

Destiny in Harry Potter

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The *Potter* stories portray Professor Sybill Trelawney, Hogwarts Divination teacher, as an “old fraud” whose soothsaying comes in pseudo-scientific trappings. She teaches various techniques for predicting the future, including tea leaves, planetary orbits, palm reading, dream interpretation, tarot cards, and crystal balls. Each method has rules for students to follow, but they have little scientific basis. Trelawney’s predictions often turn out wrong, like her constantly-repeated forecast of Harry suffering an “early and gruesome death.” She also accepts others’ fabricated predictions that fit her preconceived ideas, like when she awards Harry and Ron top marks for predicting tragic misfortunes in their immediate futures.¹

Nevertheless, at least two of her prophecies are different. Dumbledore calls them her only two “real predictions.”² Usually she speaks in such elastic generalities about common enough occurrences that she’ll usually find something that fits. A science-minded Muggle like Vernon Dursley might reject divination as a reliable predictor. What do the alignment of the planets and the random assignment of tarot cards in a deck have to do with the processes that lead to certain events happening rather than others? But this is a magical world, even if the Dursleys don’t like it. Couldn’t magic connect tea leaves or dreams with actual future events?

Unfortunately, Trelawney usually comes across as a complete fraud, and her usual methods are probably either non-magical or unreliable magic. Professor McGonagall tells Harry’s class that divination “is one of the most imprecise branches of magic. I shall not

conceal from you that I have very little patience with it. True Seers are very rare, and Professor Trelawney —.”³ She stops short to avoid speaking ill of a colleague, but the point is clear. Sybill Trelawney isn’t a true Seer.

Similarly, the centaur Firenze distinguishes between Trelawney and genuine Seers. “Sybill Trelawney may have Seen, I do not know. . . . but she wastes her time, in the main, on the self-flattering nonsense humans call fortune-telling.”⁴ He respects and practices prophecy, despite acknowledging its fallibility, but he distinguishes it from the nonsense of fortune-telling. That raises a question about genuine prophecies. What does it mean to say they’re real, and how are they different from the others? Even Dumbledore, skeptical about most divination, acknowledges two of Trelawney’s predictions as different, and Firenze acknowledges the possibility. So what is this distinction?

Varieties of Prophecy

Do “real predictions” derive from what will actually happen? Is the future “fixed” so there’s just one future? Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C.E.) gets credit for first raising this issue.⁵ Is it true when Harry first attends Hogwarts that he’ll have a final faceoff with Voldemort seven years later?

If the future is fixed, there’s only one future, and it will happen. This isn’t to say it will happen no matter what anyone does. It could happen *because* of what they do, and if they did something else a different future would happen. But part of the fixed future is what they’ll do. Being fixed also doesn’t necessarily mean the future is predetermined. People who believe the future is fixed may not be determinists, although some are.

Prophecies can be fallible or infallible. An infallible prophecy is guaranteed to be true. It couldn't have been wrong. By contrast, fallible prophecies could be wrong. False prophecies are fallible, because they're actually wrong, but true prophecies can also be fallible. All it takes is possibly getting it wrong. Fallibility isn't about how sure we can be whether a prophecy will come true. I might be very unsure of an infallible prophecy if I don't understand its secure basis. I might be very sure of a fallible prophecy, even a false one, if I lack crucial facts.

Exactly how does a Seer access information in a prophecy? Here are several possibilities:

1. A prophecy might be a fallible prediction based on human observations through the five senses. Muggle weather reports and Trelawney's prophecies are like this.
2. If the future isn't fixed, all information in the universe wouldn't be enough to guarantee a correct prediction. But there might be enough to expect probabilities. Perhaps the Seer accesses possible or likely futures. Maybe Trelawney sees possible futures but can't discern the most likely ones and must speak in vague generalities. Dumbledore says, "The consequences of our actions are always so complicated, so diverse, that predicting the future is very difficult business indeed. . . . Professor Trelawney, bless her, is living proof of that."⁶
3. A prophecy might be a fallible prediction based on a limited understanding of a deterministic world. If the future is predetermined by the current state of the world and the laws of nature, and the Seer has imperfect access to it through signs of what causes it, then the Seer accesses a fixed future. Magic derives information from the natural forces that lead to that future, but it may not give perfect information. Or the Seer might magically access a fixed future without interpreting it correctly, perhaps because of partial information.
4. A soothsayer may be skilled at using predictions to make people do things. Such a "seer" could influence people by knowing how an audience is likely to respond to a prophecy. As we'll see shortly, Dumbledore thinks Trelawney's first "real prediction" led Voldemort to choose Harry to kill, marking him as his equal. Trelawney didn't intend anything, but the prophecy plays a role in its own fulfillment.

5. An infallible prediction might come from complete understanding of the deterministic processes that guarantee an outcome. This would need an all-knowing being or magical forces influenced by deterministic processes.
6. An infallible prediction might come from infallible access to the actual future. This might be by magic or through someone with direct contact with the future, perhaps a divine being or cross-time communication. Or a Seer might have the ability to see into the actual future (not just into possible futures).
7. Finally, a prophecy could combine fallibility and infallibility, with infallible access to some fixed fact about the future and fallibility about another aspect. The fallibility might come either from imperfect access to a fixed fact or from information about likely futures.

So the question before us is what kind of prophecy Professor Trelawney's genuine prophecies are, as opposed to her usual fortune-telling.

Fallible Prophecy

Most of Trelawney's predictions are perfect examples of the first category—fallible predictions based on sensory experience. They're usually vague or open-ended enough to find something to fit them, but there may be no guarantee, and it won't always fit well.

It's easy to see how general prophecies might at best be only probable, even if some are *very* likely. Trelawney's predictions don't come from an infallible source but from her ability to predict likely enough things, sometimes based on background information. Many of her predictions are easy to fulfill. Others may happen to be right by accident. Some are false, such as her forecasts of Harry's imminent death.

Dumbledore seems to treat all prophecy as fallible when he tells Harry that the first of Trelawney's real prophecies didn't have to come true. Here's the prophecy:

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. . . . Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies . . . and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not . . . and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other

survives. . . . The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies. . . .⁷

Dumbledore suggests that some prophecies turn out to be false. “Do you think every prophecy in the Hall of Prophecy has been fulfilled?”⁸ He continues, “the prophecy does not mean you *have* to do anything! . . . In other words, you are free to choose your way, quite free to turn your back on the prophecy!”⁹ Voldemort’s obsession with the prophecy would lead him to continue to seek out Harry, and so they’ll almost certainly face off. He says this not because it was prophesied but because Voldemort and Harry will seek each other.

So prophecies can vary in likelihood. Is that the distinguishing factor between “real predictions” and Trelawney’s usual sayings? Some are likely to be true because they’re based on her perceptions of what tends to happen, and she makes them vague enough to be likely. Others are more genuine because they’re more likely. This is a difference of degree. They’re both matters of likelihood, though some are more likely. But when Dumbledore treats two prophecies as special, doesn’t it seem as if they’re more special than that? Indeed, there’s still something different about them. The two “real predictions” were purely involuntary and have a magical source. They aren’t category 1, which involves actively paying attention. Trelawney must have had a stronger connection with the future, an occasional ability to connect with an actual, fixed future (type 3) or possible futures (type 2).

There are also some indications that Professor Trelawney has inconsistent access to the future or possible futures even when conscious. Consider the following example when Harry is heading to his first private lesson with Dumbledore in *Half-Blood Prince*:

Harry proceeded through deserted corridors, though he had to step hastily behind a statue when Professor Trelawney appeared around a corner, muttering to herself as she shuffled a pack of dirty-looking playing cards, reading them as she walked. “Two of spades: conflict,” she murmured, as she passed the place where Harry crouched, hidden. “Seven of spades: an ill omen. Ten of spades: violence. Knave of spades: a dark young man, possibly troubled, one who dislikes the questioner —” She stopped dead, right on the other side of Harry’s statue. “Well, that can’t be right,” she said, annoyed, and Harry heard her reshuffling vigorously as she set off again, leaving nothing but a whiff of cooking sherry behind her.¹⁰

What she says could easily apply to Harry, but she has no inkling of his presence. Is that likely to be a coincidence?

Harry encounters her again on his way to his last appointment with Dumbledore before they leave for Voldemort’s cave:

“If Dumbledore chooses to ignore the warnings the cards show—” Her bony hand closed suddenly around Harry’s wrist. “Again and again, no matter how I lay them out—” And she pulled a card dramatically from underneath her shawls. “—the lightning-struck tower,” she whispered. “Calamity. Disaster. Coming nearer all the time.”¹¹

This is so vague that it might just be category 1, but the tower is striking in light of the book’s finale, which does lead to disaster, as Death Eaters seize power after Dumbledore’s death.

Prophecies as Self-Fulfilling

Dumbledore suggests that Trelawney’s first real prediction might be self-fulfilling. He tells Harry, “it may not have meant you at all” because Neville Longbottom had been born a day earlier, and his parents had also thrice defied Voldemort.¹² But then a few paragraphs later he tells Harry, “there is no doubt that it *is* you,” because Voldemort’s choice to go after Harry rather than Neville led to his marking Harry as his equal.

According to Dumbledore’s interpretation, the prophecy didn’t itself determine whether it

was about Harry or Neville. Voldemort's choice of Harry made it true of Harry. He wouldn't have attacked him had there not been a prophecy, and so the prophecy led him to fulfill that part of itself.

Alexander of Aphrodisias, a philosopher during the late first and early second centuries, discussed self-fulfilling predictions. In the story of Oedipus, Apollo makes a prophecy to King Laius that his future son would kill him. Some of Alexander's contemporaries believed Apollo's prophecy caused Laius to try to kill his son, which eventually led him to kill his father (without knowing it was his father). Alexander gives a number of arguments against this position, but one response is telling:

Well, if someone says these things, how does he . . . preserve prophecy . . . ? For prophecy is thought to be prediction of the things that are going to happen, but they make Apollo the author of the things he predicts. . . . how is this not the deed of him who prophesied, rather than revelation of the things that were going to be?¹³

We can imagine someone *seeming* to foretell the future but really just causing the events that lead to the predicted future. Alexander says it's not a genuine prophecy unless it's already true that those events are going to happen, and the speaker predicts them based on knowing that they'll happen. If the words are just an attempt to manipulate events, they're not a genuine prophecy.

A real prophecy could cause what it describes, but this isn't true of Trelawney's first prophecy. It didn't *cause* Voldemort to go after Harry. He could have gone after Neville, but Dumbledore notices he chose Harry as a "half-blood like himself. He saw himself in you before he had ever seen you."¹⁴ What made him choose Harry wasn't the prophecy, which didn't cause him to go after *anyone*. Dumbledore suggests that if Voldemort had heard the whole prophecy he might not have been so hasty. When Harry

asks why Voldemort hadn't waited to figure out which one it was (or, I might add, killed both), Dumbledore says Voldemort had incomplete information because his spy (later revealed as Severus Snape) was thrown out halfway through:

Consequently, he could not warn his master that to attack you would be to risk transferring power to you—again marking you as his equal. So Voldemort never knew that there might be danger in attacking you, that it might be wise to wait or learn more. He did not know that you would have “power the Dark Lord knows not.”¹⁵

The prophecy by itself couldn't have *made* Voldemort do anything. He heard some of it, but it didn't *ensure* anything. It couldn't control how much Snape heard. If Voldemort had heard the rest, he might not have chosen to do anything. So it doesn't seem as if the self-fulfilling interpretation of prophecies is a good way to distinguish “real predictions” from Professor Trelawney's usual predictions.

Destiny

In a 2007 interview with a Dutch newspaper, J.K. Rowling said her use of Professor Trelawney represents her view that there's no such thing as destiny.¹⁶ What does this denial of destiny amount to?

A *compatibilist* about freedom and predetermination thinks we can be free even if our choices are determined by things outside our control. Some compatibilists say there's just one possible outcome, the actual future. Other compatibilists speak of possible choices, meaning we can consider various options and then pick one, even if our deliberation is predetermined by things outside our control. A *libertarian* about freedom holds that we have options because there's nothing guaranteeing our choices ahead of

time. This is more than compatibilism allows, because the libertarian considers predetermined choices unfree.

Some libertarians believe in a fixed future, meaning there are truths *now* about what *will* happen. You might have many *possible* futures open to you even if there's only one *actual* future that will happen.¹⁷ Others think such truths about future free choices would threaten our freedom, insisting on an open future, where statements about our future free choices are neither true nor false (until those choices are made).

The most natural denial of destiny is the open future view. No future statements about what I'll do are true or false. But someone denying destiny could mean that there are possible futures open to us, without denying that only one of them is the actual future. It's possible Rowling means just that, in which case she might even be a compatibilist, although this kind of language is more typical of a libertarian.

Dumbledore tells Harry that the prophecy about him doesn't have to be fulfilled just because it's a real prophecy. Does Dumbledore mean there's no fact about whether it will be fulfilled, and it becomes a genuine prophecy only when the foretold event occurs or is guaranteed to happen? Or does he mean the prophecy doesn't *make* Harry or Voldemort do anything? What it predicts is the actual future, but other futures are possible. We need to delve more deeply into the *Potter* books to see what kind of destiny there is and isn't in Harry's world.

A Rodent's Destiny

In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Professor Trelawney makes a second "real prediction":

The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless, abandoned by his followers. His servant has been chained these twelve years. Tonight, before midnight ... the servant will

break free and set out to rejoin his master. The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant's aid, greater and more terrible than ever he was. Tonight . . . before midnight . . . the servant . . . will set out . . . to rejoin . . . his master. . . .¹⁸

If the prophecy that one of Voldemort's followers would go to him that night was overwhelmingly likely, then Wormtail must have been extremely likely to escape that night. Other followers capable of going were unlikely to try. If Lupin had remembered earlier or someone had responded more quickly when Wormtail transformed, Wormtail might not have escaped. If a "real prediction" involves greater likelihood, this should be a likely outcome. It doesn't seem likely, so this particular prophecy is hard to see as fallible but likely.

The earlier prophecy is similar. Even if Voldemort was likely to go after Harry, how likely was it that Wormtail would become secret-keeper at the last minute? Voldemort wouldn't otherwise have marked Harry and given him power the Dark Lord knows not. If Voldemort hadn't told Snape his plan, Snape wouldn't have begged for Lily to be spared, and Lily wouldn't have been able to make a voluntary protective sacrifice. Again, Harry wouldn't have been marked. Thus, this prediction, too, seems to be "real" in some stronger sense than simply being "likely but fallible."

Time Travel and Fixed Time

To make sense of Rowling's views on prophecy and destiny, we must consider what she says about time travel. If time travel can change the past, it allows serious paradoxes, like the case Hermione mentions of killing your past self before you could travel back and kill yourself. If you did that, you wouldn't have lived long enough to go back in time to have done it. You can't change the past with fixed time, and that means you won't kill

yourself. You already survived, so it won't happen because it didn't happen. In Harry's one instance of time travel, they travel back in time three hours, carefully avoiding being seen. They accomplish what they set out to do, saving Buckbeak and Sirius. There's never any indication of a change. The entire account fits nicely with what we already knew about that three-hour period.

We find out the second time around that later-Harry cast the stag Patronus that saved earlier-Harry from the dementors. A fixed view of time fits this best. If Harry is saved by the Patronus stag the first time around and then casts it the second time around, the best explanation is that Harry's later self was there all along. Yet future events cause those present actions, which means the future must happen a certain way for them to have been able to travel back in time to do these things. A fixed view of time allows for this.

Nevertheless, Hermione describes time travel in a way that allows changing the past. "We're breaking one of the most important wizarding laws! Nobody's supposed to change time, nobody!"¹⁹ She adds later, "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!"²⁰ If we trust a trustworthy character reporting on another trustworthy character's statements, then the past can be changed in the world of Harry Potter. That would mean time isn't fixed.

It's highly unlikely that McGonagall is lying or that Hermione misinterprets her or lies about it to Harry. It's possible (but still unlikely) that the Ministry of Magic has spread misinformation about a guarded magical subject, and even McGonagall doesn't know the truth. Some may find that a stretch. But the alternative, if the stories are to be consistent, is to take "time travel" in cases of changing the past as possibility-travel and

not time travel.²¹ They travel to another possible timeline. The one time-travel case in the novels does seem to be genuine time travel, so it's not clear what mechanism would make it possibility-travel in only past-changing cases.

Aside from these puzzles about time travel, perhaps the most compelling argument for fixed time is that it fits best with current physics. Absolute space-time is often considered incompatible with special relativity. An open future requires an absolute present moment, after which little is fixed. But there is no absolute present. What we call the present is relative to a frame of reference. There can't be an absolute future if special relativity is correct.²²

With a fixed future and prophetic access to it, Trelawney's first prophecy doesn't just happen to get it right despite being unlikely. It was guaranteed to be right, even if many of the events along the path to fulfilling it seem unlikely. We might even conclude something stronger than simply that the future is fixed. Many unlikely events happen to lead to a prophesied event. A lot of chance events could have gone the other way to prevent the prophecy's fulfillment.

Harry and his friends defeat Voldemort and his followers, despite overwhelming odds, partly from sheer luck, and it fulfills a prophecy. That's hard to make sense of without a stronger connection between the prophecy and the actual future. It seems lucky that Harry and his friends had spent time in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom making Polyjuice, which helped them locate the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. They might have tried something different to figure out what Draco knew or brewed the potion elsewhere. Their choice of that bathroom allowed Harry to find the Chamber, save Ginny's life, destroy a Horcrux, make the Sword of Gryffindor capable of destroying

further Horcruxes, leave behind the basilisk for destroying another Horcrux, and clue Dumbledore in to the fact that Voldemort must have made more than one Horcrux. A fair amount depended on where they happened to choose to brew that potion.

Many other events that could have gone otherwise were crucial to things working out in the end. Harry's luck from *Felix Felicis* accomplishes a lot more than he realizes, including seemingly-unlucky things like Dumbledore's death but also his obtaining Slughorn's memory of Voldemort wanting exactly six Horcruxes. The potion depended on Harry's receiving Snape's former potions book, which depended on Dumbledore not telling Harry he could take potions, which depended on Slughorn coming back to teach.

In the second half of *Deathly Hallows*, Harry and his friends happen to be captured by the group that had Griphook. They arrive at Malfoy Manor during Voldemort's absence, after the fake Sword of Gryffindor was stored with a Horcrux whose location they didn't know. Snape had gotten the real sword into their hands for it to be there for Bellatrix to see it and freak out, leading Harry to suspect the hiding place of the fake sword also hid a Horcrux.

Harry later arrives at the Shrieking Shack just as Voldemort is about to kill Snape, allowing Snape to pass on Dumbledore's last message to Harry. All these events rested on luck. You might wonder if some force guides things along to ensure that the prophecy will be fulfilled. The fact that so many chance events led to the prophecy's fulfillment might suggest that some divine being is guiding things along.

This would be a stronger destiny than just a fixed future, since it involves deliberate intentions of an intelligent being. Many Christians, for example, have interpreted the *Potter* books to reflect a strong view of divine providence, with God

having a plan for the universe. That might mean God predetermines all our actions by means of prior events causing them. But it could as easily involve libertarian freedom, as long as God knows what people would do in all possible circumstances and therefore knows infallibly what free choices they may make.

These lucky circumstances seem far too easy if there isn't someone guiding events toward certain outcomes. Such a view may not fit what Rowling intended to say when she denied destiny and what Dumbledore said when he insisted that Harry or Voldemort could have done something contrary to the prophecy. It's hard to be sure what she meant (and what she meant Dumbledore to mean). But the story makes better sense if there is a deeper, providential explanation of the lucky occurrences.²³ If not, Harry and his friends are just incredibly lucky!

Notes

¹ *Goblet of Fire*, p. 221.

² *Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 426.

³ *Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 109.

⁴ *Order of the Phoenix*, p. 603.

⁵ In *On Interpretation*, Chap. 9, reprinted in *Aristotle: Introductory Readings*, edited by Terence Irwin and Gail Fine (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), pp. 11-15.

⁶ *Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 426.

⁷ *Order of the Phoenix*, p. 841.

⁸ *Half-Blood Prince*, p. 510.

⁹ *Half-Blood Prince*, p. 512.

¹⁰ *Half-Blood Prince*, pp. 195-96.

¹¹ *Half-Blood Prince*, p. 543.

¹² *Order of the Phoenix*, p. 842.

¹³ Alexander's *On Fate* 30-31, reprinted in *Voices of Ancient Philosophy: An Introductory Reader*, edited by Julia Annas (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 46.

¹⁴ *Order of the Phoenix*, p. 842.

¹⁵ *Order of the Phoenix*, p. 843.

¹⁶ *The Volkskrant*, November 2007. The interview is in Dutch, but it has been translated into English at <http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org/2007/11/19/new-interview-with-j-k-rowling-for-release-of-dutch-edition-of-deadly-hallows> (or for a shorter URL, go to <http://tinyurl.com/ypazb4>). My discussion relies entirely on that English translation.

¹⁷ For an excellent defense of the compatibility of foreknowledge and libertarian freedom, see Gregory Bassham's chapter, "The Prophecy-Driven Life: Fate and Freedom at Hogwarts" in *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts*, edited by David Baggett and Shawn E. Klein (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), pp. 223-25.

¹⁸ *Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 324.

¹⁹ *Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 398.

²⁰ *Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 399.

²¹ For a more in-depth discussion of time travel in the *Potter* novels, see Michael Silberstein, “Space, Time, and Magic” in *Harry Potter and Philosophy*, p. 192-199.

²² This objection is developed in much more depth in Theodore Sider, *Four-dimensionalism : An Ontology of Persistence and Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 42-52. This chapter also discusses other difficulties that arise if you deny the fixed view of time.

²³ Thanks to Winky Chin, Jonathan Ichikawa, Peter Kirk, Ben Murphy, Tim O’Keefe, Samantha Pierce, Rey Reynoso, and Brandon Watson for comments at various stages of this chapter’s development.