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Harry Potter and Philosophy

Hogwarts for Muggles

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HARRY POTTER
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HOGWARTS FOR MUGGLES**

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Gregory Bassham



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For David Baggett

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FOREWORD

Tom Morris

In 2004, there was an important literary event involving Harry Potter that didn't require sleepy parents to show up before midnight at bookstores around the world with hyperactive, well-costumed children trembling in anticipation of a new adventure and completely unable to sleep. It didn't involve J. K. Rowling writing something new or even leaving her home for a special appearance, and it never sparked front-page newspaper headlines or special television news bulletins. It was the surprising publication of an unexpected book: *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts*, edited by the philosophers David Baggett and Shawn Klein.

What made this a remarkable occurrence for Harry and his fans and the broader world of readers is that it demonstrated the range and depth of attention this ongoing story was receiving, not only among kids, teens, and imaginative young adults, but also throughout the professorial ranks of the academic world. The wizards of wisdom in our colleges and universities were taking note of Harry's remarkable story and were finding in it great ideas and lessons for life. Courage, duplicity, friendship, happiness, justice, love, and ambition joined issues of good, evil, death, and freedom, among many other topics, in this remarkable examination of themes to be found in the adventures of Harry Potter as they unfolded before us, book after book.

When I was initially asked to write an essay for that first collective philosophical look at the deeper themes in the Potter tales, I must admit that I was simply perplexed. At the time, I wasn't a Potter reader. I thought these were just books for kids. But after one of the editors of the project vigorously assured me that the Harry Potter stories were for everyone and were enthralling people of all ages around the globe, I cracked open the first volume mainly out of curiosity and then, like many adults before me, was instantly hooked. In no time at all, whenever I prepared to sit down to read, I felt a strange urge to dress up in black robes and a tall, pointed hat. I breezed through the first four volumes, which were then the only ones in print, and subsequently began to read each one again, slowly, while awaiting the new books, savoring the intricacies of the story and the sparks of wisdom I started to see everywhere.

By the time the series was complete, I had read most of the seven large volumes six times through, and with deeper insights as my reward each time. There was much more going on in Harry's world than met the casual glance, and far beyond the hidden skullduggery and secret machinations of the many characters. Ideas were percolating under the surface. Real wisdom was suffused throughout the pages. The former classics major Joanne Rowling was not merely a masterful storyteller, but was also a talented weaver of profound perspectives on some of the things that matter most in our lives.

I was inspired. I quickly wrote an essay on what I saw as one of Harry Potter's central attributes, his courage, and then could not stop writing. In no time at all, I had written an entire book of my own, examining the philosophical insights to be found in these incredible stories that were linking the generations like perhaps nothing else in our time. I had to wrap up my book and send it in for publication right after Rowling's sixth volume of her planned seven installments came out. So I ended up holding my philosophical breath for a good while in anticipation of the concluding storyline and what it would

say about my take on the earlier books. I'm happy to report that I was able to breathe a great sigh of relief when the series ended and all of my major interpretations had held up. But I had not had the last word, as a philosopher, on Harry and his friends.

This exciting new book that you now have before you, *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles*, is a fresh and distinctive report on the great ideas in the series. All of the authors of the chapters have had the advantage of thinking through their chosen issues and writing up their conclusions after the entire Potter storyline was complete and Rowling had even had her say in public about things that never made it into the pages of the official texts. The philosophers and other top Harry Potter experts who are gathered together here offer new voices and new perspectives on many of the most important ideas that come up in the books—some of which can be genuinely life changing. Reading this book will be like putting on a Philosophical De-coder Ring. It will show you vital aspects of the deepest story that lies behind these famous novels.

The dust has settled and the air has cleared. The great battle is over, and the surviving characters have gone on with their lives. It's time to take stock and cast a long view over the most remarkable literary phenomenon of our time and to see what it says about some of the ultimate issues we face in our lives. As you read these pages and personally grapple with their important issues, you will experience anew the real magic that will forever animate J. K. Rowling's immortal tales.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some House Points I'd Like to Award

Someone must have spiked my Chocolate Cauldrons with Felix Felicis, because this book has been a pure pleasure to work on from beginning to end. House points are due to the long-suffering contributors for their efforts, patience, and good humor through the long gestation of this book. I am grateful to Potter scholars John Granger and Travis Prinzi for answering my queries and providing helpful feedback at various stages of the project. Drafts of several chapters were helpfully discussed by my students in Honors Philosophy II class at King's College. Thanks are due to all of the good Muggles at Wiley, particularly Connie Santisteban, Lisa Burstiner, and Eric Nelson, for believing in this project and seeing it through to completion. I am deeply indebted to Tom Morris, public philosopher extraordinaire, for agreeing to write the foreword. Kudos, also, to the biggest Mugwump of all, series editor Bill Irwin, whose editorial skill and passion for using insights from popular culture to teach philosophy continue to be second to none. A special word of thanks is due to Dave Baggett, who was exceptionally generous with his advice, criticism, and time. Finally, I must thank those who share Bassham Burrow with me and make it a place of love, laughter, and warmth: Mia and Dylan. Love is truly the most powerful magic of all!

INTRODUCTION

Harry Potter and the Enchantment of Philosophy

Let's play a little word-association game. What comes to mind when you hear the word *philosophy*? Deep. Dense. Complex. In short, *heavy stuff*, right?

So, what's the connection between philosophy and the Potter books and films? How can there be any real philosophy—or any *good* philosophy—in fantasy works aimed primarily at kids? Easy!

Philosophy, as Plato said, begins in wonder. And kids wonder about everything. They're naturally curious, questioning, and eager to learn. Often they understand a lot more than adults give them credit for.

That's why J. K. Rowling—like J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and other great children's writers—doesn't hesitate to raise complex issues and pose challenging questions. Of course, Rowling realizes that most of her readers won't grasp all of the subtleties and complexities of the issues she raises. But she also knows that young readers—like Fang gnawing on a large, meaty dragon bone—can get a great deal of nourishment from foods they can't completely digest.

This book is for Rowling fans who want to explore some of the deeper issues posed in the Potter books and films. What is love? Is it, as Rowling says, the most powerful magic of all? Is there an afterlife? If so, what might it be like? Is death something to be feared—or “mastered,” as Harry ultimately was able to do? Do people have souls? If so, how are they related to their bodies? Can souls, if they exist, be divided, as Voldemort fragmented his by means of the Horcruxes? What can shape-shifters like Animagi and boggarts teach us about personal identity and the self? Does power inevitably corrupt? Is Hogwarts a model school, or are there real shortcomings with the education students receive there? Is it true, as Albus Dumbledore says, that our choices reveal far more about us than our abilities do? What can the complex and intriguing character of Severus Snape teach us about moral conflict, character judgment, and the possibility of redemption? Would it ever be ethical to use a love potion? Is it true, as Kingsley Shacklebolt proclaims, that “[e]very human life is worth the same”? Is it true, as Dumbledore says, that something can be real even if it exists only inside a person’s head?

This is a book written *for* Potter fans *by* Potter fans, most of whom happen to be professional philosophers in their nine-to-five lives. Like other volumes in the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series, it uses popular culture—in this case, the Potter books and films—as a hook to teach and popularize the ideas of the great thinkers. Some of the chapters explore the philosophy of the Potter books—the basic values and the big-picture assumptions that underlie the series—while others use themes from the books as a way to discuss various philosophical ideas and perspectives. Like others involved in the popular culture and philosophy movement, our hope is to bring philosophy out of the ivied halls of academia and make its methods, resources, and critical spirit available to all.

Several of the philosophers who contributed to this book also contributed to *Harry Potter and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open

Court, 2004; coedited by David Baggett and Shawn E. Klein). In some ways, this book is a follow-up to that earlier volume. The earlier book covered only the first five volumes in the Potter series. Some of it, therefore, was guesswork, because many of the important revelations and plot developments occur only in the last two books of the series. This volume covers the entire seven-book saga and focuses particularly on developments in the climactic final two books.

So, the wait is over. The faculty has assembled for one last time; the Great Hall, ablaze with light, is buzzing with excitement, and the long wooden tables groan with delectable things to eat. Once more, it's time to don your robes, take a generous nip of Baruffio's Brain Elixir, and prepare for a philosophical feast. It's going to be a great year.

All references to the Harry Potter novels are taken from the following American editions, published by Scholastic, Inc., in New York: *Sorcerer's Stone* (1998); *Chamber of Secrets* (1999); *Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999); *Goblet of Fire* (2000); *Order of the Phoenix* (2003); *Half-Blood Prince* (2005); *Deathly Hallows* (2007).

PART ONE

**THE HORCRUX OF THE
MATTER:
DESTINY, IDENTITY, AND
THE SOUL**



THE SOUL IN HARRY POTTER

Scott Sehon

Souls play a huge part in the Harry Potter saga. At different points in the books, Harry, Sirius Black, and Dudley Dursley narrowly avoid having their souls sucked out by dementors; Barty Crouch Jr. does not escape this fate. And notoriously, Lord Voldemort intentionally creates six Horcruxes, and unintentionally creates a seventh in Harry, thereby dividing his own soul into eight parts, all of which must be destroyed before Voldemort can die.

So, what is the soul? In Harry's world, people have souls that generally survive bodily death. But it is not entirely obvious how souls work and what their nature is. Over the centuries, philosophers and theologians have proposed and debated various accounts of the soul. In this chapter, we'll survey some of those accounts before turning to the questions of how souls work in J. K. Rowling's books and whether her picture of the soul is plausible.

Philosophical Conceptions of the Soul

While competing conceptions of the soul are legion, we'll focus here on five different philosophical views.

The Life-Source View

According to some ancient Greek philosophers, the soul accounts for life itself. In this view, the essential difference between living and nonliving things is that living things have a soul and nonliving things do not. Yet because the lowest animals and even plants are alive, this means that all plants and animals have souls. Blast-Ended Skrewts and even gillyweed would have souls, according to this view. These days, not too many people think that this conception of the soul is correct.

The Sentience View

According to a second conception, the soul is responsible for *sentience*, the ability some organisms have to feel pleasure and pain and sense the world around them. If an organism is consciously aware of its surroundings, then the organism *feels*, it has experiences. According to the sentience view, the soul is responsible for sentience, along with all higher-level thought. Plants, one assumes, do not have sentient awareness and so, in this conception, would not have souls. (Of course, in the universe of Harry Potter some magical plants, like the Whomping Willow, do have some direct sensation of the world and would thus have souls.)

The Cartesian View

A third view of the soul further narrows the scope of ensouled organisms. According to a view associated with the philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650), the soul is not responsible for sensation and awareness. Descartes thought that those features of mental life could be accounted for by purely material

causes; however, he believed that mere material causes would never be able to explain our ability to use language and formulate complex beliefs. For this, we need souls. So Descartes said that our immaterial soul is responsible only for higher-level cognitive functions, including beliefs, desires, and, especially, our ability to use language.

One consequence of the Cartesian view is that nonhuman animals do not have souls—at least, if those animals lack linguistic ability and higher-level thought. Descartes was willing to accept this and thought that nonhuman animals were entirely soulless. Some of the magical creatures in the Harry Potter stories might blur this distinction within the Cartesian view. For instance, owls seem to understand human speech, although they don't speak in return, and magical pets like Crookshanks seem much more intelligent than your average cat.

According to the life-source, sentience, and Cartesian views, the soul is usually thought to be some sort of immaterial substance, something not made of matter but still associated with, or connected to, a person's material body. If souls are in fact like that, then there is a possibility that the soul could survive a person's bodily death. On the other hand, there are many philosophers and scientists who would deny the existence of a soul, if what we mean by a soul is some sort of entity independent of the brain and the body. This leads to a fourth view of the soul: materialism.

Materialism

Materialists hold that ultimately there is nothing but matter and physical forces. All mental functioning, including language and emotions, is due to physical processes in the brain, and there simply is no extra entity above and beyond this. Needless to say, according to a materialist view, there is no life after death; with bodily death, the processes that underlie our mental and emotional life simply cease, and that's all there is to it.

The Sentimental View

In everyday talk, the word *soul* is often used in a way that does not clearly correspond with any of the more abstract conceptions just discussed. From the Hoagy Carmichael tune, we have: “Heart and soul, I fell in love with you./Heart and soul, the way a fool would do, madly.”

Or we might speak of a person seeking his or her soul mate. We talk of people having good souls. We might describe music or art as soulful or as soulless.

These sorts of everyday sentimentalist uses of the word *soul* need not be taken to imply any particular metaphysical view. That is, they don’t commit one to any view on which the soul is an actual substance existing independently of the body. If we say, “Unlike her later work, the artist’s early paintings were soulless,” clearly we are not suggesting that the artist literally lacked and then later somehow obtained an immaterial soul. Rather, we are suggesting that the artist’s early work was uninspired or somehow lacked genuine emotional depth. Or if I say that I love her, heart and soul, or that we are soul mates, I am commenting about the emotional depth of my attachment and the deep connection we feel for each other.¹ If we say that someone has bared her soul, we mean she has let us see through the superficial trappings and down to what is most deeply important to her. These uses of the word *soul* are essentially metaphorical ways of talking about that which makes us most human and makes life most full: our deepest emotions, our ability to love, our moral conscience. Materialist philosophers don’t need to renounce any of these ways of talking and certainly don’t need to go back and translate Hoagy Carmichael’s lyrics into some sort of thesis about brain states (“C-fibers firing, I fell in love with you . . .”).

With these sundry options on the table, we are now ready to turn to Harry Potter and try to place the conception of the soul as developed in the story. To foreshadow, we’ll see that

Rowling's picture of the soul is an interesting mix of views. In many ways, it seems that her conception of the soul is closest to the sentimental view, but she combines it with a metaphysics that incorporates parts of the Cartesian and sentience views.

Ghosts and "Going On"

Materialism is the dominant view among philosophers and scientists in our world today. But materialism is false in the world of Harry Potter, where souls typically survive bodily death. Here is Hermione Granger's explanation of souls:

"Look, if I picked up a sword right now, Ron, and ran you through with it, I wouldn't damage your soul at all."

"Which would be a real comfort to me, I'm sure," said Ron. Harry laughed.

"It should be, actually! But my point is that whatever happens to your body, your soul will survive, untouched," said Hermione.²

So we know that in Rowling's world, the soul survives destruction of the body. Beyond the fact of survival, it's not entirely clear what happens to the soul of a deceased person. In *Order of the Phoenix*, in the room at the Ministry of Magic where Sirius dies, there is a mysterious archway with a veil, and both Harry and Luna Lovegood hear voices from beyond the veil. Luna's interpretation is that dead people exist just beyond and that we will see them again. Later, Nearly Headless Nick tells Harry that the recently killed Sirius will have "gone on," but he has no further light to shed on what happens in the ordinary case. Nick, of course, is a ghost, and he explains to Harry that a wizard is able to avoid "going on" by remaining behind as a ghostly imprint of his former self. He says that few wizards choose this path, and perhaps it is not too hard to

see why. Nick lives on, sort of, in a ghostly imitation of a body, one that can see and be seen, hear and be heard, but that otherwise walks through walls and has few physical effects. Rowling's ghosts apparently induce an icy sensation when a person has contact with them, and Moaning Myrtle is somehow able to make splashes in toilets, but beyond this, they seem to mostly lack bodily effects. Voldemort presumably could have had this sort of immortality all along, but it is a form of immortality devoid of real physical contact and, more important for Voldemort, devoid of power.

Besides being a ghost, there are several other ways in which souls can appear on earth after their bodies have died. First, there is the case of Voldemort himself, who, because of his Horcruxes, survives bodily death when his killing curse aimed at baby Harry backfires. We'll talk more about Horcruxes later, but at this point it is worth noting that when Voldemort's soul continues, it is in an incredibly weak form; he later describes his condition at the time as "less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost."³ In that state, Voldemort needs to attach himself to a living body to have any physical effects at all.

Second, there is the semi-ghostly condition in which Harry twice sees his departed loved ones. In the graveyard scene in *Goblet of Fire*, Cedric Diggory, Bertha Jorkins, Frank Bryce, and Harry's parents appear out of Voldemort's wand. These ghostly figures look to Harry much more solid than ordinary ghosts, and they have enough of a physical presence that James Potter tells Harry that they will give him some time to escape once the wand connection is broken. Similarly, when Harry uses the Resurrection Stone in *Deathly Hallows* he sees Sirius, Remus Lupin, and his parents, and it seems that they are again, at least in some sense, real. Less substantial than living bodies and here only temporarily, they are nonetheless not mere ghosts; they are described as "neither ghost nor truly flesh."⁴