

STEVE L. PORTER

natural formation of contentment. Why are both important for the Christian?

4. Consider one or two specific practices that would foster contentment according to the theory of virtue formation presented in this chapter?

Being Good : Christian Virtues
for Everyday Life

M. Austin, D. Geivett, eds. Eerdmans
2012

Courage

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung

There is probably no virtue that enjoys broader recognition across cultural and historical boundaries than courage. From ancient Greek and Eastern warriors to medieval knights, from the cowboys of the Wild West to American soldiers in overseas conflicts, in real life, myth, and film, courageous individuals are held up as heroes and bravery is valorized as a moral ideal. How should we think about these pictures of courage? What implications do different models of courage have on who we validate as having courage — e.g., the weak or the strong? In particular, who might we look to for examples of Christlike courage?

Courage is the virtue most directly concerned with strength and weakness, power and vulnerability, life and death. What will count as courage depends on what kinds of things ought to be feared, and feared most. Handling these concerns well is an essential task of the moral life; it is also a central issue in Scripture and in biblical injunctions about faithful living. Today, courage is perhaps better known as an American value than a Christian virtue, since it epitomizes qualities that Americans idealize: strength in adversity, believing in yourself against the odds, tough self-reliance. Developing a Christian conception of courage in conversation with these cultural ideals will require us to examine the dominant paradigms and definitions of courage, to explore links between fear and love as deep human motivations, and to sort through different views of human fear and power, to determine what may be considered virtuous and what vicious.

How do we learn what virtue is, and how do we learn to become virtuous? Often, we turn to a person who has the virtue, a person who em-

bodies courage. We observe his or her character to learn what the virtue is like, and we imitate that person to become more virtuous ourselves. Christians take Jesus Christ as their model of the perfectly virtuous person. For centuries, Christians have understood moral formation as the imitation of Christ (Eph. 5:1).¹ Learning to become virtuous involves, among other things, trying to become more Christlike in our character. The apostle Paul describes this process as “taking off” our old sinful practices — the vices — and “clothing” ourselves with the virtues (Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:5-14).

Does taking Jesus Christ as our exemplar of courage make the Christian conception of this virtue different or distinctive? How does the courage of Jesus compare to the heroic ideals of courage found in ancient Greek epic poetry or in contemporary American films? If the courage of Christ is not the “heroic warrior” courage we are so familiar with, then what sort of courage would it be?² What sort of strength does Jesus embody, and how does it compare with human and worldly ideas of power? Our conclusions about courage as a virtue will depend on who we take to be our guiding patterns and ideals, and how these people practiced and embodied courage in their own lives.

In this chapter, I will describe a form of Christian courage that is different from the traditional heroic model. Although this alternative picture of courage affirms some things about conventional views of the virtue, it also challenges them and provides a warning about trusting human power to conquer evil, fear, and death. Drawing on the thought of Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274), I will first explain the different expressions of courage found, respectively, in the conventional action-adventure hero and in the Christian martyr. Aquinas’s treatise on courage is a good place to think through various models of this virtue. Like us, Aquinas had to evaluate dominant cultural conceptions of courage he in-

1. Among many possible examples, we find that the title of Thomas à Kempis’s well-known work, *The Imitation of Christ*, and the three traditional vows of those in religious orders (poverty, chastity, obedience) reflect just this conception of the moral or spiritual life. All biblical references are to the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

2. Early Christian desert ascetics commonly referred to themselves as “athletes” and “soldiers” of Christ, trained to fight in the arena; however, these terms designated spiritual contests with inner temptations and the demons standing behind them, not with other people. See, for example, John Cassian, *The Institutes*, trans. B. Ramsey, O.S.B., *Ancient Christian Writers* 58 (Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 2000), Book V.

herited from the Greeks and Romans and decide what courage might look like from a Christian point of view. Aquinas argues that endurance and patient suffering — especially that of martyrdom — can be as courageous as the daring battlefield heroics typically lauded by Greek culture (and that are echoed in our own action-adventure films). As we will see, the key to his picture of courage is love, not human power. What unites the aggression of the hero and the endurance of the martyr as courage is their willingness to risk death for the sake of something they love. Section two of the chapter is thus devoted to explaining the connection between courage and love.

Using Aquinas’s two forms of courage and their link to love as a foundation, I will then consider how courage looks in practice. How is the virtue of courage, as defined by the Christian tradition, embodied in a person and a life? To answer that question, I will offer three “character studies.” I will consider J. K. Rowling’s portrayal of Harry’s death in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* as an expression of courage.³ I will argue that her depiction of Harry fits within a long moral tradition which envisions courage as endurance. Comparing Harry to the conventional action-adventure hero and also to Voldemort — the antithesis of courage — gives us a more concrete and “fleshed out” picture of the relevant models of character and their strengths and weaknesses. In the end, it will be clear that both Aquinas’s and Rowling’s accounts of courage make fruitful test cases for the ways ancient and contemporary conceptions of courage must be transformed in order to capture a Christian view of this virtue, and that they agree on the fundamental character of courage.⁴ I will conclude by answering a brief objection about the scope of courage’s practical application in everyday life.

3. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Arthur A. Levine/Scholastic Books, 2007).

4. Aquinas’s account of courage is found primarily in the *Summa Theologica* (hereafter ST) 2a2ae.123-40, especially qq. 123-24, a passage traditionally known as the treatise on courage. He also discusses fear in the treatise on the passions, ST 1a2ae.40-48 (on the irascible passions), and fear of God in ST 2a2ae.19. All translations are by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948; repr. Christian Classics, 1981).

Courage and Fear

The virtue of courage is most often defined by its regulation of fear. Courageous people need not be fearless, but they are not overcome by their fear. Rather, they have mastery over it — at least enough to persevere in doing some good or noble deed. To understand courage, therefore, we have to know something about fear. Aquinas first discusses fear as a reaction of the “irascible appetite.” The irascible appetite is, roughly, our power to respond to obstacles, difficulties, and pain when they stand in the way of our attaining something good we desire. For example, I desire security, but a threatening noise in my house at 2 a.m. arouses fear. I desire that my children be treated with justice, but a playground bully sends them home bloodied and crying. To satisfy my desires for security and justice, to gain or regain my hold on those goods, I first have to face some evil or difficulty that stands in my way. My previous attachment to these goods — my love for my children and my desire to live in a home that is safe and secure — drives my perception of certain things as threatening and my visceral reactions to them.

Natural reactions like fear presuppose a world in which the things we want and need are threatened or blocked, or in which trying to acquire and hold onto good things involves struggle, hardship, and pain. Fear is one of several possible reactions to these evils that complicate our pursuit of the good; anger at the bully’s threat to my children’s well-being is another. In understanding and evaluating a reaction like fear, then, we must hold together in mind both the evil obstacle *and* the good it threatens.

How we respond to difficulty or evil depends on what that evil is, and what we care about, therefore, but it also depends on our character or virtue, since human beings can direct and train their fears and desires to follow reason. Aristotle calls the process of cultivating patterns of thought and feeling “habituation,” that is, habit-formation.⁵ The courageous person — as a person of virtue — is not someone who merely *happens* to handle fear well; she is someone who has been *trained* to handle fear well. How she reacts to fearful situations, what she fears, and how she expresses her fear can be deliberately shaped over time through practice.

To put it another way, human fears and desires arise in us naturally, but fearfulness in danger is more than a mere instinct, just as the desire for

pleasure is not something we are compelled to give in to every time it is aroused. With the virtues — good habits or character traits — we can direct and perfect the expression of fear, desire, and other such reactions in ways that help us to flourish fully as human beings. For this, we need to use practical reason’s “big picture” view of how this particular situation fits into our overall pursuit of the human good. An important part of formation in virtue, a life of cultivating Christlike character, is engaging in the sort of practices and disciplines that gradually align our initial reactions to accord more and more with this big-picture view of our good. Rather than letting fears interfere with our pursuit of what we love, then, we can with courage discipline them enough to enable that pursuit, or even see the good more clearly and pursue it more wholeheartedly and faithfully.

Think about Peter Pettigrew’s fear in contrast to that of Harry Potter. Peter’s fear leads him to betray those he loves. Peter does love his friends, but his fear of Voldemort overcomes that love. So he betrays his friends to save his own skin. Harry, in *The Deathly Hallows*, also experiences intense fear of death at Voldemort’s hands. But his love for his friends leads him instead to face that fear and not to let it interfere with what he knows he must do to preserve what he loves. Fear can overwhelm us and our judgments about what is good. When left unchecked, fear can even reshape our vision of the world and the good. Pettigrew shows us the damage cowardice can do over time to a person and the quality of his life. Harry shows us how courage is the power to withstand fear for the sake of protecting what is good.

When something dangerous or evil threatens, Aquinas says that two reactions are typical: we fight or take flight. Daring is the fight response; fear prompts us to flee. Both responses are prompted by an evil that threatens some good we love, but they are opposite reactions. One moves us to strike back; the other urges us to run away.

When do we fight, and when do we run? The key difference between fear and daring is whether we judge it *possible* for the threat to be overcome and the good attained. “Daring is aroused by things that make us think victory is possible,” according to Aquinas.⁶ Daring causes us to fight against whatever is threatening us because we believe we can get rid of it or hold it off. A reaction of daring depends on the judgment that it is possible for us to do something about what threatens — we can fight it or

5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1–2.4, 1103a15–1105b15.

6. ST 1a2ae.45.3.

overcome it.⁷ Fear, on the other hand, makes us want to flee, because we judge that whatever we face is something with the power to overcome us.⁸ We are afraid when we know we are vulnerable and perceive the danger to be overwhelming. So daring makes us want to attack or fight because we think we can win, while fear instinctively inspires flight to cut our losses.

For Aquinas, courage concerns fear *and* daring. Its task is to hold fear in check, so that it does not interfere with or prevent our pursuit of a worthy good, and to “moderate” daring, so that we are properly cautious with the good of our own life. Like Peter Pettigrew, the cowardly person is too cautious. The rash person, on the other hand, is not cautious enough.⁹ (Thus the virtue of courage lies in Aristotle’s “golden mean” between the extremes of deficiency and excess, too little and too much.)¹⁰ Fear moves us to withdraw from dangers, and daring prompts us to strike out against them. The virtue of courage is necessary because each of these passions can interfere with protecting or pursuing the good. Fear is the passion that most needs moderating when we must bear with an overpowering difficulty or danger. Aquinas calls this act of withstanding fear “endurance” (an act necessary to avoid the vice of cowardice). Daring is the passion that needs moderating in the act of attacking some evil or obstacle in one’s path. This virtuous act is aptly named “aggression.”¹¹ When moderated by reason, it should be distinguished from heedlessly rushing in (the vice of rashness). Most of the Harry Potter books end with Harry, Ron, and Hermione engaging in an act of aggressive courage, en-

7. ST 1a2ae.45.1.

8. ST 1a2ae.41.2 and 4.

9. In Rowling’s novels, Sirius Black sometimes tends toward rashness and excessive risk-taking.

10. In Aristotle and Aquinas, parsing the virtue and vices involved is slightly more complicated, since courage concerns both fear and daring. So the vices might be characterized as an excess and deficiency of fear (cowardice and rashness, respectively), or they might be characterized as an excess and deficiency of daring (excess daring being something like rashness, again, and a deficiency of daring being something analogous to cowardice). See, for example, ST 2a2ae.126, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.7 (1107b1-5). Aquinas thinks that the case of excessive daring doesn’t arise much because fear for one’s life (a natural inclination) serves to restrain daring and increase fear (ST 2a2ae.123.6). Having too much fear is the usual moral problem, and the one I will concentrate on in this chapter.

11. ST 2a2ae.123.6.

tering the fray to fight Voldemort and the Death Eaters, risking injury or possible death in attempting to overcome the threat and defend the good. This is what makes Harry’s willingness to simply lay down his life without fighting back at the end of Book 7 so striking by contrast.

Although it concerns both fear and daring, Aquinas argues that courage is primarily concerned with restraining fear.¹² Why? Because the danger that threatens usually serves as a natural check on excessive daring and aggression, but at the same time it increases our fear.¹³ Yet if fear is the main passion courage moderates, then endurance — bearing with difficulty and standing fast against our fear of danger — must be its paradigmatic act.

Aquinas consistently emphasizes that fear is our natural emotional response when some evil threatens and resisting or aggressively attacking the evil is not an option. Sometimes endurance is required because we *cannot* avoid or attack the threat. Aquinas says that sometimes courage is necessary because evil comes from a cause which is stronger than we are and outside our control: “Fear regards a future evil which surpasses the power of the one who fears, so that it is *irresistible*.”¹⁴ In these cases, we are forced to stand firm from a position of weakness.¹⁵ Our helplessness and vulnerability make facing the threat inevitable and escape impossible. This is one reason we need courageous endurance. Other times, however, endurance is required because we *ought* not avoid or attack the threatening evil. In these cases, to fight back will also compromise the good we love and are trying to protect, or to compromise our moral integrity. Even if we do have greater power, or the power to fight back, faithfulness to what we love — not (just) the greater force of what threatens — requires that we lay down our power of aggression and endure what comes. Because this is a choice, and not something forced upon us, it can make these instances of courageous endurance even more difficult yet.

In an interview, J. K. Rowling describes the difference between

12. ST 2a2ae.123.6; *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.9, 1117a30.

13. ST 2a2ae.123.6. Aquinas’s point here also relies on the natural inclination of all beings toward self-preservation. See ST 1a2ae.94.2.

14. ST 1a2ae.41.4, emphasis added. It might be more accurate to say the threat “appears to be” irresistible, because it is the agent’s perception and judgment of such that prompts the passion to arise. See ST 1a2ae.42.2, where Aquinas quotes Aristotle to make this point.

15. ST 1a2ae.42.3.ad 3; ST 1a2ae.43.2.

James's and Lily's reactions to Voldemort in terms of the distinction between aggression and endurance.¹⁶ Voldemort arrives at their home with intent to kill. James reacts with daring and aggression; Lily with fear mastered in an act of endurance. Rowling says, "I think there are distinctions in courage. James was immensely brave. But the caliber of Lily's bravery was, I think in this instance, higher because she could have saved herself . . . [For James it was] like an intruder entering your house. . . . You would instinctively rush them. But if in cold blood you were told, 'Get out of the way' [so Voldemort could kill your child] . . . what would you do? . . . [Lily] very consciously [laid] down her life. She had a clear choice." She can't fight Voldemort — she doesn't have her wand. But she will not sacrifice her child to escape, out of fear. Instead, she courageously chooses to stand firm and endure, even to the death.

Aquinas's defense of martyrdom as an exemplary case of courage depends on this picture of fear and daring, endurance and aggression.¹⁷ Both his and Rowling's pictures of courage serve to challenge the dominant "aggressive" paradigm of this virtue, or at least to expand our conception of courage to new and perhaps less familiar expressions of it. Aquinas inherited Aristotle's definition of courage as paradigmatically displayed on the battlefield, and Aristotle's account reflects the brave Greek warrior from the epic poets before him. Contemporary moral imaginations and ideals track a similar aggressive type. In fact, not only do most action-adventure heroes in film — from John Wayne to Rocky to John McClane — fit this model, but so do Harry and his friends in the first six books of the Harry Potter series. Each book ends with a climactic scene in which Harry and company battle against Voldemort. Courage is the virtue of fighting off evil, getting into the fray and defeating what threatens, risking one's life in a battle to protect and save others. Privileging martyrdom — an act of suffering and *enduring* an evil that we cannot or should not overcome by attack or a show of force — therefore radically changes our view of courage and the type of strength it requires.

Examples of aggressive courage are inspiring and noble, without a doubt. Why does Aquinas argue that these cases typically depict a lesser

16. Interview by Emerson Spartz et al., July 16, 2005, Edinburgh, Scotland. Full text available at <http://www.Mugglenet.com>. All quotations from Rowling in this chapter are from this interview.

17. See ST 2a2ae.124.

degree of courage than martyrdom, which seems to be a more resigned *reaction* to threats from others, in contrast with courageous *acts* which combat great evils and protect great goods? If we are looking for an *action* that best embodies courage, why settle for this apparently passive model — especially in our age, in which *doing* is valued more highly than (indeed thought almost utterly to eclipse) *suffering*?

Earlier, we saw Aquinas distinguish our reactions of fear and daring based on our perception of whether the danger was overwhelming or possible to overcome or avoid. In acts of daring aggression, our attack of daring is based on the belief that it is possible to avoid or conquer the evil that threatens. Thus there is a sense in which the courageous person still has some control over the situation: he acts courageously because he believes he has sufficient power to gain or protect the good; to that extent, he still trusts his own power to overcome the threat.

In an act of endurance, on the other hand, the courageous person can only avoid danger or death if she renounces or betrays the good at stake. That means, *given her love for and faithfulness to that good*, she is powerless to evade the threat. She must stand firm against it and take what comes. Her deepest loyalties demand it, and the sacrifice of her own life that comes with it. Her intense fear signals that her control over the safeguarding or protecting of her life is gone. In this position, her only means of resisting the evil is to stand fast and not give up on the good she loves while she suffers.¹⁸ As Josef Pieper puts it, "fortitude . . . is nothing else than to love and to realize that which is good, in the face of injury or death, and undeterred by any spirit of compromise."¹⁹

18. Notice that it is the protection of her own life that she forfeits. Aquinas's definition of courage does not require that we sacrifice the lives of others, especially those for whose well-being we are responsible. Courage *serves* justice; it does not undermine its demands. Rather, he is thinking of situations when the only remaining way to preserve the integrity of the self and one's relationships to others (human or divine) is to lay down one's life.

19. Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), pp. 130-31. It is interesting that as Harry himself matures and his character deepens, he turns from aggressive courage to endurance and moves away from an attempt to remedy his situations of suffering to realizing that his suffering is not to be alleviated or avoided, but borne with steadfastness. He also moves from a suffering that is not chosen to the need to choose it voluntarily. This requires greater courage from him as well.

The fact that the aggressively courageous person — like our familiar action-adventure hero — is active, rather than forced into a position of suffering, implies that he is in a position of greater control over both the situation generally and his own physical well-being. It is a common experience that in the face of dangers and threats of pain, a greater sense of powerlessness also increases one's fear.²⁰ The aggressively courageous person thus has physical and psychological strength to draw upon which the one who must endure lacks. The martyr must stand firm from a position of greater weakness and greater fear.²¹

There is a sense in which the aggressively courageous person's aim and efforts are directed at still trying to avoid death, while the challenge of the one who courageously endures is to face and accept it.²² So it makes sense that Aquinas takes martyrdom as his paradigmatic picture of endurance. The martyr is threatened with death unless she renounces her faith. Unless she is willing to betray Christ, she will be killed. Her position is one of weakness, of being required to suffer and undergo death. But her resistance is not a merely passive, "doormat" type response and is not to be confused with merely giving up. It is a deliberately chosen resistance to the temptation to bail out and betray the one she loves most in order to save herself, and it is a resistance that requires her to stand firm against fear, even fear of death.

Thus in the act of endurance, physical strength, brute force, better weapons, and human power are not what make the martyr strong. These things have either been stripped away or laid aside. To endure the danger that threatens and her own fear, the martyr needs strength of soul — and this is the heart of courage. Courage, for Aquinas, is a power that can be perfected even, and perhaps especially, in weakness.

20. This has been observed and documented among those with terminal illnesses that render them unable to care for themselves. See, for example, those cited in "Severe Mercy in Oregon," *Christianity Today*, June 14, 1999, p. 66.

21. See my "Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas's Transformation of the Virtue of Courage," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11 (2003): 147-80.

22. This is not to deny that there are opportunities for and acts of endurance comparable to martyrdom on the battlefield.

Courage and Love

It is evident from the examples of Lily and the martyrs that the virtue of courage does not stand by itself. Love's role as the source and end of all we do is essential for understanding the nature of courage in Aquinas, as in Rowling, and they are right to make this strong connection. To put it simply, rightly ordered love is, and should be, the ultimate motive for any act of courage.²³ What makes the courageous person stand firm is not confidence in her power, but love. Without love, all the bravery in the world is mere gritted teeth — or, more darkly, it is idolatrous reliance on human strength to save the day.

For Aquinas, if a courageous person endures persecution to the death, that action should be characterized *primarily* as aiming at some good that her endurance of death safeguards, *not* as aiming at dying bravely, as if this were in itself something good (see also 1 Cor. 13:1-3). In fact, to see courage as requiring one to face death or suffering stalwartly for its own sake would be to miss its main point. Aquinas writes, "endurance of death is not praiseworthy in itself, but only insofar as it is directed to some good."²⁴ G. K. Chesterton once said of courage, "The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him."²⁵ Likewise, I face the intruder at 2 a.m., not because I crave risk or danger, but because my family's security depends on my protection. My love for them is my deepest motive. To be a virtue, courage must point beyond itself to love as its source and to love's end as its goal.

Augustine defines courage as "love readily bearing all things for the sake of the object beloved."²⁶ For courage to point beyond itself, for love to "endure all things," there must be some good we love even more than the suffering and pain we fear. The good we love, which motivates us to stand firm against fear, is an essential part of courage, for, as Aquinas ex-

23. ST 2a2ae.124.2.ad 2: "Charity inclines one to the act of martyrdom, as its first and chief motive cause, being the virtue commanding it, whereas fortitude inclines thereto as being its proper motive cause, being the virtue that elicits it." For the more general claim, see also ST 2a2ae.23.8, where charity is described as the efficient cause, foundation and root, end and commander of all the other virtues.

24. ST 2a2ae.124.3.

25. *Illustrated London News*, Jan. 14, 1911.

26. *De Eccles. Morib.* 15.25, quoted in ST 2a2ae.123.4, obj. 1 and 123.7, obj. 3.

plains, “fear is born of love.”²⁷ In fact, not only fear but all human reactions presuppose an underlying love of some kind.²⁸ This means fear is a derivative emotion. Our love for something makes us fearful when it is threatened, lest we lose it. The loss and fear are greatest in cases involving a good that is loved naturally by everyone, such as our own bodily life and its preservation.²⁹ And yet love of an even higher good can motivate risking great loss, even as our fear acknowledges the loss as itself something evil — a *loss* of something good. In the case of courage, while love of the good of our own life causes fear, love of something even greater than ourselves can enable us to face its loss and withstand our fear of death.

The more we love something, the more sacrifice and suffering we can endure for its sake.³⁰ Nothing less than love for her own child moves Lily to lay down her life and put herself between Voldemort’s killing curse and her beloved son. Likewise, Aquinas says it is the martyr’s great love for God that enables her to withstand her fear of losing her life. Love makes courageous self-sacrifice possible.³¹

Courage: A Character Study

So far we have set out Aquinas’s descriptions of courage and its various forms. The virtues, however, are meant to be an integral part of human character and the practices of the moral life. In this section, then, we will consider concrete cases of courage and courageous characters in more detail, using our own action-adventure heroes and Rowling’s characters. The pictures of moral character we draw here will put flesh on the contrast between aggressive courage and the courage of endurance seen in Harry Potter and his ultimate act of self-sacrifice in *The Deathly Hallows*. We will also draw a character sketch of the antithesis of courage, using the character of Voldemort. These character studies will help us to see

27. ST 2a2ae.123.4.ad 2; 2a2ae.19.3; 2a2ae.125.2; and 1a2ae.43.1, quoting Augustine’s *83 Questions*, 33.

28. ST 1a2ae.27.4.

29. ST 2a2ae.123.4.ad 2; 1a2ae.94.2: We share this inclination with all substances.

30. ST 2a2ae.124.3.

31. As I discuss in “Power Made Perfect in Weakness,” the martyr needs divine assistance (grace) for this.

more clearly the different views of power underlying different moral ideals, and the way that love grounds true courage.

Our first character study is the aggressively courageous hero. Our most familiar models of courage — action-adventure heroes — are inspiring, noble, and fun to watch on the big screen. From the Lone Ranger to Rambo, from Tom Cruise in *Mission Impossible* to Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* to Toby Maguire in *Spiderman 1* and *2*, we love to cheer these heroes on as they rush in and rescue others from danger and distress. They fight the bad guys and win. They use aggressive means, even violence, to achieve just ends. They are rescuers, problem-fixers, fighters, individuals who can *do* something about evil, and do it with their own power and ingenuity. Their sort of courage exemplifies human power triumphing over evil. And the “power” in question is usually physical or military power — it involves the use of force, whether brute strength, bigger guns, or both. Not coincidentally, the action-adventure hero is almost always male. This picture of aggressive courage easily trades on our desires to solve our own problems and save the world on our own terms and in our own strength. Note that the action-adventure hero is never a conventional citizen but a maverick, authority-defying rather than inclined to play by the rules; he steps in when the government fails and the police are found inept, and overcomes the enemy himself. He is autonomous: he “goes in alone.”

Now there *is* something admirable about this model: the action-adventure hero loves justice and fights for a good cause, and he is willing to risk his life (but not others’ lives) for the sake of that good cause. As is true of all courageous people, our action-heroes are willing to suffer, put up with injury, risk death, and face their fears in order to achieve a good end. But there is a danger here. We should be wary of the way this model tends to glorify human power and its ability to overcome all evil. We should be cautious of heroes who never need others, and who expect to be able to conquer evil and evade death by their own strength and on their own terms.

Taken to extremes, these action-hero tendencies and temptations can produce a character like Voldemort. Rowling deliberately depicts Voldemort as one who has great power, but not love. This explains why it is impossible for Voldemort — unlike the action-hero — to have courage. Courage is the virtue that enables us to stand firm against our fear of injury, difficulty, and ultimately, death, for the sake of some good that tran-

scends us — that is, for something other than ourselves or our own good. Courage requires that we recognize and care about some good greater than ourselves, a good that facing danger and risking death can — in some cases — protect or preserve.³² Courage is a safeguarding virtue — standing fast against our fears (even our fear of death) is good only as it enables some great good to be safeguarded or protected.

Why can't Voldemort have courage? Because for him, his life *is* the greatest good. He loves nothing but himself. There is nothing in Voldemort's universe worth risking his own life for, nothing and no one worth dying for. He cannot recognize any good that transcends himself. That means death is the greatest evil for him. As Rowling says, "He regards death itself as ignominious. He thinks that it's a shameful human weakness. . . . His worst fear is death." Because his own life is the greatest good, he must protect and preserve himself at all costs, and for that he needs the power to defy death.

Voldemort's quest is not courageously to stand firm in the face of fear, but rather to *eliminate* fear, especially the fear of dying. To get rid of fear entirely means that we have to accumulate enough power for ourselves to overcome everything that threatens us, including death. Ultimately, the way to get rid of all fear is to become invincible, all-powerful — godlike. When asked what Voldemort would see if he were in front of the Mirror of Erised (the mirror which shows you your heart's greatest desire), Rowling answers, "[He sees] himself, all-powerful and eternal. That's what he wants." Voldemort is infatuated with power, his own power, because he seeks to be above death, immortal, beyond the possibility of fear. Ideally, he won't need courage, because he will have eliminated his own vulnerability to death and any possibility of his own weakness or suffering.

32. We note here the following important caveats. For Aquinas, you may (and in some cases you ought) to lay down your physical good if by doing so you can protect the good of another person. This is an act of love. (Although it would take more argument than I offer here, this position does *not* imply that it is virtuous or morally required to endure just any form of injury to the body or that certain forms of suffering — domestic abuse for example — are either morally required or praiseworthy.) You may not, however, lay down your spiritual good (that is, you may not commit a sin) for the sake of protecting another. The virtue of courage regards risks to one's physical safety and preservation. For a discussion of fear as it pertains to spiritual risk and self-preservation, see my chapter "Holy Fear" in *The Intellectual Legacy of John Paul II*, ed. Laura L. Garcia (forthcoming, Crossroads Press).

Through the Sorcerer's Stone, the Horcruxes, and the Elder Wand, Voldemort's quest for power is motivated by his desire to be beyond fear.

It is easy for aggressive, action-hero courage to slide toward a Voldemort-like agenda. As John Paul II once said, we live in "a cultural climate which fails to perceive any meaning or value in suffering, but rather considers suffering the epitome of evil, to be eliminated at all costs."³³ Viewing death and suffering only as weaknesses to be overcome fuels our search for power and control over them. We are often tempted to use military might, genetic engineering, medical treatments, and physical force to try to eliminate our vulnerabilities, even to try to place ourselves above death, invulnerable, superhuman. Suffering is certainly not something to be gloried in for its own sake. Sometimes, however, courage requires it, because to try to overcome evil instead of suffering it will cost us our integrity and everything we love. As in Dumbledore's search for the Hallows and his mistaken quest for the "greater good," or in our culture's pursuit of more and more control over life and death, the worry is that we will increase and use our power to try to overcome our vulnerabilities in ways that deny our humanness and trample others. Dumbledore's power-driven agenda as a young man justified (in his mind) controlling Muggles and not acknowledging their fully human status.³⁴ This is not courage, but a perversion of it. This is a selfish, worldly view of power and what power is for. It makes us less human, not more fully human.

Human power to overcome evil and death is so inadequate. Perhaps this is why we are so often tempted to go to extremes, and why our action-adventure heroes often have to be superheroes — with superhuman powers or power-enhancing props like the Elder Wand. As Dumbledore says, "[Voldemort] believes the Elder Wand removes his last weakness and makes him truly invincible."³⁵ But he also confesses that in his own pursuit of the Hallows, "I too [like Voldemort] sought a way to conquer death, Harry."³⁶ The "Hallows" of course is another name for the "Holy" — that is, the powers reserved only for God. Thus Harry's choices and character are not defined by a search for the Hallows and their god-

33. *Gospel of Life: Evangelium Vitae* (New York: Random House, 1995), 15.

34. Rowling, *Hallows*, p. 716. For similar themes, see C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*.

35. Rowling, *Hallows*, p. 721.

36. Rowling, *Hallows*, p. 713.

like powers, but by a sacrifice of himself for the sake of love. Our action-hero model of courage can tempt us, as it did the young Dumbledore, toward an obsession with our own self-sufficiency and power.³⁷ Even when we are engaged in the fight against injustice, like an action-hero, how often do we want to rely on ourselves to save the day, and assume we are able to secure justice by ourselves? The danger of the action-hero model of courage is that it can easily slide into a Voldemort-like choice to place our confidence in our own power, and to seek to enhance human power to reach superhuman, or even divine, levels.

We turn now to Harry Potter himself. What makes Harry's case of courage different from the action-adventure hero's aggression and Voldemort's plan to eliminate the possibility and the fear of death altogether? We have seen that the courageous person does not seek death, and he does not glorify it. In fact, he naturally fears it. He recognizes and values the life he lays down; his sacrifice is *not* a suicide.³⁸ Nor is it an attempt to escape suffering. What enables him to face his fear and endure death is not confidence in his own power, but in the power of love. The good he loves enables him to face his fear. To be courageous, your love has to be greater than your fear of death: there has to be something or someone you love more than your own life. True courage is rooted in self-giving love, not prideful self-assertion.

When Augustine defined courage as "love bearing all things for the sake of the beloved," he could have been writing about Lily Potter.³⁹ Or about Harry in *Deathly Hallows*. While his definition also applies to the true action-adventure hero — including Sirius or James or Lupin — Harry's sacrifice is importantly different.⁴⁰ Harry endures death because

37. As he says to Harry, "I had learned that I was not to be trusted with power" (*Hallows*, p. 717).

38. Harry neither kills himself nor wills his own death by the hand of another (the definition of active and passive suicide, respectively). Unlike the perpetrator of suicide, he wants to live. The difference between the suicide and martyrdom cases can be seen by running the following counterfactual: How would the agent react if he or she did not die after all? The suicide will feel her intentions thwarted; Harry and the martyr will be glad to be alive.

39. See note 26. Emphasis added.

40. It is also greater than Lily's. As Rowling notes (see note 16 above), Lily is acting according to a mother's natural love for her child, and does not have time to back out. While her choice is more voluntary and deliberate than James's, Harry's is even

it is the only way to preserve and stay faithful to the good he loves. For Harry, to choose to live, rather than to face Voldemort in the forest, would have compromised the good of everyone he loved — as Pettigrew's failure to stand firm against fear caused Harry's parents' death. For Harry, to choose to live would have betrayed everything he was and everything his parents' died for. To give up his life was a choice demanded by his love and faithfulness to the good.

Harry's courage to lay down his life, to endure death, is similar to the kind of courage Aquinas says the martyr has. And the martyrs were imitating Christ. It is no accident that Aquinas describes this courageous act of self-sacrifice first and foremost in terms of love: "Now of all virtuous acts, martyrdom is the proof of the perfection of love." It is "a sign of the greatest love, [because,] according to John 15:13: 'Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down one's life for one's friends.'"⁴¹ This picture of courage is a picture of a love for others which is powerful enough to keep our fear in check so that we can lay down our lives out of love. It is not (as in the first two models) a picture of conquering evil or eliminating fear on the basis of our *own* power, whether physical, technological, or magical. Harry puts away his wand so that he will not be tempted to use it to fight,⁴² just as he deliberately chooses to pursue the Horcruxes,⁴³ not the Hallows. Harry intentionally follows Lily's example — her courageous choice to lay down her life, to endure death, for the sake of love. And thus Rowling's picture of virtue stands in this tradition of thinking about courage in terms of the power of love, not the power of human force or the quest for power over death. This is why Lily — a woman — and Harry — a teenager with inferior wizarding power — can be a picture of this sort of courage. And so can we. Because the only power courage ultimately

more voluntary and deliberate than hers (see Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, 1110a5-1110b5 for a discussion of the voluntariness of acts done under threat). Harry, on the other hand, acts on behalf of friends he has voluntarily pledged loyalty to, and has time to weigh his choice, put away his wand willingly, and renege on his decision. In my judgment, that makes his act of courage more difficult than hers.

41. ST 2a2ae.124.3. It is important to note that her sacrifice of her life does *not* have salvific significance; like the martyrs, she bears witness to a self-giving love for others. Catholic theology acknowledges something redemptive even in the suffering of the martyrs, insofar as the martyrs willingly participate in the sufferings of Christ.

42. Rowling, *Hallows*, pp. 703 and 704.

43. In Latin, "the dreaded cross."

needs is the power of love. Only a love that is stronger than death has the power to “bear all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). As Rowling’s Dumbledore wisely observes: “Of house-elves and children’s tales, of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. Nothing. That they have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped.”⁴⁴ Voldemort cannot have courage because he “has not love” (1 Cor. 13:3).

Virtuous courage of the kind we are celebrating in this chapter is not self-sufficient or autonomous. As we have seen, the aggressive action-adventure hero tends to be a rugged individualist: he works alone, and depends on himself, his ingenuity and physical strength. Voldemort goes even further, acting only for himself and even using others as disposable means to his own good. Harry, by contrast, relies essentially on his friends throughout the books, and in his death, claims the power of the communion of the saints by using the Resurrection Stone to surround himself with those whose love has made him what he is. Laying down his life is Harry’s own decision and act, but as Rowling writes, “Beside him, scarcely making a sound, walked James, Sirius, Lupin, and Lily, and their presence was his courage.”⁴⁵ Love binds us together in community; love recognizes that we are not meant to be self-reliant. We flourish in solidarity, not solitary self-sufficiency. Again, it is not our own power that makes us courageous.

Aquinas says that “fear is born of love”; what we fear most depends on what we love most. Voldemort fears death most because he loves his own life more than anything else. His fears are rooted in selfish self-love. Harry can face death courageously because he loves something beyond himself and his own life. His love of others and their good, and his desire to protect them, is a love that is stronger than his fear of death. This is nothing less than a Christian love, the greatest of the virtues.⁴⁶

44. Rowling, *Hallows*, p. 710.

45. Rowling, *Hallows*, p. 700.

46. To be clear, I am not arguing that Harry is a Christian or has grace, or that Rowling intends this part of the tale allegorically to represent Christian martyrdom. I merely mean to say that Harry — like characters in a Flannery O’Connor novel — gives us a true picture of what Christian love looks like in his character and his practice, even if it is one that he himself is not aware of or would define in those terms. Harry Potter is not a story about Christian characters; it is a story about virtues that Christians recognize as fitting in their tradition of moral practice and perhaps only fully articulable within it.

In the end, it is a power that transcends him — the power of his mother’s love — that enables Harry to endure. It is not his own wizarding skill or intestinal fortitude that saves the day. Lily’s love for Harry and Harry’s love for others ultimately defines his view of power and therefore also his courage. And this picture of power and courage and love is one that itself echoes through many centuries of the Christian moral tradition. The martyrs, too, found the grace to endure by looking to Christ, who chose love, not force, as the way to defeat evil and death.⁴⁷ As a model of this sort of courage, Harry’s defining name should perhaps have been not “The Boy Who Lived” but “The Boy Who Loved.”

Courage as a Christian Practice

If we find compelling this picture of courage as endurance, even in the face of death, for the sake of love, we might still object that choosing martyrdom — an act as rare as it is exemplary — as the paradigm makes this view of courage highly irrelevant for ordinary people trying to live courageously amidst more mundane difficulties. After all, most of us can’t compete with Harry Potter when it comes to chances to save the world, and in the contemporary United States, opportunities for martyrdom are fairly rare. Nonetheless, Aquinas’s picture of courage was meant to instruct ordinary Dominican friars in the imitation of Christ. If the model of virtue he offers is too far removed from ordinary experience and too remote a possibility for practical imitation, then he will have failed to meet his own pedagogical aims.

Does the paradigm of martyrdom make courage too inaccessible for ordinary people? In fact, I think the opposite is true: the aggressive/action-hero paradigm of courage actually narrows the range of the virtue more than the endurance/martyrdom paradigm. The main point of making martyrdom the paradigm of courage is to show that this virtue can find expression as much or more in suffering and weakness as it can in striking out against a threat. The aggressive paradigm has, until very recently, been

47. Aquinas is clear that the ultimate expression of this type of courage requires setting *human* power aside in favor of reliance on divine power and grace. Thus Aquinas transforms this Aristotelian virtue in ways Aristotle would neither have dreamed of nor approved.

largely restricted to males, and even further restricted to those males who meet certain requirements for ability and physical strength. To make martyrdom the paradigm, on the other hand, enables *anyone willing to endure suffering for the sake of love* to echo this supreme example of courage in their own lives, and leaves physical power, with its attendant gender, health, and age limitations, out of the picture.⁴⁸ It also provides a necessary check on our temptations to rely too fully on our own power. *Anyone* who is unable or unwilling to use force when love demands this is a candidate for practicing courage — and this included, perhaps especially, the vulnerable: women, children, the elderly, the economically and socially disempowered, and the disabled. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. defined his non-violent resistance — again, a form of courageous endurance — by this guiding belief: “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final say in reality.”⁴⁹

As fallen and vulnerable human beings in a world marred by sin and death, the endurance of suffering and death is necessary for us all, and courageous endurance is an answer to the question, “What is left for me to do when my own strength is exhausted, my burdens can’t be lightened by human resources or power, or when faithfulness to the good demands that I suffer rather than betray what I love most?”

Moreover, for Aquinas’s intended readers, as for us, the moral life is coextensive with the process of sanctification — becoming more and more like Christ in our character. This process requires the death of the old self and the coming to birth of the new, dying *with* Christ in order also to rise with him. This is another form of laying our lives down for the sake of love. This is not a rare opportunity but a daily discipline. So martyrdom, in an analogical but no less important sense, is a task for all of those who claim Christ as their own and seek to love him above all else.⁵⁰

To understand courageous endurance as an exemplary expression of

48. Analogously, superior technological power (of the sort that can trump the limitations mentioned in the text) usually comes with economic privilege, which is another way of restricting the exercise of power to a few.

49. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Dec. 10, 1964.

50. Although I do not make this point here, I have argued elsewhere that the usefulness of an exemplar is not limited to its direct imitability; an ideal can teach in other ways as well. See chap. 2.1.1 and chap. 5 of my “Virtues in Action” (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2000).

the virtue of courage, we first have to understand the ultimacy of love in the moral life. This form of courage shows us how rightly ordered fear must be grounded in love, not a reliance on human strength or power. Courage requires that love be the center of the moral life, shaping our hopes and fears. And for Christians, it demands that we be not afraid to take Christ’s love — a love powerful enough to endure suffering and the ultimate self-sacrifice — as a model of virtue worth imitating.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What are you most afraid of? When do you feel most vulnerable? List three of your deepest fears, or three moments when you were most fearful. How are these fears expressed in your habits of thoughts and actions or reactions? When you examine your response to threatening evils, do you find that you are overly fearful or overly confident?

2. How do your fears reveal what you love? Is your love primarily focused on yourself, temporal things, other people, a greater cause? Is the love your fears reveal a healthy self-love or a selfish one?

3. Who are your heroes? Do they typically express courage as endurance or aggression? What have you learned, and what can you learn, about courage through their example? Think of one act of courage they’ve performed: What pain do they endure, what evil do they fight against? For the sake of what do they endure and fight?

4. In what ways are you trying to be a superhero, seek eternal youthfulness, and deny your own vulnerability and mortality? In what ways does our culture encourage this (e.g., by overvaluing safety/security, beauty as youthfulness, human strength, military prowess)? How might the stories of the Christian community offer counterexamples of a healthy and honest view of death and its meaning (e.g., the Eucharist, Jesus weeping at Lazarus’s tomb, martyred saints)? How might Christian practices embody that view (e.g., hospice care; welcoming and including the aging and terminally ill, rather than isolating them; Christian funeral practices; the refusal of extraordinary medical treatments, or cosmetic surgeries)? How do these practices teach us that love is stronger than our fears?

5. Set aside time to reflect on your own death. This practice of “memento mori” has been used for centuries to clarify for people what is truly

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important and worth living for. What does this reflection help you discover about yourself, your fears, the way you are living out your priorities? Mother Teresa, working amidst great suffering and death, famously said that God did not call her to be successful, but to be faithful. What sorts of things can you practice daily and in small ways to help you become more faithful to what you truly love, even when this is difficult or requires self-sacrifice?

LOVE