

Dementors, Horcruxes, and Immortality: The Soul in *Harry Potter*

Scott Sehon

Souls play a huge part in the Harry Potter story. Voldemort creates six Horcruxes, thereby dividing his own soul into seven parts, and Harry must destroy all of the Horcruxes before Voldemort can die. At different points in the books, several main characters (Harry, Sirius, and Dudley) narrowly avoid having their souls sucked out of them by a dementor; Barty Crouch, Jr., does not escape this fate.

So what is the soul? In Harry Potter's world, it is clear that people have souls, and that these souls 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 various different accounts of the soul, and have argued about which is an accurate picture. In this chapter, I will survey some of the major philosophical accounts of the soul before turning to the question of how souls work in Rowling's books and whether her picture of the soul is plausible.

Differing Philosophical Conceptions of the Soul

The Life-source view. According to some ancient Greek philosophers, the soul accounts for life itself. On this view, the essential difference between living and non-living things is that living things have a soul and non-living things do not. However, since the lowest animals and even plants are alive, this means that all plants and animals have a soul. So blast-ended skrewts and even gillyweed would have souls on this view. These days, not too many people think that this conception of the soul is correct.

The sentience view. A second conception of the soul has it that the soul is responsible for the phenomenon of *sentience*, whereby some organisms have some direct *awareness* of the world around them through sensation. If an organism is consciously aware of its surroundings, then the organism *feels*, it has experiences. On 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, on this conception, would not have souls. (Perhaps some magical plants, like the Whomping Willow, do have some direct sensation of the world, and would have souls on this view.)

The Cartesian view. A third view of the soul narrows the scope of ensouled organisms further. On 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, Descartes thought 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 non-human 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 non-human animals were entirely soulless. Some of the magical creatures in *Harry Potter* might blur this distinction within the Cartesian view; for instance, owls seem to understand human speech, though they don't speak in return, and magical pets like Crookshanks seem much more intelligent than your average cat.

On the life-source, sentience, and Cartesian views, the soul is usually held to be some sort of immaterial substance, something not made of matter but still associated or connected to a given 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 it is taken to be some sort of entity independent of the brain and 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 use and our emotions, are ultimately due to physical processes in the brain, and there simply is no extra entity above and beyond this. Needless to say, on 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 discourse, the word "soul" is often used in a way that does not clearly correspond with any of the more abstract conceptions above. 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 as seeking their soul-mate. We talk of people having a good soul. 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, I don't think they commit one to any view on which the soul is an actual substance existing independently of the body. If we say something like, "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. (Originally, the idea may have been different: according to some myths, our souls were split in two, and finding one's soul-mate literally meant finding one's other half. But such an overtly metaphysical picture is clearly not presupposed in our colloquial uses of the phrase.) 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 make us most human and make life most full: our deepest emotions, our ability to love, our moral conscience. The materialist philosopher need not deny any of these ways of talking, and certainly need not go back and translate Hoagy Carmichael 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, I'll claim 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 more common with the Cartesian or the sentience view.

The Soul in *Harry Potter*

I mentioned materialism as one of the standard views concerning the soul; indeed, materialism of one sort or another is the dominant view among philosophers and

scientists today. But it is clear that materialism is false within the *Harry Potter* books, and that souls typically survive bodily death. Here is Hermione'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.¹

So we know that the soul survives destruction of the body. Beyond the fact of survival, it is not entirely clear what happens to the soul of a deceased person. In the room where Sirius dies in *Order of the Phoenix*, there is a mysterious archway with a veil, and both Harry and Luna hear voices from beyond the veil. Luna's interpretation is that dead people exist just beyond, and that we will see them again. Nearly Headless Nick tells Harry that the recently killed Sirius will have “gone on,” but 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 otherwise walks through walls and has few physical effects. Ghosts apparently induce an icy sensation when a person has ‘contact’ with them, and Moaning Myrtle is somehow able to flood the bathroom, but beyond this they seem to 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 importantly 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. I'll talk more about Horcruxes below, but at this point it is worth noting that when Voldemort's soul continues, it is in an incredibly weak form; he describes his condition at the time as "less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost."² In that state, Voldemort needed 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 appear to Harry as 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, in the Resurrection Stone scene in *Deathly Hallows* Harry again sees Sirius, Lupin, and his parents, and it seems that they are again, at least in some sense, real. Less substantial than living bodies, and only here temporarily, they are nonetheless not mere ghosts; they are described as, "neither ghost nor truly flesh."³

So it seems that while souls normally "go on" in some undescribed way,⁴ disembodied souls can stay or return to earth in certain circumstances, and when they do, they take one of a variety of forms, ranging from Voldemort's almost entirely non-physical state, to Nick's ghostly state, to the temporary but slightly more substantial physical states of the souls brought back by the Resurrection Stone. All of this would be impossible if materialism were true. So, materialism is false within the *Potter* world. But to learn more about the nature of souls, we need to consider Dementors and Horcruxes.

The Dementor's Kiss

Dementors suck good feelings and happy memories out of people. Worse than that, they can destroy your soul. Here is Lupin talking to Harry:

“You see, the dementor lowers its hood only to use its last and worst weapon.”

“What’s that?”

“They call it the Dementor’s Kiss,” said Lupin, with a slightly twisted smile. “It’s what dementors do to those they wish to destroy utterly. I suppose there must be some kind of mouth under there, because they clamp their jaws upon the mouth of the victim and – and suck out his soul.” . . .

“What – they kill--?”

“Oh no,” said Lupin. “Much worse than that. You can exist without your soul, you know, as long as your brain and heart are still working. But you’ll have no sense of self anymore, no memory, no . . . anything. There’s no chance at all of recovery. You’ll just – exist. As an empty shell. And your soul is gone forever . . . lost.”⁵

This is very interesting. A wizard’s soul normally survives bodily death, and the natural further assumption would be that souls are immortal. But, with Dementors around, not all souls achieve this happy state, for Dementors can apparently destroy souls completely. However, *you* can still exist even without your soul. Lupin’s words here are susceptible of more than one interpretation. He might merely mean your *body* can still exist and keep functioning biologically as long as your organs are still intact. On this reading, the Dementor’s Kiss would leave the victim in something like a permanent vegetative state, in which basic metabolic functions continue but in which there is no substantial mental life at all. But if this is what Lupin means, it is odd that he portrays it as the continued existence of the person but in a state worse than death. If the soul is the source of all conscious mental life, and if *all* of that disappears after the Dementor’s Kiss, then it would seem more appropriate to say that the person truly is no more, that the empty shell of a body is just that—a body, but not a person.

Since Lupin is insistent that the person can continue to exist without a soul, a different picture seems to be suggested. This is speculative, but here's my guess. A soulless person still has sensations and even thoughts about the passing show. After the kiss was applied, Barty Crouch, Jr., may have still recognized that there were people in the room, but he had no idea who they were or who *he* was, for he had no substantial memory or sense of self. Accordingly, perhaps we should think of existence after the Dementor's Kiss as akin to a severe case of dementia or Alzheimer's disease—perhaps similar to the condition Lockhart found himself in after one of his memory charms backfired.

The Dementor's Kiss would appear to rule out at least two, if not three, of the remaining conceptions of the soul. If one can be alive without one's soul, then the soul cannot be the source of life itself, and so the life-source view cannot be correct. And if a victim of the Dementor's Kiss still has sensations, and even a body in a vegetative state may be somewhat responsive to sensory stimuli, then the sentience view also seems ruled out. Moreover, if the Dementor's Kiss does allow someone to think and notice the passing show, albeit lacking memories or a sense of self, then even the Cartesian view seems unlikely. On the Cartesian view, the soul is that which is responsible for our higher-level functions, our ability to have beliefs and, especially, to understand language. On the interpretation I have suggested, the Kiss might leave those abilities at least partially intact, despite the soul itself being utterly destroyed.

Horcruxes

A central plot element for the *Harry Potter* story as a whole is Tom Riddle's quest to defeat death and his use of Horcruxes for this purpose. Professor Slughorn explains to a young Tom Riddle what happens when a wizard creates a horcrux:

“Well, you split your soul, you see,” said Slughorn, “and hide part of it in an object outside the body. Then, even if one's body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged.”⁶

And indeed, later, when Voldemort attacked the infant Harry, the *avada kedavra* curse that rebounded destroyed Voldemort's body, Voldemort remained alive, albeit as “less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost.”⁷

The young Tom Riddle presses Slughorn further, and asks how one splits one's soul. Slughorn answers:

By an act of evil—the supreme act of evil. By committing murder. Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage: He would encase the torn portion —⁸

Slughorn does not answer Riddle's further question about exactly how one encases the soul, other than saying that there is a spell. Riddle then asks:

Can you only split your soul once? Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces, I mean, for instance, isn't seven the most powerfully magic number, wouldn't seven --?⁹

Slughorn is horrified that Riddle would apparently think of killing repeatedly to do this, but he also warns against it for another reason. He had already told Riddle that “the soul is supposed to remain intact and whole” and that splitting “it is an act of violation, it is against nature.”¹⁰

Two points from Slughorn's words are worth emphasizing. First, that it requires a supreme act of evil to make the soul such that it can be ripped, and, second, that the soul is thereby damaged or made unstable, and that ripping it more than once presumably

increases the damage. This is a point that Hermione makes as well, after she read *Secrets of the Darkest Art*, which, along with other dark magic books, she summoned from

Dumbledore's office after his death. She says:

“And the more I've read about [Horcruxes],” said Hermione, “the more horrible they seem, and the less I can believe that he actually made six. It warns in this book how unstable you make the rest of your soul by ripping it, and that's just by making one Horcrux!”¹¹

While both Slughorn and *Secrets of the Darkest Art* are clear that ripping the soul damages it, it is not immediately clear how the damage to the soul translates into harm to the living human being. There is, after all, no indication that Voldemort's mental faculties or magical abilities are in any way diminished. Indeed, Dumbledore warns Harry,

Never forget, though, that while his soul may be damaged beyond repair, his brain and magical powers remain intact. It will take uncommon skill and power to kill a wizard like Voldemort even without his Horcruxes.¹²

This seems quite clearly to rule out the Cartesian view, according to which the soul is responsible for all higher-level thought. If a Cartesian soul were horribly damaged, then one's thoughts, skills, and, presumably, magical abilities would be damaged as well; but all of this is left intact in Voldemort. Since Voldemort's sensory abilities seem unharmed too, despite his damaged soul, it seems that the sentience view is excluded also.

What does all of this mean? I suggest that it points to Rowling's adoption of what I called the *sentimental view* of the soul, on which the soul is associated with that which makes us most human, with our capacity to love, and our moral conscience. This was already suggested by the fact that one rips and damages the soul by committing the supremely evil act of murder. If the soul is associated with what makes us deeply human and good, then it at least makes poetic sense that the soul would be damaged by committing the ultimate evil. But the key evidence lies in what seemed different about

Voldemort after he damaged his soul so badly: not his higher cognitive functions, but his *humanity*. Dumbledore tells Harry: “Lord Voldemort has seemed to grow less human with the passing years, and the transformation he has undergone seemed to me to be only explicable if his soul was mutilated beyond the realms of what we might call ‘usual evil’”¹³ Specifically, after ripping his soul and creating Horcruxes, the handsome young Tom Riddle undergoes significant physical transformation. Few of us look better as we age, but with Riddle/Voldemort, the change is extreme. When he has completely regained his body in the graveyard scene in *Goblet of Fire*, he is described as “whiter than a skull, with wide, livid scarlet eyes and a nose that was as flat as a snake’s with slits for nostrils.”¹⁴

I take it that Voldemort’s change in appearance is Rowling’s metaphor for what was happening to Voldemort on a deep emotional and moral level. Of course, the young Tom Riddle in the orphanage already had a significantly sinister side to him, and there is no evidence that he ever truly loved anyone, but in his early days at Hogwarts he at least had the ability to charm people. He was a leader among his peers, even among older students, and he accomplished this through personality rather than fear. He charmed Professor Slughorn, who predicted that Riddle would become Minister of Magic,¹⁵ and managed to get him to discuss Horcruxes, which was a banned topic at Hogwarts. However, by the time Riddle begins his reign of terror as Lord Voldemort, all indications are that Death Eaters continued to follow him out of fear, rather than anything remotely approximating devotion. Even Bellatrix Lestrange, his most devoted follower near the end, seems worshipful of his power, but hardly *charmed*. That capacity, Tom Riddle’s

most human attribute, seems to have utterly disappeared after his soul was ripped into seven pieces.

Voldemort might have been able to repair his damaged soul, but not by use of a potion or appropriate incantation (not even with the Elder Wand). Rather, according to *Secrets of the Darkest Art*, a ripped soul can perhaps be repaired through *remorse*; as Hermione puts it, “You’ve got to really feel what you’ve done”¹⁶ On none of the other views of the soul would there be any reason for the particular emotion of remorse to have a special effect on the immaterial soul. But on the sentimental view, the soul is most closely connected with our deepest emotions and our moral conscience. Our goodness and humanity are damaged by evil actions, but we can go some ways towards restoring that goodness and humanity if we feel genuine remorse. In the climactic scene, Harry in fact suggests to Voldemort that he “Be a man” and try to feel some remorse.¹⁷ Voldemort, of course, having gone so far beyond even the “usual evil,” feels no inclination towards remorse, and Voldemort is killed for real when his own killing curse, shot from the Elder Wand of which Harry is the master, rebounds off of Harry’s *Expelliarmus* curse.

Conclusion

If Rowling indeed adopts what I’ve called the sentimental conception of the soul, she does so with an interesting twist. I described the sentimental view not as a philosophical theory developed by theologians or philosophers, but as a distillation of various ways we use the word “soul,” and I pointed out that these ordinary uses of the word could easily be taken as metaphorical. Such uses of the word do not imply that there really is some sort of independent and immaterial entity that explains our deepest

emotional commitments and moral conscience. Even materialists can and do use the word “soul” as a perfectly good metaphor. But, within the *Harry Potter* world, Rowling clearly also presupposes a metaphysical view: that the soul is independent of the body, is not harmed by normal physical events, and can even survive the destruction of the body. In other words, Rowling takes the metaphysical picture normally associated with the more philosophical views of the soul (especially the sentience view and the Cartesian view) and combines it with the metaphorical picture suggested by the sentimental view.

Do we have here a theory of the soul that is likely to be true? Probably not, but the issues are contentious. First of all, many philosophers and scientists argue, plausibly to my mind, that there is no good evidence for the existence of an immaterial substance that is causally responsible for anything above and beyond what the human body does. It would be possible to have such evidence someday: if neuroscientists saw that there were events that happened in brains with no observable physical cause, then this would at least be an indication that the events had an immaterial cause. But we have not seen any such brain events up to now.

Moreover, philosophers have pointed out for centuries that it is difficult to see how an immaterial soul would even be *able* to interact with a purely material body; if the soul is not made of matter and does not have physical properties, then it is mysterious how it could cause the human body to move or how anything in the material world would have any effect on it. This kind of dualism of mind and body would be outside anything of which we have experience. Dualism is not incoherent, and it is possible that it is correct, but it faces substantial obstacles.¹⁸

Finally, Rowling's combination of an implausible metaphysics with the sentimental view of the soul probably makes the problems worse rather than better. It is especially implausible that there would be an immaterial part of us that is specifically responsible for just our deepest emotions and moral traits, but not other psychological capacities. These traits may seem linked to us because they are arguably what makes us most human, but from the standpoint of scientific psychology, there is nothing that is so different in kind here; so there seems no need to postulate something altogether different from the brain to explain these traits. In addition, as I mentioned earlier, within the story the immaterial soul can sometimes remain on earth with a variety of different physical powers or presences, depending on whether the soul is here as a ghost, as something resurrected by the Resurrection Stone, or as a bare soul saved from destruction by a Horcrux. If, as I've suggested, it would be difficult to explain how an immaterial soul could interact at all with the physical world, then it would be even more difficult to explain why the soul would have different physical abilities depending upon what magic spell is at work.

Is the implausibility of Rowling's metaphysics a strike against her work of fiction? Of course not. After all, it is also extremely unlikely that there are witches, wizards, and magic in the real world! And Rowling's picture of the soul does have a way of making vivid what we care about, or what we hope we care about. Besides, talk of souls, Horcruxes, dementors, and magic makes for a terrific story, and that's reason enough.*

¹ *Deathly Hallows*, p. 104.

² *Goblet of Fire*, p. 653.

³ *Deathly Hallows*, p. 698.

⁴ When Harry “dies” in the Forest towards the end of *Deathly Hallows*, he finds himself with Dumbledore in a place that reminds him, somehow, of King’s Cross Station. One interpretation is that he is in a way station between death and the after-life. Even if so, Harry learns nothing about what will happen if decides to die by, say, taking a train; Dumbledore merely says that the train would take him “On.” Moreover, Rowling is deliberately ambiguous about whether this is some real sequence of events in which Harry actually encounters Dumbledore’s post-mortem soul, or whether it is a vision or dream solely in Harry’s mind.

⁵ *Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 247.

⁶ *Half-Blood Prince*, p. 497.

⁷ *Goblet of Fire*, p. 653.

⁸ *Half-Blood Prince*, p. 498.

⁹ *Half-Blood Prince*, p. 498.

¹⁰ *Half-Blood Prince*, p. 497f.

¹¹ *Deathly Hallows*, p 103.

¹² *Half-Blood Prince*, p. 509.

¹³ *Half-Blood Prince*, p. 502.

¹⁴ *Goblet of Fire*, p. 643.

¹⁵ *Half-Blood Prince*, p. 495.

¹⁶ *Deathly Hallows*, p. 103.

¹⁷ *Deathly Hallows*, p. 741.

¹⁸ For more detailed recent arguments of this sort, see Scott Sehon, *Teleological Realism: Mind, Agency, and Explanation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005, Chapter Two), and Jaegwon Kim, *Philosophy of Mind* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2005, Chapter Two.

* Thanks to the editors of this volume for some very useful suggestions. Special thanks to Josephine Sehon and Hayden Sartoris for years of reading and discussing Harry Potter and for useful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.