

## MEETING YOUR MINIMAL SELF

A Harry Potter-based exploration of an encounter between two selves

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the philosophical problem of self through the lens of the literary example of Harry Potter. The paper first builds a theoretical framework consisting of contemporary conceptions of self as the *minimal* and *narrative* self. This framework is then used to analyse the time-travel scene in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, in which two versions of Harry Potter encounter each other. The paper finds that it is not possible for Harry to conceptualise his future self as himself when he encounters himself because for an experience of self, a first-person experience is necessary. This paper provides an illustration of a thought-experiment of an individual encountering themselves, which is physically impossible and has not been discussed academically. It is thus relevant in exploring a philosophical and physical problem at hand of a popular story, making this thought-experiment easier to grasp.

### **1. Introduction**

Natural scientists have long discussed the idea of time travel, and its conceptual exploration has inspired philosophers, authors, and physicists to grapple with the topic. (Callender & Edney, 2010; Silberstein, 2004). Physicists tend to discuss time travel in its scientific feasibility related to the physics of time and space (Callender & Edney, 2010; Carlini et al., 1995), and often conclude that based on our knowledge on the nature of our universe, time travel is unlikely to be possible. Philosophers have studied time travel from a logical perspective, walking through the premises that may be

necessary for time travel to be possible from a logical perspective and discussing the paradoxes that could occur, such as the grandfather paradox (Smith, 2018).

Although scientists have conceded that time travel is not possible, creatives and academics have long been exploring the concept in films, novels, or TV shows. A popular example is the British TV series *Doctor Who*, or the recent German series *Dark*. These works explore different types of time travel and deal with possible ramifications caused by it. JK Rowling (2019) also explores time-travel and points toward a possible subject of philosophical investigation related to it in her *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. In this third book of the *Harry Potter* series, the existence of a magical artifact called a 'Time Turner' opens up the possibility for Harry and Hermione to travel into the past (Rowling, 2019). During their adventure in the past, Hermione repeatedly urges Harry that "they cannot be seen" by their past selves. She explains that encountering one's other self could be problematic:

“Harry, what do you think you’d do if you saw yourself bursting into Hagrid’s house?”, *said Hermione*. “I’d..I’d think I’d gone mad”, *said Harry*, “or I’d think there was some Dark Magic going on.” - “Exactly, you wouldn’t understand, you might even attack yourself! Don’t you see? Professor McGonagall told me what awful things have happened when wizards have meddled with time... loads of them ended up killing their past or future selves by mistake” (Rowling, 2019, p. 424).

This paper aims to philosophically explore the idea of encountering one's other self during time-travel as put forward by Hermione in this quote. As Wittenberg (2013) has argued, time travel fiction can operate as a laboratory for thought experiments in the area of philosophy of time, and thus contribute to the growing body of philosophical works on time travel. I build upon this argument, and work with Rowling's time travel scene as a thought experiment to anchor my exploration.

To do so, I draw upon philosophical and psychological theories of self, such as Zahavi's (2005) concept of the minimal self, and Kyselo's (2016) addendum to his theory. Two notions of self become important to the analysis: The minimal self, which pertains to perspectival ownership of our experience as a minimal requirement of self-experience, and the social self, which posits that the relationality of the self within

the world is as crucial to self-experience as perspectival ownership. After applying these ideas to my analysis of the time travel scene in Harry Potter, I conclude that the less experienced, past version of Harry Potter would not have been able to recognise his more experienced, future self until he becomes that person, because he lacks the perspectival ownership of the more experienced Harry.

## 2. The minimal and narrative self

Psychologists and Philosophers alike have long theorized about what makes a person a person. An infamous example is René Descartes' exploration of his experience of self, which he concluded by conceding "I think, therefore I am". Descartes strips down his own experience to the only sensation he can be sure of: thought, or more broadly, consciousness. What Descartes is alluding to here is one of the constituents of self that most academics can agree upon: the first-person experience of the world.

This is what Zahavi (2005) calls *the minimal self*. The minimal self is the most fundamental type of self, the part that is left once we conceptually exclude the "non-essential" parts of the self, such as our stories and memories. Even if we were not to have those, we still have a sense that the experiences we are having at a given moment are ours. The minimal self is what qualifies an experience as "mine", a notion that Zahavi calls perspectival ownership. The minimal self has two basic components: a sense of ownership and a sense of agency (Gallagher, 2000). This means that to a minimal experience of self belongs both a sense that it is one's own body that is doing or experiencing something and a sense that one has power over what they are doing or experiencing. The minimal self is at the core of the self. It qualifies our first-person experience as such and is what distinguishes "me" from "other".

However, theorists also agree that the minimal self is not an exhaustive self-concept, as it can lead to solipsism (Kyselo, 2016). Solipsism posits that nothing exists besides the self and its experience and does not acknowledge that different humans experience the world in a fundamentally similar way. This is also where Descartes' statement becomes dangerous: If the only thing that makes us ourselves is our thought/consciousness, then we do not credit how interdependent we are with social world around us, how much we can affect it and vice versa.

Modern theorists argue that the self is socially constructed and arises from the experiences we have in the social world. Gallagher (2000) for example argues that the self is constructed from the stories we tell ourselves based on our experiences with the world around us. In relation to the solipsistic tendencies of the minimal self, the narrative self is constructed from the relationship between the self and the world around it. The narrative self thus addresses our relationality in the world by highlighting the impact the world has on the self, and how the self deals with this.

Others disagree with the idea of narrativity. Strawson (2004), based on his own experience, argues that not all individuals construct their identities in forms of stories. According to Strawson, some people remain relatively unaffected by their past memories, and prefer to live moment-to-moment instead of constructing narratives from our memories. He states that although he remembers certain episodes from his life, these memories do not constitute his sense of self – in fact, he would not see the person who he remembers being years ago as himself now. He concludes that although he understands he is a product of his past, he does not take a narrative attitude to his life and stating that narrativity is a crucial aspect of self minimizes the less narrative-based experiences of people like him. Here, I argue that although it is true that not all people construct their identity through reflection-based storytelling, an individual still has some form of identity that arises from their positionality in the world and their relationship to the people around them.

Zahavi (2005) addresses this concern and views the minimal and narrative self as two poles on a spectrum, rather than two essential aspects of the self. Every self is minimal; it is a precondition of consciousness that we experience the world with a sense of mine-ness, our own perspective ownership. But the sociality that is also central for the experience of self does not need to lead to a sense of narrativity. Even when we refrain from meaning-making in the form of narrative, we are aware that the self is interpersonal, that we affect the people around us. These interactions with our environment lead to a certain sense of self, a sense that there is a relationship between ourselves and the world, that the two interact and influence each other. Here, interpreting one's own experience does not necessarily need to involve a narrative, but it is important to acknowledge that the self is constituted by the relationship between itself and world as much as its initial perception of the world.

#### 4. Chapter Synopsis

In Chapter 21 of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Rowling, 2019), Harry and Hermione travel back in time. The time travel scene follows a crucial sequence of the book, in which Harry for the first time meets his godfather, Sirius Black. Harry discovers that, despite having been told that Black is a criminal out to kill him, he is in fact innocent and means no harm. Harry finds out that a man named Peter Pettigrew was truly at fault for his parents' murder but fails to turn him in to authorities as Remus Lupin, Harry's teacher, transforms into a werewolf in their company, endangering everyone present. When Harry comes to after a wild goose chase through the Hogwarts grounds, he is in the hospital wing and Sirius has been captured by Severus Snape. To save Sirius from the Dementor's kiss, which is practically a death sentence, Harry and Hermione follow Dumbledore's advice and use Hermione's time turner. The time-turner had been a secret until that moment. They travel back in time three hours and plan to save both Buckbeak, a hippogriff who had been sentenced to death, and Sirius, who can then escape into safety with Buckbeak. Hermione and Harry have to do this without being seen, for magic law states that you cannot be seen, especially by yourself, if you travel in time. They manage to save Buckbeak and watch the other events unfold from a safe distance. Harry wants to see who fought off the dementors, so he goes to the lake and watches from the other side as his past self is being attacked by them. When he waits and nobody comes, he realizes that it was he who saved himself all along, and he performs the Patronus. Hermione then joins him, they return to Buckbeak, fly to the tower in which Sirius is incarcerated, and free him. They then manage to return to the hospital wing in time for Dumbledore to let them back in, making it seem like they never left (Rowling, 2019).

#### 5. Harry Potter and the minimal/narrative self

When Harry performs a Patronus at the lake and saves his past self, he truly encounters his other self. It is important to mention that encountering yourself here refers to only seeing yourself, not meeting or speaking to yourself (the latter does not occur in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*). However, the argument includes implications for an "actual encounter" between two selves that follow from the analysis.

While Harry travels in time, two versions of him exist (Rowling, 2019). One of them, past Harry, is the one who is living through the immediate experience of the evening. He experiences, for the first time, Buckbeak's assassination, he meets Sirius and finds out he did not kill Harry's parents. Harry sees a person across the lake who casts a Patronus and drives the dementors away. Future Harry, however, has already experienced this. He has woken up in the hospital wing to find out that Sirius has been captured. He also has found out about the existence of the time-turner and has used it to travel in time. He has seen his past self from afar, but does not recognise that this person is himself, so he resorts to his memory to make sense of the experience: he thinks it was his father who saved him. When he goes back to the lake to see who cast the Patronus, and nobody is there to do so, he casts the Patronus himself, saving his past self from the dementors.

It is clear that the two Harrys are both Harry Potter in the sense of the minimal self. Both consistently experience the day's events from Harry's perspective, there is an ownership to the experiences that Harry goes through. However, future Harry has lived longer and gained more experience. He has lived both versions of events from his perspective. He has learnt about time travel and the temporary existence of both selves. Past Harry, however, has only lived the events once and consequently does not have perspectival ownership of the second run-through, because it has not happened yet.

Logically, it is impossible for past Harry to understand that the person saving himself could even be himself. Based on the sequence of events in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry does not even know that time travel exists. Additionally, on a philosophical level, it is not possible for Harry to understand what is happening because past Harry is lacking the minimal self-experience of that self that is necessary for such understanding. Only future Harry has the memories of both run-throughs of the evening that are necessary to make sense of his experiences, he is the only one who has perspectival ownership over both. This means that in an encounter of two selves, only the future self can conceptualise the past self as being itself in addition to its future self because it is the only self that has experienced both viewpoints from the first-person perspective.

This point is illustrated when Harry talks to Hermione about his memories of this encounter with the silhouette across the lake. Here is how he makes sense of this experience:

He was thinking back to the person he'd seen on the other bank of the lake. He knew who he thought it had been, but how *could* it have been?

"Yeah, I saw him," said Harry slowly, "But maybe... I imagined it... I wasn't thinking straight... I passed out right afterwards"

"Who did you think it was?"

"I think...", Harry swallowed, knowing how strange this was going to sound. "I think it was my dad" (...) "Maybe I was seeing things," said Harry, "but... from what I could see... it looked like him... I've got photos of him..."

Had he been seeing things across the lake? The figure had been too far away to see distinctly... yet he had felt so sure, for a moment, before he'd lost consciousness. (Rowling, 2019, p. 432-433)

Harry's reaction to his encounter with himself is to conceptualise the person across the lake as his deceased father. Only when he actually travels back in time and goes back to the scene to see the man he believes to be his father, he realises that it was he who had saved himself: "and then it hit him - he understood. He hadn't seen his father - he had seen himself" (Rowling, 2019, p. 436). Harry was only able to understand that he had saved himself because of the experiences that distinguish him from past Harry: he has learnt about the time turner and has travelled in time, which past Harry did not know to be possible.

Another philosophically important event here is Harry's decision to cast the patronus. When he understands that nobody was going to come to cast the spell, he "flung himself out from behind the bush and pulled out his wand. 'EXPECTO PATRONUM!', he yelled" (Rowling, 2019, p. 436). As previously mentioned, selfhood is intrinsically linked to one's relationship to the world, the way we enact ourselves onto the world. For an experience of self, a person needs to be aware that they are a person in the world that not only perceives (minimal self), but also is perceived by other people (social self). In this chapter, Harry has a reverse experience of self: He first experiences himself as an "Other", because he has not experienced his future self's actions from a first-person perspective yet. And only when he later then travels back in time and becomes that future self, he realizes that who he has experienced as other is in fact himself. Him stepping in to perform the Patronus to save his past self and others

becomes an embodiment of that realization: He takes ownership of the person who he saw from the other side of the lake.

Only when Harry casts the patronus spell does he fully understand the encounter he has had with his past self, only then the person he saw in his memory becomes him. Such a perspective supports the idea of the minimal self, as it shows that the self needs to have a first-person experience to be even able to classify that experience as its own because one needs to have a sense of ownership and agency to have this sense of self.

This conceptual inability to recognise one's future self means that a person's reaction to encountering their future self is difficult to predict. Perspectival ownership, the minimal self, is essential for an experience of self. In Harry Potter's case, this is not a problem because he immediately believes that whom he saw was his father. The analysis nevertheless shows that an actual encounter between two selves is confusing on a philosophical, and likely also on an interpersonal level. Imagine a simple thought experiment wherein you encounter somebody who looks exactly like you and tells you that they are you from the future. But there is no way for you to conceptually process this experience because the self is so inextricably linked to the first-person experience that this situation is not possible to understand. On the one hand, there is a person who looks like you and claims to be you from the future. On the other hand, it is impossible for yourself to fully believe that this person logically *can* be you. As we have seen, it is philosophically debatable whether that person really is you; after all, they lack the perspectival ownership you feel in the moment of meeting them. These two situations are cognitively contradictory.

The unpredictability of such a situation may warrant the caution with which the Harry Potter characters handle time travel. In Harry Potter, the encounter of two selves could be especially dangerous because a wizard could conceptualise it as an attack by another witch or wizard. As Harry puts it in the introductory quote: "I'd think there was some Dark Magic going on." (Rowling, 2019, p. 424). In Harry Potter, wizards frequently use Dark Magic to achieve power or feats of magic that are not possible to enact with regular magic. A second self that pretends to be you could easily be a Dark-Magical ruse to confuse a wizard, which is why Harry rightly resorts to Dark Magic as an explanation. The feeling of confusion that arises from the impossibility to conceptualise encountering yourself in within the Harry Potter universe thus does not only lead to a state of discomfort but can pose a threat to the witch or wizard in question.

## 6. Conclusion

Time travel creates the possibility for two versions of an individual to exist at the same time. This opens up metaphysical and philosophical questions. The paper first drew upon Zahavi's (2005) theory of self to establish a theoretical framework. His idea of the minimal self describes the requirements for a perceptual self-experience, which is perspectival ownership, a sense of agency, and a sense of ownership. Important to note however is that besides the minimal self, it is crucial to acknowledge the impact a person has on the world and vice versa. In the context of the time-travel scene in Harry Potter, Harry cannot conceptualise his future self as himself because, for an experience of self, a first-person experience (a minimal self-experience) is necessary. Although this encounter did not turn out to be problematic for Harry, it could potentially have been, as it is impossible to conceptualise an encounter with the future self and thus the past self cannot empathise as though it were interacting with itself; it must treat the future self as fundamentally "other".

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