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**How does the Harry Potter series connect to Plato's belief in the immortality of the soul and  
finitude of the body?**

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### **Abstract**

Plato has long been acknowledged for his significant role in the development of the Christian perspective regarding immortality. The following analysis demonstrates how Plato's perspective on what follows death, which shaped Christian eschatology, aligns with the themes presented in the Harry Potter series. Using Plato's *Phaedo*, this paper will compare Plato's ideas about the immortality of the soul to how J. K. Rowling portrays immortality, illuminating the presence of Christian thought in the famous Harry Potter series. These connections include the beliefs that the soul survives the physical death of the body, one must nourish and protect their soul, one must accept death when the time comes, and a form of judgment occurs upon one's death and determines the destination of one's soul.

**Keywords:** immortality, Christianity, Harry Potter, religion, death, soul, spiritual, physical

## **How does the Harry Potter series connect to Plato's belief in the immortality of the soul and finitude of the body?**

In Plato's *Phaedo*, Plato writes about Socrates's experience with death. Through the story of Socrates, who has been sentenced to death, Plato uses a variety of arguments to stress that although the body is impermanent, the soul is immortal. The text follows the conversation that occurs on Socrates's execution day between Socrates and his two friends Simmias and Cebes, in which Socrates attempts to convince his peers that because the soul is immortal, avoiding death is foolish. Key elements of Plato's ideology are presented in the Harry Potter series through J. K. Rowling's portrayal of the afterlife and immortality. Rowling includes the sorcerer's stone, the Horcruxes, and the deathly hallows to show that Voldemort's desire to live forever is sinful and that Harry's abandonment of physical immortality is virtuous.

### **The Soul Outlives the Body**

Throughout the text, Plato differentiates the permanence of the body and the soul. Plato describes how upon one's death, "the visible part, the body, which exists in the visible world... decays" while "the [well-nourished] soul, the invisible part... makes its way... to the divine and immortal and wise... to the gods" (Plato 31-32). In other words, Plato believes that the soul, which is invisible and unchanging, leaves the body to continue its journey while the body, which is visible and changing, dies. One's soul is immortal. One's body is not.

Rowling has a similar ideology about the immortality of the soul, as shown through her remarks to the press as well as elements of the Harry Potter series. Rowling stated in 2017 that she is Christian and believes in "life after death" (Armstrong 51). Rowling demonstrates this in her creation of the wizarding world through the presence of ghosts and Harry's use of the resurrection stone to briefly speak with his

family and friends. Furthermore, Hermione echoes Platonic beliefs throughout the series. She notably promotes the immortality of the soul. When discussing Horcruxes with Harry and Ron, Hermione explains:

“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. (DH 104)

It is clear from this interaction that Rowling agrees with Plato’s idea that although the body can be physically harmed, the soul is spiritually immortal. Additionally, when Harry, Ron, and Hermione visit Godric’s hallow, Harry reads the epitaph on his parents' grave:

Harry read the words slowly, as though he would have only one chance to take in their meaning, and he read the last of them aloud.

‘The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death’ ...” A horrible thought came to him, and with it a kind of panic. “Isn’t that a Death Eater idea? Why is that there?”

“It doesn’t mean defeating death in the way the Death Eaters mean it, Harry,” said Hermione, her voice gentle. “It means...you know...living beyond death. Living after death.” (DH 328)

Harry’s concern conveys that Rowling condemns dark wizards’ quest to eternally preserve their physicality. Furthermore, Rowling conveys that the belief in *the soul’s* immortality can and should be comforting. Likewise, many people of the Christian faith feel comforted by praying for their loved ones’ happiness in heaven. The thought that a person’s soul has eternal presence and lasting impact can bring peace to those with faith. Overcome by grief, Harry struggles to see this perspective on his parents’ death

so Hermione tries to help him find clarity by having faith. Hermoine does so in a way that connects to Plato's philosophy about the immortality of the soul.

### **Listen to Your Soul**

Plato expresses that truth and wisdom lie within the soul, which must be nourished and fiercely protected throughout its spiritual journey. Plato suggests that the soul is trapped by the body during life, and only after death will the soul be free of the body's harmful temptations such as power, wealth, and physical immortality. Plato emphasizes that:

A man should be of good cheer about his own soul, if during life he has ignored the pleasures of the body and its ornamentation as of no concern to him and doing him more harm than good, but has seriously concerned himself with the pleasures of learning, and adorned his soul not with alien but with its own ornaments, namely, moderation, righteousness, courage, freedom and truth.  
(Plato 64)

Plato conveys that one must resist greed to purify their soul, which, unlike the body, is of eternal importance. Consequently, Plato believes that greed and selfishness harm the soul without destroying it. Throughout the Harry Potter series, Rowling shows that Voldemort's greed and selfish desire for perpetual dominance in the wizarding world causes him to damage his soul in search of physical immortality. Voldemort notably prioritizes the sustainment of his body over the protection of his soul. According to Rowling's description of how one must create a Horcrux, Voldemort's creation of multiple Horcruxes is sinful. An act of murder is necessary to create a Horcrux. Rowling shows how Voldemort's brutality towards others tears his soul apart. Like Plato, Rowling depicts how immoral actions harm the soul and that the search for physical immortality is not moral.

Both Rowling and Plato clearly promote the separation of the physical and spiritual, so that the soul can flourish and be freed upon death. Voldemort's enclosure of his soul fragments within

materialistic items is condemned. It prevents him from fully dying because part of his soul “remains earthbound” (HBP 497) and tied to physicality. According to Cohen in his journal article, *The Two Alchemists in Harry Potter: Voldemort, Harry, and Their Quests for Immortality*,

The horcruxes into which Voldemort pours his soul, as Dumbledore understands, are projections of Voldemort’s unconscious desires, of his yearnings for material wealth, for power, for historical legacy, and for belonging. By hiding his splintered soul in material objects that represent wealth, power, and historical significance, Voldemort blurs the distinction between body and soul, between the spiritual and the material. (Cohen 216)

This is the exact opposite of what Plato endorses. Plato encourages his audience to resist the temptations of the body and to find clarity by developing one’s soul. Rowling clearly disapproves of Voldemort’s actions. She writes, “the soul is supposed to remain intact and whole. Splitting it is an act of violation, it is against nature” (HBP 498). Voldemort’s creation of Horcruxes is inhumane because it directly ties his soul to the material world. As part of their quest to destroy Voldemort’s Horcruxes, Hermione explains to Harry and Ron:

A Horcrux is the complete opposite of a human being... The fragment of soul inside it depends on its container, its enchanted body, for survival. It can’t exist without it. (DH 104)

Hermione’s explanation of the nature of a Horcrux further conveys Rowling’s support of Plato’s main ideology, which states that the soul is normally able to escape the body and live on after death. Human souls do not rely on anything physical for survival. However, by tying his soul to objects, Voldemort has damaged his soul to the point that it cannot exist without a physical container.

Rowling does not show Harry’s *complete* abstention from “bodily passions” (Plato 33). However, despite their similar childhood experiences, Harry certainly clings less to his physicality than Voldemort. Harry and his friends do not succumb to power, wealth, or fame very often, and when they do, only a

short amount of time passes before they realize these temptations are not worth the loss of their friendship. The protagonists clearly focus on preserving their own morality and genuine relationships with others. Their values include – family, friendship, loyalty, courage, fairness, and love – all of which Plato endorses. Rowling shows how Harry and his friends undergo a spiritual transformation. While Voldemort is spiritually stagnant, Harry, as well as his mentors and peers, learn from their mistakes, becoming better people and in turn strengthening their souls. By contrasting Harry and Voldemort’s personal decisions, Rowling conveys the platonic philosophy that avoiding the temptation of bodily desires protects and nurtures one’s precious soul.

### **Acceptance of Death**

Plato believes that death is not inherently bad. In *Phaedo*, Socrates welcomes his death because he believes that it will free his soul. Plato advocates for people to accept death and let the soul go on when the time comes. Plato does not believe that physical immortality is advantageous or even possible. Similarly, Rowling conveys that while physical permanence is attainable in the wizarding world, clinging to the body is unwise and not admirable.

Throughout the Harry Potter series, many commendable characters accept the possibility of death while less exemplary figures fear it. Firstly, Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel sacrifice their physical immortality for the greater good. They agree to destroy the Sorcerer’s stone to ensure that people like Voldemort cannot use it for the wrong reasons. As Tumminio suggests, “when people refuse to acknowledge what it means to be human, they are apt to commit sins like those of pride of sameness” (Tumminio 46-47). This sums up the danger that the existence of the sorcerer’s stone poses. Voldemort’s use of the stone to deny his natural impermanence and to ensure his perpetual power over others conveys that bodily death should not be tampered with since this leads to sin. When Dumbledore discusses the Flamels’ decision with Harry, he explains, “to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great



adventure” (SS 297). This resonates with platonic philosophy which claims that “there is good hope that on arriving where I am going, if anywhere, I shall acquire what has been our chief preoccupation in our past life, so that the journey that is now ordered for me is full of good hope, as it is also for any other man who believes that his mind has been prepared and, as it were, purified” (Plato 15). In other words, those who protect their souls and cope with the thought of physical impermanence find hope and clarity in death.

Harry Potter and Ignotus Peverell both willingly confront death when the time comes. Firstly, although Harry is initially inclined to possess all three Deathly Hallows, Harry abandons his search for them in favor of destroying Voldemort’s Horcruxes. This demonstrates Harry’s ability to suppress his selfish desires for a greater cause. Secondly, Harry’s voluntary sacrifice to protect the wizarding world is praiseworthy. Rowling shows that Harry realizes he must face Voldemort at once. Harry approaches death with courage. He hesitates only momentarily to receive support from his family and friends using the resurrection stone. This idea is also seen in Plato’s primary text when Socrates denies Crito’s suggestion that he should spend more time eating and drinking with his loved ones before he decides to drink the poison. Socrates explains, “I do not expect any benefit from drinking the poison a little later, except to become ridiculous in my own eyes for clinging to life” (Plato 66). Both Socrates and Harry know what must happen and embrace their reality. Thirdly, even when Harry does have all three hallows in his possession, he lets go of the resurrection stone in the forest and chooses his own wand over the elder wand. He does this so that no one can ever become the “master of Death” (DH 410) in the future. Lastly, contrary to the first two Peverell brothers, Rowling commends Ignotus for his humility and wisdom which allows him to shed his invisibility cloak and greet death “as an old friend” (DH 408-409). These sacrifices help Rowling demonstrate the nobility of embracing one’s mortality.

Harry’s, the third brother’s, and the Flamel’s self-sacrifices starkly contrast with Voldemort’s (and his followers’) self-serving nature and fear of death. Voldemort’s greatest fear is dying. During his

battle against Dumbledore in the Ministry of Magic Atrium, Voldemort exclaims, “there is nothing worse than death, Dumbledore!” (OP 814). However, throughout the series, Rowling conveys that one’s refusal to accept death is certainly worse than death itself. Firstly, Slughorn tells Tom Riddle that “death would be preferable” (HBP 497) to existing as a Horcrux. Secondly, as Voldemort repeatedly destroys his soul to gain physical immortality, his figure is distorted, becoming less and less human. Voldemort’s ghastly appearance highlights the toll that is taken on one’s soul if one does not accept death. Lastly, Voldemort’s fate is that his killing curse towards Harry Potter rebounds onto himself, which demonstrates that his attempt at perpetual survival (he believes Harry is the last thing standing in his way) ultimately destroys him. These elements of Voldemort’s character emphasize that the soul brings goodness to a person, and without it, one suffers due to a lack of humanity and spiritual guidance.

### **Judgement of Souls**

According to Plato, pure souls leave the body and rise to “dwell with the Gods” (Plato 18), damaged souls wander about alone, shunned by others, until they find their destination (Plato 59), and severely damaged souls are hurled into Tartarus for eternity (Plato 63). Overall, Plato believes that each person’s soul “dwells in a place suited to it” (Plato 59). Both Rowling and Plato convey that damaged souls are separated from pure souls upon death. When Harry is struck by Voldemort’s killing curse, the last part of Voldemort’s soul is expelled from Harry’s soul. During Harry’s out-of-body experience at Kings Cross Station, Rowling juxtaposes Voldemort’s soul to a “small, maimed creature” (DH 708) with Harry’s “unblemished hands” (DH 712) to show the vastly different fates of their souls. Furthermore, despite Harry’s insistence, Dumbledore asserts that there is nothing he or Harry can do to help comfort Voldemort’s soul (DH 707-709), which shows that impure souls suffer alone for eternity.

Harry’s life after Voldemort’s death demonstrates that virtuous people are rewarded. The purest souls in the Harry Potter series experience peace and harmony. The epilogue of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* describes a Heaven-like atmosphere for Harry and his peers: “the scar had not pained

Harry for nineteen years. All was well” (DH 759). Meanwhile, damaged souls, such as Malfoy and other Death Eaters, do not get to enjoy this blissful fulfillment. Instead, they are left mostly alone to wallow in their misdeeds and find their place of belonging. Conversely, when Voldemort and Bellatrix die, they are “incurable because of the enormity of their crimes” (Plato 63) and are presumably sent to Hell. The fates of Voldemort and his followers show Rowling’s platonic belief that those who live honest lives are rewarded and those who give into temptations are damaged in life and death, according to the severity of their transgressions.

Voldemort’s brutal exploitation of life-preserving magical techniques and Harry’s quest to destroy the Horcruxes, leading to Voldemort’s ultimate downfall and Harry’s spiritual transformation, convey that Rowling disapproves of the search for physical permanence. While Rowling’s portrayal of immortality in the Harry Potter series alone does not make the novels inherently Christian, Rowling certainly promotes some Christian themes in this realm. The most important takeaway from Rowling’s writing is the power of love, which is of both secular and religious importance. Referring to love as he forcefully takes Harry’s love-filled blood, Voldemort says, “old magic, I should have remembered it” (Goblet of Fire 652-653). This interaction between Voldemort and Harry demonstrates how Voldemort misunderstands the value of sacrifice since he does not have the capacity to love (Caldecott 25). Furthermore, his attempt to protect himself by stealing Harry’s blood backfires, showing that a person’s love must be genuine. Rowling’s overarching goal is to show that real love is far more powerful than hatred. This message resonates with many people, both secular and religious, and contributes to the groundbreaking success of the series.

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