being something like a river of sequenced moments seems implausible, just one more human attempt to understand the strange in

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<sup>20</sup> Silberstein, Michael. “Space, Time and Magic,” *Harry Potter and Philosophy*, 192-98.



terms we are more familiar with—to give us more control over the mysterious Cosmos into which we are thrust. Our typical notion of time may be simply a highly stretched metaphor for how we visualize the world of space. The nature of time may always transcend our ability to understand it well and deeply.

There are several things which happen in *The Deathly Hallows* that raise issues of metaphysics, theory of knowledge, and philosophy of science. In epistemology and in philosophy of science, it is important to know which kinds of “factual” assertions or hypotheses it is worthwhile to verify. For example, with regard to singular existential claims like “This woman is pregnant,” “Water boils at 220 degrees F,” or “Barak Obama was born in Hawaii,” one can confirm their truth by doing some research and making some fairly straightforward observations. Such observations can confirm or refute the truth of such statements, and even more general statements like ‘Metal expands when heated’, ‘All citizens of the U.S. South are illiterate and dumb’, or ‘All human beings die.’ In such cases, you can gather lots of confirming evidence, or you can find a single example which shows the general claim to be false. Consider this passage from the HP saga. A serious epistemological issue is raised here.

Hermione: “What about the stone, Mr. Lovegood? The thing you call the Resurrection Stone?”

Lovegood: “What of it?”

Hermione: “Well, how can that be real?”

Lovegood: “Prove that it is not.”

Hermione: “But that’s, I’m sorry, but that’s completely ridiculous! How can I possibly prove it doesn’t exist? Do you expect me to get hold of all the pebbles in the world and test them? I mean you could claim that anything’s real if the only basis for believing in it is that nobody proved it doesn’t exist!”<sup>21</sup>

So, what about sweeping “negative existential” assertions? What about the case where someone says ‘No extra-terrestrials exist’, or ‘There is no philosopher’s stone’, or ‘There is no God’? Of course, you can refute such claims by finding one example of what they claim doesn’t exist, but if true, how could you prove such claims? Since the scope of each claim is literally the universe, how far would one have to look in order to have

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<sup>21</sup> Rowling, J.K. *The Deathly Hallows* (New York: Scholastic, 2007), 411.

good evidence that there were *no* extra-terrestrials, *no* philosopher's stone, or *no* God? In the last case, it is not even clear that "looking about" the Cosmos would be relevant to proving God was nowhere present. If God transcends the space-time continuum, then God's existence, or lack thereof, is not really a matter of looking here and there among stars and dark matter.

Aside from this epistemic point about such sweeping generalizations, there is another point made here. Not being able to prove that something is true, does not mean that it is true. There may well be stars which exist but are so far removed from us that we will never be able to observe them or have proof of their existence. One may fail to "prove" something for a host of reasons, including that one simply is not a skilled proof-giver, but that does not reveal anything about the status of what is not "proved."

*The Deathly Hallows* also invites us to consider what is the best way to be safe in life and the best way to cope with death. Here the tale (told also in *Tales of Beedle the Bard*<sup>22</sup>) is told of the deathly hallows, three magical objects that keep a person safe in different ways. The invisibility cloak keeps a person hidden from the sight of anyone or anything that could injure or kill a person. In our Muggle world, we have similar technologies: stealth bombers and jets, masks, radical cosmetic surgery, and the witness protection program. In the original tale, this cloak could even hide a person from death itself, but it might also serve to shield the person possessing it from any awareness or fear of death. In our Muggle world, the real dangers we manage to ignore or deny can cause awful problems for us and our loved ones. The resurrection stone serves to allow a person to bring back to life their dead loved one, but it cannot restore them to life in a full and complete way, leaving the person possessing the stone to feel terribly frustrated and sad. In our world, people who recover from being long submerged in a coma can have such a different personality and awareness that their loved ones barely recognize them. In a similar vein, what would a person brought back to life after being cryonically<sup>23</sup> frozen, perhaps for many centuries, be like? Would they too have a radically different and perhaps emotionally disoriented personality? Finally, there is the elder wand, a wand so powerful a magical person can use it to out duel and slay any opponent. The elder wand is the ultimate weapon (on the theory that the best defense is an aggressive offense). In our world, there have been many ultimate weapons in human history, each the technological fruit of the attempt to gain an overwhelming edge over any

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<sup>22</sup> Rowling, J. K. "The Tale of the Three Brothers," *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* (New York: Scholastic, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> The Cryonics Institute. <http://www.cryonics.org/>.

possible threat to one's power or safety: spears, swords, bow and arrow, cross bows, cannons, guns, machine guns, chemical weapons, biological weapons, and nuclear weapons. We humans have found that whoever possesses such a weapon becomes feared by others, who in turn want to get their own ultimate weapon, which sooner or later they do. It can be questioned whether such ultimate weapons actually make one more secure, or less secure, putting a big bulls-eye on the person or society possessing them. Each of the deathly hallows raises deep issues about how to live and how to deal with death. In the background looms the most basic question: should we fight and conquer death or should we learn to accept it and let go? Rowling's own view seems embodied in the way the tale of the three brothers ends. The brother whose death is most under his control and most gentle is the brother who accepts a natural death of old age, accepting it as an old friend. The other two brothers seek to conquer death, and both fail miserably.

In conclusion, the ancient Greek philosophers held that philosophy begins in perplexity and wonder. Unless we become gods, it seems we shall never leave that perplexity and wonder completely behind us. The Harry Potter saga is more than a fun adventure for kids of all ages. It is an invitation to examine and explore some of life's most profound issues and mysteries. For example, toward the end of the HP saga, Harry has a near death experience, and in this experience he encounters his previously deceased Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. As the mysterious experience comes to a close, the following exchange takes place.

"Tell me one last thing," said Harry. "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?" Dumbledore beamed at him and his voice sounded loud and strong in Harry's ears even though the bright mist was descending again, obscuring his figure. "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"<sup>24</sup>

Is our common distinction between what is real and what is just an idea well-founded, or is it a false dilemma? If it is a false dilemma, what does it mean to say that all our experiences, including near-death experiences, are "real?" These questions are not solved in the tales of Harry Potter, but they are wonderful food for thought, "portkeys" to help us explore our mindscape.

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<sup>24</sup> Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows*., 723.

# CHAPTER TWO

## WHAT IS MAGIC?

### CORBIN FOWLER

In the first Harry Potter novel, *The Philosophers' Stone*, Vernon Dursley yells gruffly at young Harry, "There's no such thing as magic!" Now, as dense and conventional as Vernon is, he probably would admit there are real magicians, and that they can entertain us with their tricks. I think these two perspectives capture a major schism in how most folks feel about magic. I think most of us either believe that real magic does not exist, or we believe that it does, but only as trickery and illusion.

Magicians have a long history of making a big impression on society. In Exodus 7, the magicians of the Pharaoh's court enter a losing magic duel with Moses.

<sup>10</sup> So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. <sup>11</sup> Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: <sup>12</sup> Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs.

In the Bible (Matthew, 2, NIV), wise men known for their study of astrology were eager to visit the newborn infant Jesus. These wise men are referred to by the Greek word 'magi', and yes, this is the origin of our modern words 'magic' and 'magician'.

<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'

The Bible informs us that the magic of Moses and the magic of Jesus (e.g. turning water into wine, walking on water, or resurrecting the dead) was good magic and more powerful than that of their foes. Due to later

developments in the Christian church of the Dark Ages, it became settled dogma that there was miraculous magic versus black magic, the first being performed by the power of Faith in God and the second being performed by witches and Satan worshippers. Mainstream and elite authority attitudes toward magic, and what counts as magic, have changed over the centuries.<sup>1</sup>

From the many stories told about magic, we can presume that good magic is helpful, constructive, and healing. Bad magic is harmful, destructive, and life diminishing. We see this bifurcation in such popular stories as the Wizard of Oz, where the ugly and bad witches wear black and the beautiful and good witches wear white. We see it in the Harry Potter saga where the decent wizards and witches honor the taboo against using any of the three forbidden curses<sup>2</sup>: the killing curse, the domination curse, and the torture curse. The Death Eater wizards and witches, on the other hand, have no qualms about using these three curses in order to gain and maintain personal and political power. The head Death Eater, Lord Voldemort, actually becomes increasingly hideous in appearance as he murders others to gain power and conquer death.

So, what exactly is magic? Let us assume there is magic and it is real, so why does it intrigue and attract so many of us while being “pooh poohed” by many others? Consider what professional magicians do. They perform feats that surprise, amaze, and amuse us. They make things happen (apparently) that utterly confound us and leave us wondering “How in the world did they do that?” or we think “What trickery did they use to make us have that amazing experience?” They apparently saw people in half, make them disappear, pull rabbits out of hats, levitate, make the Statue of Liberty disappear (temporarily), etc. They do things, or create the illusion of having done things, that confound us. We have no idea how they do it, and what they do seems beyond logical or scientific understanding. No matter how we view magic, it strikes us as extraordinary and mysterious. Still, once we learn how a simple magic trick is done, say a simple card trick, it no longer seems mysterious or extraordinary to us.

Our ordinary understanding of events seems the very antithesis of magic. Still, a curious fact about magic is that what was formerly considered magical can later seem wholly ordinary and non-magical. For

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<sup>1</sup> See Wiedl, Birgit, “Magic for Daily Use and Profit,” *Harry Potter & History*, ed. Reagin, Nancy (New Jersey: Wiley, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> At least until the final battle of Hogwarts where there truly is a clear issue of life & death self defense. At that stage the Ministry of Magic is thoroughly corrupt, and a state of war has begun.

most of human history, the idea that people could fly, much less fly to the Moon, was considered pure fantasy, the sort of thing only the gods might do. Most of what we take for granted in the way of electricity and electronics would be considered magical by most of our ancestors and their ancestors. Silicon chips, laser technology, holographic imagery, and cloning are just a few examples of things available to us nowadays that would be considered powerful magic by most human beings of the past.

Another curious fact about the technology we take for granted these days is that most of us have little idea how it works, save in the most general and cartoonish fashion. We are confident that experts, technicians, and scientists know how lasers work, how computers compute, and how to split atoms for making electricity without causing an out-of-control series of atomic explosions. For our own part, we are clueless. We believe someone knows how things work, even if we do not.

If we begin to put two and two together, we can begin to see a relationship between powerful, but commonplace, feats and the idea of magical events. Both are produced by a few people, technicians or magicians, and both do things which we do not know how to do. Both technicians and magicians can explain how they are able to produce what they do, but most of the rest of us are in the dark about how it works. So why do we consider those who can make and operate holographic images to be skilled technicians or scientists while we think Houdini or David Blaine are just trickster magicians?

You might think part of the answer lies in the fact that scientific technology rests on shareable procedures and repeatability while trickster magic is very private and secretive. Still, this cannot be the whole answer because magic feats are normally produced in a way (using methods) that can be shared with others, especially fellow magicians, and of course, they are repeatable. It is just that professional magicians have a trickster code which bans them from letting the cat out of the bag, spilling the beans, and giving away the secrets about how they perform their amazing tricks.

Being extraordinary and beyond (current) understanding seems to be a major reason why we consider some event or process magical. If so, then what we consider magical today, we may recast as non-magical in days and years to come. In this way, magic productions are much like miracles. Most folks seem to think that genuine miracles are not only extraordinary, but beyond anyone's understanding except God. Miracles occur when God makes, or allows, "the impossible" to happen. Hence, we can also interpret miracles in a theological sense simply as occurrences God brings about, or allows, which are beyond our human understanding. To us, they seem impossible given our knowledge of natural laws, but the occurrence of any