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Time Travel and the Philosophy of Choice

Throughout human history, imagination and storytelling have been a way for us to explore human experience and philosophy. Through stories, we share what it means to be human in all its beauty and tragedy. Stories offer a way to ask questions about ourselves and our world, and to imagine different alternatives; and one of our favorite ways to do this is through stories of time travel.

It's a question we often ask ourselves: if we could go back in time and alter the events of our lives, would we do it and what would we change? This question has fascinated human intellect for centuries, if not millennia, and it has been used as a literary device for just as long. Time travel narratives, whether they involve the future or the past, allow us to explore philosophy around choice and destiny. They allow us to envision different outcomes in our lives and world that help us to gain a deeper understanding of who we are, both individually and culturally. In this paper, we will examine three different philosophies: fatalism, determinism, and free will, and how each are represented in three different time travel narratives. We will investigate how each story uses different temporal mechanics to explore these philosophies and what they reveal about how time travel could affect human agency.

Fatalism, Determinism, and Free Will

To understand how each story exemplifies each of these philosophies, we must understand how they are defined and how they differ from each other.

Fatalism claims that the future is fixed; that outcomes are realized regardless of human actions. This belief is espoused by many religious schools of thought, who teach the philosophy that all events occur as part of a greater plan, often attached to a god-like entity. However, this belief is also part of logical fatalism, which argues that free will and “prior truths” (what will happen) are incompatible (Todd and Fischer 21). In fatalism, human agency does not exist, as an individual will inevitably follow the path that has been laid out for them.

If we apply fatalism to stories of time travel, we see that the future cannot be altered – even if slight changes occur, the outcome is ultimately the same. The impression received is one of helplessness, whether for good or for bad. Some stories portray this inability to affect future outcomes in a positive way; others frame it in a more nihilistic perspective.

Determinism argues that events occur in accordance with natural laws; choices made lead to outcomes that are predictable. It promotes the belief that all events are the results of prior causes, and that choice is an illusion, as what is perceived as “choice” can only follow certain paths that lead to inevitable conclusions.

There are two distinct positions within determinism – hard determinism and soft determinism. Hard determinism contends that “the human brain obeys the laws of science, and that human thought is nothing more than a series of chemical and electrical reactions in the brain” (Biscontini). According to this view, humans may believe they are executing their free will, but hard determinists believe they are simply acting in the way their brain’s electrical and chemical functions have determined they will behave. Soft determinism debates this position, with an assertion that free will and determinism are compatible. In soft determinism, an individual’s choices are still constrained by natural laws and individual chemistry, but they must have the freedom and ability to carry out this predetermined path.

Free will is often portrayed as the defining and most sacred characteristic of humanity. Proponents of free will believe that humanity has control over their destiny, and as such, they carry moral responsibility for their choices. The nature of free will and arguments both for and against its existence have been part of philosophical debates since ancient times and have been studied by philosophers across history, from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes and Kant (O'Connor and Franklin). Under free will, an individual has control over their choices and behavior and therefore can control the outcomes of their choices – they can shape their own fate.

Fatalism in “What If”, by Isaac Asimov

In this story by Asimov, a happy young couple is allowed to glimpse an alternate history in which the circumstances of their first meeting are slightly altered. Livvy and Norman have been happily married for five years and are taking a train to celebrate their anniversary in New York City. As they sit together on the train, Livvy directs a question to her husband that she has asked repeatedly over the years: “Norman, what if you had been one minute later at the streetcar corner and had taken the next car? What do you suppose would have happened?” (678). Not long after she asks this question, a mysterious man sits in the seat opposite her that also faces her. He has with him a box labeled “what if” and out of which he retrieves a frosted piece of glass. In the frosted glass, Livvy and Norman can see scenes from an alternate history in which they still meet on the trolley, but instead of losing her balance and falling into his lap, she maintains her balance and exits the trolley prematurely with her friend Georgette. After asking to “Mr. If” to see their wedding day, Livvy and Norman discover that the change in their meeting has led to Georgette and Norman’s marriage, with Livvy in attendance as a guest. As they move forward in this alternate timeline, they see that events still occur as they did, with the only difference being

Georgette in Livvy's place. In the last scene they see, it's an alternate version of their present; Norman has divorced Georgette and he and Livvy are beginning a relationship.

These scenes cause Livvy and Norman some distress, especially Livvy, as it was her curiosity that led to an uncomfortable realization. However, when Livvy says to Norman, "The jigsaw pieces fit after all", she is reassuring herself that they belong together (686). Livvy goes on to explain to Norman, "I thought that because we had each other, we should have all the possible each others" (687). Her happiness and satisfaction with Norman and their life give her confidence that they would belong to each other no matter the circumstances. When Mr. If shows her that this is true, but through much more difficult and painful circumstances, she gains a measure of humility and understanding that events transpired as they were meant to. When Livvy says, "I was very wrong...all of the possibilities are none of our business. The real is enough" (687) the implication is that she is wrong to question fate. The "lesson" Livvy and Norman receive from Mr. If is not to wonder about the possibilities, but to enjoy what has been given to them by God, fate, or the universe.

This story is the answer to the question posed by Paul J. Nahin in *Time Travel: A Writer's Guide* when he asks, "Are humans creators of the future, or are they mere fated puppets of destiny" (116). By showing Livvy and Norman that their outcome would remain the same, Asimov asserts that we are predestined, our lives following a course that has already been determined and over which we have no control.

Determinism in "30 Seconds From Now", by John Chu

In this story, the main protagonist (Scott) is not only able to see the future, but he can also see all the possible futures that follow different actions or choices. This allows Scott a measure of control over what happens in his life, as seeing all those possibilities allows him to choose the

actions he will take to make a particular possibility become reality. To be able to restrict his vision of the future to only a few seconds into the future requires Herculean efforts in concentration, however, and he realizes that he will not always be able to control every outcome. This is illustrated by the opening scene, in which Scott tosses a bean bag from hand to hand. When he makes a bad toss, he sees multiple ghost-like versions of himself reacting to the toss, scrabbling across the room, stretching to catch the bean bag. He acknowledges this inevitability: “As hard as he tries to keep his sight solid, to make his life predictable, he will drop a bean bag” (215). As he sits in his room, he sees a future in which a man passes outside his door and the man is unusually solid and clear. Intrigued by the man’s clarity in his vision, Scott gives his ability free rein and can see the entirety of his future relationship with this man (Tony).

Let us consider Scott’s ability to be mental time travel. Since he can see all of his possible futures, his present becomes the “counterfactual past” described by Kourken Michaelian in *Mental Time Travel: Episodic Memory and Our Knowledge of the Personal Past*. Michaelian states, “Even if some form of determinism is true, the future remains undetermined as far as our knowledge of it is concerned” (211). While Michaelian discusses future-oriented time travel as an exercise in imagination, Chu’s story asks us to consider if someone could see the future. If determinism says events can only occur according to the laws of nature and that choices made will follow a determined path to a natural conclusion, we can see that determinism is at play in this story. Scott can see a multitude of futures, but each possible one follows natural laws. The bean bag Scott is tossing around will not have a future in which it hovers, weightless, above the floor – gravity ensures that it will fall. While Scott can choose which actions to take to lead to a particular future, each possible choice will lead to an inevitable and predictable outcome according the laws of the universe. By making his present the “counterfactual past” through

mental time travel, Scott can affect his “past” decisions in order to choose the future his “present” will become.

Expression of Free Will in “Story of Your Life”, by Ted Chiang

In “Story of Your Life”, linguistic expert Louise Banks assists government officials in their attempts to communicate with extraterrestrial visitors – the heptapods. The heptapods have both a spoken language (Heptapod A) and a written language (Heptapod B) that Louise and her global counterparts endeavor to learn, so humanity can understand why the heptapods have come to Earth and what it is they want. As Louise becomes more and more adept in the written language, Heptapod B, she realizes that she is beginning to perceive time in the same non-linear manner that the heptapods do. Louise’s work partner, Gary, hints at the nature of their perception when making an observation about the Heptapod B “semagrams”: “I wonder if it’s a Trconsequence of their bodies’ radial symmetry: their bodies have no ‘forward’ direction, so maybe their writing doesn’t either” (11). As she studies the language and perfects her ability to create semagrams, her thought processes begin to change:

“As I grew more fluent, semagraphic designs would appear fully-formed, articulating even complex ideas all at once...my mind hung balanced on the symmetry underlying the semagrams. [They] seemed to be something more than language; they were almost like mandalas. I found myself in a meditative state, contemplating the way in which premises and conclusions were interchangeable” (26).

By learning to think and process information in a non-linear (or more than one-dimensional) way, Louise can experience time non-linearly as well. This allows her to live and experience her life like her thoughts: “all at once”. She simultaneously makes and experiences every choice and every event that occurs throughout her life, knowing exactly where each choice will lead. Jo Alyson Parker argues that in this story, Chiang “highlights key ideas related to free

will: knowledge, predictability, and agency” (139). In this story, Louise’s perception of time gives her access to her future and the ability to know/predict the progression of her life, but she maintains her agency. Since she is experiencing past, present, and future *simultaneously*, her choices remain the result of her free will.

Conclusion

Each of these time-travel narratives question the nature of human agency and whether we have any measure of control over the course of our lives; but the question of whether we have free will or if our fates are predestined is less important than how we respond to the circumstances surrounding us. There are elements of life that cannot be controlled, but each of these stories illustrate the human ability to choose how to react. After her experience with Mr. If, Livvy decides to simply enjoy life without questioning it; despite knowing the future heartbreak he will experience, Scott decides to leave the door open to Tony and love; and Louise chooses to embrace each moment of her life and, by extension, her daughter’s life. The fact that each character chooses to accept all that life has to offer emphasizes the meaning and dignity found in the single chance we are each given.

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