

Harry Potter and the Metaphysics of Soul-Splitting

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1. Introduction

The world of *Harry Potter* is a magical one in which souls can be split into pieces and fragments of souls can be magically embedded in external “dark objects” (Horcruxes), making one immortal as long as one or more of these soul-fragments survives. This, of course, presupposes that there *are* souls, that souls are things that can be split into parts, and that bits of one's soul can be encased in objects outside the human body. All of this, as Gaffer Gamgee might say, “takes a lot o' believing,” but suppose we play J. K. Rowling's fictional game and grant it. A variety of fascinating metaphysical puzzles then arise. Must such souls be substances? Must they be corporeal? What effect does soul-splitting have on personal identity? I'll argue that in the world of *Harry Potter* souls are substances, that they are material substances, and that soul-splitting creates deep and probably insuperable problems for personal identity.

2. Are Souls Substances?

Souls in Rowling's fictional world can exist separately from bodies and in fact can survive “untouched” (*DH* p. 104) even if their host-bodies are destroyed. The converse is also true: Persons (or at least their bodies) can survive—though only as empty shells, with no memories or a sense of self (*PoA* p. 247)—even if their souls are destroyed by a Dementor's Kiss. This strongly suggests a dualist conception of mind and body. Dualism is roughly the view that mind is distinct from, and irreducible to, the body. There are two major forms of dualism: substance-dualism and property-dualism.¹ Substance-dualism holds that souls or minds are substances—that is, independently existing things or entities in which properties inhere. Plato and Rene Descartes (as standardly interpreted) are substance-dualists in this sense.² Property-

¹ For an accessible discussion of the distinction, see J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 232-38.

² Plato, *Phaedo*, 73c-84a; Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in

dualists hold that mental and physical properties are essentially distinct, but deny that the soul or mind is a “thing” that exists or can exist separately from the body. Instead, mental phenomena such as thoughts and feelings are simply properties, capacities, or characteristics of bodies (or brains). On this view, thoughts and other mental states are nonphysical qualities, but qualities that are produced by, and wholly dependent upon, physical states of the body or brain.

Rowling’s world does seem to presuppose some sort of dualism. Souls are distinct from bodies since they can continue to exist even if their associated bodies are completely destroyed. Moreover, souls appear to be substances in Rowling’s world. Souls aren’t simply properties of bodies, as property-dualists claim, because they can survive “untouched” when one’s body is dead and buried. Thus, Rowling’s world presupposes substance-dualism. Historically, most substance-dualists have claimed that souls are purely spiritual, *immaterial* substances. Plato, Descartes, and Thomas Aquinas all held this view.³ Some substance-dualists, however, have held that souls are composed of matter, though a different and more ethereal kind of matter than that of the body. For instance, the early Church father, Tertullian, following the Greek atomists and Stoics, held that souls, though distinct from the body and capable of existing apart from it in an afterlife, are corporeal.⁴ Are souls *material* substances in Rowling’s world?

3. Are Souls Corporeal?

Souls in Rowling’s world can be “split,” “torn,” and “mutilated,” and “bits” of soul can be physically separated from other parts of the soul and intentionally encased in magical containers (or can split off unintentionally and latch on to something nearby, as happens when Voldemort’s killing curse rebounds off the infant Harry, fracturing Voldemort’s damaged soul and making Harry a Horcrux of sorts). If such terms are used literally, then souls in Rowling’s fictional world are clearly corporeal. Only material things can be “torn” or split into “bits.” Other passages also suggest that souls in the *Potter* books are physical or composed of some sort of matter. Memories are described as wispy, silvery-blue substances that can leak out from people’s heads and be captured in flasks and magical basins. Soul-fragments are annihilated when their material containers are destroyed (*DH* pp. 104, 708). Souls can be destroyed by means of a magico-physical process, a Dementor’s

Descartes: Philosophical Writings, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: The Modern Library, 1958), Meditation VI, p. 236.

³ Plato, *Phaedo*, 73c-84a; Descartes, *Meditations*, p. 236; Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith: Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. James F. Anderson (Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1955), Book 2, chaps. 50, 55, and 79.

⁴ Tertullian, *On the Soul*, in *Tertullian: Apologetical Works*, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, et al. (Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 1950), pp. 185-96.

Kiss. When wizards die and their souls leave their bodies, they can leave physical imprints of themselves in the form of ethereal, but not wholly immaterial, ghosts. (Consider the splash that Moaning Myrtle makes when she dives into a toilet [*OotP* p. 861].) A bit of soul encased in a Horcrux can flit in and out of its container when enticed by someone who has become “too fond of or dependent upon the Horcrux” (*DH* p. 105). Harry’s soul is rendered immortal—so long as Voldemort lives—by being “tethered” to the enchanted blood flowing in Voldemort’s veins (*DH* p. 709). In the limbo-like King’s Cross Station in *Deathly Hallows*, Harry awakens to find himself embodied in a physical space, sees a physical embodiment of Voldemort’s damaged soul in the guise of a flayed-looking child, and is given the option of “board[ing] a train” to move “on” to whatever afterlife awaits (*DH* pp. 705-22). Finally, the fragment of Voldemort’s soul implanted in the diary-Horcrux is able to assume bodily form (albeit “blurred” and “misted”) as the sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle and to perform various physical acts, such as speaking and wielding a wand (*CoS* pp. 307-22). All of this, though perhaps explicable in other terms, seems to make most sense on the assumption that souls are composed of a special “spiritualized” or “ethereal” form of matter.

The major difficulty for this interpretation is Hermione Granger’s statement to Ron Weasley about the soul’s ability to survive destruction of the body: “Look, if I picked up a sword right now, Ron, and ran you through with it, I wouldn’t damage your soul at all. . . . [W]hatever happens to your body, your soul will survive, untouched” (*DH* p. 104). This implies that if your body is nuked, blown to smithereens, sucked into a black hole, or otherwise totally destroyed, your soul will survive undamaged. But if the soul is made of matter, how could this be? Wouldn’t nukes and black holes pretty much destroy anything made of matter?

The answer, I suggest, is No. Because of its spiritualized nature (and/or special magical protection) souls cannot be damaged or destroyed in Rowling’s world by any purely physical process. In this respect, souls are like Horcruxes, which can only be destroyed through powerful magical means, such as Basilisk fangs, magical swords, or Fiendfyre (though not by the Avada Kedavra curse, as is demonstrated by Sirius Black’s having “gone on” [*OotP* p. 861]).⁵ We’ve seen that souls and soul-fragments *can* be destroyed through magical means (the Dementor’s Kiss, destruction of a Horcrux). Souls can also be damaged and healed through certain *moral acts*. For example, acts of murder “rip the soul apart” (*HBP* p. 498), and mutilated souls can be healed by means of deep and painful remorse (*DH* p. 103). So Hermione’s statement

⁵ Do the appearances of Harry’s parents, Lily and James Potter, (and others) resulting from using the Resurrection Stone (*DH* p. 699) and the *Priori Incantatem* spell (*GoF* p. 667) likewise show that souls cannot be destroyed by the Avada Kedavra curse? Not directly. As Dumbledore explains, “no spell can reawaken the dead” (*GoF* p. 697). What Harry encounters are mere shadows or echoes of once-living persons, not their still-living souls.

is consistent with my view that souls in Potter's world are not immaterial, but are composed of a special form of matter.

4. Puzzles of Personal Identity

Finally, we turn to puzzles of personal identity. If souls can be split and bits of soul placed in external objects, deep problems arise for determining personal identity. If part of my soul is *here*, and other parts are *there*, where am *I*? In a world of soul-splitting, what makes you *you*, and what is it for the *same* person to exist at different times? There are three leading theories of personal identity—the body theory, the memory theory, and the soul theory—and none of them seems to work in the world of *Harry Potter*.

The body theory claims, roughly, that personal identity is a matter of having the same body from one time to the next. Person P1 is the same person as P2 just in case P2 has the same body as P1 (or at least *enough* of the same body to preserve what is essential to P1). The body theory doesn't require that a person have exactly the same parts from one time to the next. People's bodies change all the time, and it may be that I now have none of the same molecules or cells that made up my body when I was a day-old infant. It's enough, according to the body theory, that body parts are replaced gradually over time and essential parts of the body are preserved. I could get an artificial leg or a heart transplant and still remain the same person. But if my head gets chopped off or somebody destroys my brain and replaces it with somebody else's brain, then I no longer exist.

The body theory fits well with our everyday experience, but runs into problems when we think about science-fictiony sorts of cases. Suppose I wake up one morning and find myself with a cockroach's body (as in Franz Kafka's famous example).⁶ Different body, but same *me*, right? Or imagine there's a "body switch." I wake up one morning in your body and you wake up in mine (as in John Locke's Prince-and-the-Cobbler case).⁷ Wouldn't that still be me? Or suppose a mad scientist removes half my brain and puts it in a cloned body that looks exactly like my old one. Suppose further that all of my memories and personality features are preserved in that half-brain. According to most defenders of the body theory, I'm still alive, because the body parts that are essential to me—my half-brain with my memories and personality traits—have been preserved. But now imagine that the mad scientist takes the *other* half of my brain, which also has all of my memories and personality features, and transplants it into another cloned body. Now there are two people (Smith and Jones, let's call them) who look exactly alike and have all

⁶ Franz Kafka, "Metamorphosis," accessed online at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5200/5200-h/5200-h.htm>.

⁷ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II.27.15, p. 340.

of the same psychological characteristics. They can't both be me; they are different people who exist in different places and have different life-experiences. So which, if either, is me?

These are big problems for the body theory, but they aren't problems in Rowling's world, because in that world *being the same person* is not a matter of *having the same body*. Voldemort doesn't die when he is "ripped" from his body by his own rebounding killing curse, despite the fact that his body is destroyed and he becomes "less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost" (*GoF* p. 653). Professor Cuthbert Binns remains Professor Binns even when he (or his soul-imprint) becomes a ghost. In Rowling's world the death of one's body is not the death of one's self. As Albus Dumbledore says, bodily death in the Wizarding World is "but the next great adventure" (*SS* p. 297).

All of this, you might say, shows that what's really crucial to personal identity is *psychological continuity*, that is, having (pretty much) the same memories and personality features from one time to the next. On this view, Voldemort survives the death of his body because his memories and personality survive intact. Likewise, the postmortem Dumbledore that Harry encounters in the limbo-like King's Cross Station (*DH* p. 707) is still Dumbledore because the requisite psychological continuity is preserved. By contrast, when the dementors suck out the soul of Barty Crouch, Jr. in *Goblet of Fire* (p. 703), thereby destroying all memories and sense of self, what remains is merely an empty shell, not Crouch himself. This is what's known as the memory (or personality or psychological continuity) theory of personal identity.

Unhappily, the memory theory runs into serious problems of its own. I remember nothing from when I was three-years-old, yet intuitively I am still the same Greg Bassham. Likewise, I have no memories of happenings at 3:00 a.m. last night, when I was in a Heineken-induced state of oblivion. A bottle of Heineken is a noble thing, but it is not a death potion that can cause one to cease to exist and then return to life. And what about cases of amnesia? A mad scientist tells you he'll wipe out all of your memories and then torture you. Would it make sense to say, "Go ahead, dirtbag. It won't be *me* you'll be torturing because all of my memories will be gone"? Even deeper problems arise when we consider "fission cases" in which two or more persons each have the relevant identity-preserving memories and psychological characteristics. Suppose the Star Trek transporter goes haywire and beams two of you down to Vulcan (simultaneously destroying your original body). Both beamed persons look exactly alike and have exactly the same memories and personalities. According to the memory theory, *both* are you, which is impossible since they are separate individuals at different locations with different experiences and life-trajectories.

Luckily, Rowling's world isn't committed to the bogus memory theory of personal identity. When Hermione radically modifies her parents' memories to make them think they're Wendell and Monica Wilkins (*DH* p. 96), there's no suggestion that her parents have died or ceased to exist (later to

be brought back to life once Voldemort is defeated). They're still alive, still the same persons, but with heads now full of false memories. And the reason they remain the same persons is presumably because they *have the same souls*.

There's little doubt, I think, that in Rowling's world *same self* means *having the same soul*. This is the soul theory of personal identity, and it fits with everything we're told about souls, selves, and survival in the *Potter* books.

There is one vexing problem, however. Souls can be split in Potter's world, creating the sorts of pesky fission problems that bedevil the memory and body theories of personal identity. If souls remain whole and undamaged, there's no problem with identity. As long as my soul survives, I survive. But suppose my soul gets split in half. Then all sorts of difficulties arise. At a minimum, the simple equation—"same soul, same person"—needs to be modified. Can you survive if only part of your soul survives? If so, how large a part—90%? More than 50%? Even less? Suppose you've created so many Horcruxes that only 20% of your original soul remains intact. Is that still you? Would it matter if one of your Horcruxes (the Big Enchilada) contains 30% of your original soul (the largest fragment)? Would that 30% actually be you? Does it matter if the 20% soul remains in its original body, whereas the 30% soul is encased in a Dick Cheney bobblehead doll? And what happens in the case of ties? Your original body is damaged beyond repair, so you split your soul and place 50% in one cloned body (Smedley) and 50% in another cloned body (Sturdley). Suppose the two bodies and two halves of the soul are identical in all respects and carry all of your former memories, personality traits, etc. Which, if either, is you?

Hard questions also arise about the status of one's separated soul-bits. Rowling calls them "parts," "pieces," "bits," "fragments" of an original soul that is now "torn" or "mutilated." But what makes the separated soul-fragment a "part" of something rather than an entity in its own right? If an amoeba splits into two, there are two amoebas, not one divided into two spatially separated parts. If a water-droplet breaks into two, there are two droplets, not one. So why shouldn't we say that when a Horcrux is created, two persons exist rather than one? A "person," as most philosophers define the notion, is a conscious, rational, self-aware being capable of choice and relatively high-level cognition.⁸ By this definition, the Tom Riddle soul-fragment in the diary-Horcrux would seem to be a person. He thinks, speaks, acts, and plans. There doesn't seem to be a shared consciousness or even much if any communication between the diary soul-fragment and Voldemort's original soul. It is, apparently, an independent being, with its own thoughts and experiences. The fact that scattered soul-fragments can be reunited by a process of deep and painful remorse (*DH* p. 103) does not imply that the

⁸ See, for example, Joel Feinberg, "Abortion," accessed online at: <http://www.ditext.com/feinberg/abortion.html>.

fragments are merely “parts” of some still-existing whole. The fact that two brain-hemispheres can be reunited to form one unitary person does not show that Smith and Jones were not different persons when the separated hemispheres were housed in their identical cloned bodies.

One possible solution for Rowling would be to adopt what philosophers call a “closest continuer” theory of personal identity.⁹ As long as *enough* of my soul survives (however much that is) and *no one else exists* who is a better candidate to be me, personal identity is preserved. Rowling could then say that Voldemort’s identity is clear. Voldemort is the person Harry kills in the final climactic duel of the series, since that Voldemort is the closest continuer to the Voldemort who was ripped from his body when he tried to kill the infant Harry many years before. That person is the real Voldemort because it contains (or is) the “master soul” that has existed continuously since Voldemort’s birth, that generated the various soul-fragments, that alone has the power to reunite them, and presumably is the “largest” part of Voldemort’s soul, with the greatest powers and abilities. For all of these reasons, it is the closest continuer to Voldemort’s earlier self, and thus *is* Voldemort, the other bits being either mere “parts” of a larger but spatially separated whole, or separate “persons” in their own right that hived off from Voldemort’s master soul and share many similarities with him.

Closest continuer theories strike many philosophers as non-starters, because it’s hard to see how personal identity (seemingly a *necessary* relationship) could depend upon something *extrinsic* and *contingent* like whether I have a competitor living (let’s say) unbeknownst to me in Kokomo. (Who knows, maybe last night God secretly split my soul, gave me a new but identical-looking body, and implanted the other half of my soul in the Kokomo chap whose body looks just the same.) Such theories also imply, bizarrely, that you will survive if one half of your soul is preserved, but you will die if both halves are.¹⁰ If you care about your continued survival, you shouldn’t care whether a mad wizard-scientist kills your entire soul (by means of his dementor sidekick) or merely splits your soul in two and plants the halves in two identical bodies cloned from yours. Either way, you’re equally dead. Bizarre, but some version of the closest continuer theory may be the best Rowling can do. As for me, gimme that old-time religion in which souls are immaterial, incorruptible, and indivisible (even by God).¹¹

⁹ For a classic defense of this view, see Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 29-47.

¹⁰ Eric T. Olson, “Personal Identity,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed online at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-personal/>.

¹¹ See, for example, Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith: Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 2, chaps. 50, 55, and 79.

