

Harry Potter and the Tweeting TERF
Is It Ethical to Separate the Art from the Artist?

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Introduction

In Case 3 of the Regional Ethics Bowl Cases, J.K. Rowling, the author of the *Harry Potter* series, is brought into question about her recent transphobic tweets. Some fans of the series are unsure as to whether they can continue to consume her work or not, fearing that doing so will be supporting views that are inherently against their moral values. In order to understand this case more, a more inclusive summary of the case will be provided, the ethical dilemma of whether or not it is okay to separate art from the artist will be established, and a response in favor of this separation will be given by using a variety of ethical arguments including utilitarianism, virtue ethics, the values of aesthetics and beauty, and an analogous connection to Walt Disney.

Case Summary

On June 6, 2020, J.K. Rowling tweeted that post-COVID-19, the world should be made a more equal place for “people who menstruate” (Petter 2020), saying, “I’m sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?” (Petter 2020). People have taken this to mean that Rowling is saying only people who menstruate can be considered women, making many transwomen and transmen feel unseen and invalidated. She then went on to support a transphobic retailer who creates products with phrases like “You’re Your Pronouns,” “Trans Activism is Misogyny,” “Get the L out of LGBT,” “Notorious Transphobe,” and more (Biggerstaff 2020). This has caused fans of the popular series to wonder whether or not they can still support the Harry Potter franchise’s books, movies, theme parks, merchandise, and more. Some of the actors and actresses of the films, including Emma Watson and Daniel Radcliffe, have denounced Rowling’s tweets, validating trans people while also claiming that the relationship between fans and the series is sacred, and between them and the art, completely independent of the artist. Others, on the other hand, claim that they cannot

support Rowling's work anymore, as they feel they cannot give recognition to a person who would make such claims.

Ethical Dilemma

The ethical dilemma requiring attention within this case is whether one can separate the art from the artist. In light of this case, if separating the art from the artist is determined ethical, this would entail a fan being able to continue to purchase and read the *Harry Potter* books, watch the films, attend the theme parks, and support the fandom while still rejecting J.K. Rowling and her recent tweets. However, if separating the art from the artist is not determined to be ethical, then a fan would have to stop supporting anything coming out of the *Harry Potter* franchise, as it would result in adding money into an unethical person's pockets as well as the promotion of an unethical person through the popularity of her work.

Response to Ethical Dilemma

In order to respond to this ethical dilemma, the question can be viewed from a utilitarian perspective. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, utilitarianists "ought to maximize the good, that is, bring about 'the greatest amount of good for the greatest number'" (Driver 2014). Using this theory, in terms of *Harry Potter*, separating the art from the artist (J.K. Rowling) is considered ethical as the good that the franchise has done outweighs the bad for the greatest number of people.

The good accomplished by the series includes teaching millions of people who have purchased 500 million copies of the books worldwide and 180 million copies in the United States ("20 Facts About the Harry Potter Book Series," n.d.) lessons of the ability to accept the past and change the future, the necessity of overcoming our fears to achieve our dreams, the importance of friendship, the power of love, and the truth that magic lives in all of us (Mormann

2020). This good can be understood a little better by diving into virtue ethics, which according to the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, refers to “the role of character and virtue in moral philosophy” (Athanassoulis n.d.). Dr. Michael Strawser and Dr. Nancy Stanlick explain how this form of ethics “involves asking the question ‘[w]hat traits of character make someone a good person?’ and then trying to cultivate those traits” (Stanlick & Strawser 2015). In terms of Harry Potter, the characters serve as moral exemplars for readers to model their lives after. From personal experience of reading the books and watching the movies, lessons of wisdom can be learned from the great wizard named Dumbledore, lessons of friendship can be learned from the three main characters of the series, Hermione, Ron, and Harry Potter, lessons of self-sacrificial love can be learned from Harry Potter’s mom dying for him and Harry Potter sacrificing his life for the safety of the students at Hogwarts, the school of witchcraft and wizardry contained in the book, and lessons of courage can be learned from the underdog of the series, Neville Longbottom, being the one to stand up to the antagonist Voldemort when all hope seems lost in the last book. While J.K. Rowling does not represent a moral exemplar, the characters she has created in fact do.

The harm done by J.K. Rowling can be defined as the emotional and mental bullying she has done to the millions of transgender people around the world. Now, just looking at numbers alone, in 2016 there were about 1.4 million adults who openly took on the identification of transgender (“How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?” 2016). While there certainly were more who did not openly identify as transgender, using the utilitarian view, if all 180 million people in the United States who purchased these books reaped the benefits of the lessons contained in them, then the 1.4 million transgender people who possibly were offended by the tweets of J.K. Rowling would be outnumbered by the former. This does not

excuse J.K. Rowling's tweets in any way at all; however, according to utilitarianism, it would justify the continued consummation of the art produced by Rowling. According to Dr. Michael Strawser, this begs the following question: "On a scale of happiness in which utils are assigned to each action, is the pleasure of reading a good book equal to the unhappiness of being offended by the author?" To this question, the answer is that the pleasure of reading the books and the benefits received by learning the lessons within the Harry Potter series surpass the unhappiness of being offended by the author.

Something that must be made clear is that it is ethical to separate the art from the artist as long as the art itself is ethically sound. Since the lessons found within the *Harry Potter* series are ethical, it would stand that people may be able to support the work even though the artist has proven to be unethical. However, someone supporting Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* during Hitler's lifetime, for example, would be extremely unethical as both the book and the artist were immoral.

One more argument to defend the claim laid out in this paper includes an analogous argument of Walt Disney. As analogous arguments "often help us think about the consistency of our moral outlook" (Lo 2020) and "treat similar cases similarly" (Lo 2020), the case of Walt Disney can be very helpful here. Walt Disney was notoriously homophobic, racist, and sexist; however, he created a company teaching values of love, acceptance, fantasy, and joy. Films such as *Princess and the Frog* teach fans to work hard but never forget the importance of family, and movies like *Frozen* emphasize family, friendship, compassion, and courage. Stories like *Aladdin* teach people to always be true to who you are, while others like *Hercules* show the importance of persevering and going the distance for the greater community. Furthermore, the Walt Disney theme parks represent home, joy, and happiness to so many people worldwide, providing an

escape from the real world into a world of fantasy. While Walt Disney may have made unethical choices, the good that his art did is incomparable. For that reason, we may continue to support the products of the Walt Disney Company. His art has created the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

An objection to these claims could be that it is being implied that since the *Harry Potter* series created happiness, they are moral; however, if they did not create happiness, they would not be moral. To this it must be said that the series is ethical as it promotes moral values; on the other hand, continuing to purchase products from the series is ethical in light of J.K. Rowling's tweets because this creates more happiness than the harm done by millions of people not being able to continue to support the series and reap the benefits of the lessons taught. It is important to mention though that purchasing things that promote unethical lessons by J.K. Rowling is inherently wrong. For example, J.K. Rowling has released a new book titled *Troubled Blood* as part of her *Cormoran Strike* series that is considered transphobic as it focuses on a serial killer who is a crossdresser, thus furthering the idea that JK Rowling is a transphobe (Voytko 2020). It would be unethical to purchase this immoral book.

One final claim to support my argument that consuming the art is ethically justified is that readers found their love for the series prior to when the tweets were made. They have formulated this bond with the art and should be allowed to maintain this bond. They should not have to give up their passions because of the actions that the creator of the series has performed after their relationship had already been formed. At the same time, people who would like to start supporting the series should be allowed to do so simply because of the lessons to be learned and the beauty and aesthetics found within the series. To deprive someone of the opportunity to enjoy art and aesthetics is unfair, and such beauty should be separate from morality. Many bad people

have real talents, and while their wrongdoings are completely immoral, the art itself should be able to be enjoyed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, due to the ideas promoted by utilitarianism that actions promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people are considered ethical, fans of the *Harry Potter* franchise may separate the art from the artist, as this action would provide the greatest happiness for the largest number of people.

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