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EATING THE DINOSAUR

by Chuck Klosterman

Tomorrow Rarely Knows

1

It was the 1990s and I was 20, so we had arguments like this: What, ultimately, is more plausible – time travel, or the invention of liquid metal with the capacity to think? You will not be surprised that *Terminator 2* was central to our dialogue. There were a lot of debates over this movie. The details of the narrative never made sense. Why, for example, did Edward Furlong tell Arnold that he should quip, “Hasta la vista, baby” whenever he killed people? Wasn’t this kid supposed to like *Use Your Illusion II* more than *Loc-ed After Dark*? It was a problem. But not as much of a problem as the concept of humans (and machines) moving through time, even when compared to the likelihood of a pool of sentient mercury that could morph itself into a cop or a steel spike or a brick wall or an actor who would disappoint watchers of *The X-Files*. My thesis at the time (and to this day) was that the impossibility of time travel is a cornerstone of reality: We cannot move forward or backwards through time, even if the principles of general relativity and time dilation suggest that this is possible. Some say that time is like water that flows around us (like a stone in the river) and some say we flow *with* time (like a twig floating on the surface of the water). My sense of the world tells me otherwise. I believe that time is like a train, with men hanging out in front of the engine and off the back of the caboose; the man in front is laying down new tracks the moment before the train touches them, and the man in the caboose is tearing up the rails the moment after they are passed. There is no linear continuation: The past disappears, the future is unimagined, and the present is ephemeral. It cannot be traversed. So even though the

prospect of liquid thinking metal is insane and idiotic, it's still more viable than time travel. I don't know if the thinking metal of tomorrow will have the potential to find employment as assassins, but I do know that – if this somehow happens – those liquid metal killing machines will be locked into whatever moment they happen to inhabit.

It would be wonderful if someone proved me wrong about this. Wonderful.

Wonderful, and sad.

2

I read H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* in 1984. It became my favorite novel for the next two years, but only for textual reasons: I saw no metaphorical meaning in the narrative. It was nothing except plot, because I was a fucking sixth grader. I re-read *The Time Machine* as a 36-year-old in 2008, and it was (predictably) a wholly different novel that seems fixated on archaic views about labor relations and class dynamics, narrated by a protagonist who is completely unlikable. That is a trend with much of Wells's sci-fi writing from this period; I re-read *The Invisible Man* around this same time, a book that now seems maniacally occupied with illustrating how the invisible man was an asshole.

Part of the weirdness surrounding my reinvestigation of *The Time Machine* was because my paperback copy included a new afterword (written by Paul Youngquist) that described Wells as an egomaniac who attacked every person he encountered throughout his entire lifetime, often contradicting whatever previous attack he had made only days before. He publicly responded to all perceived slights levied against him, constantly sparring with his nemesis Henry James and once sending an angry, scatological letter to George Orwell (written after Orwell had seemingly given him a compliment). He really

hated Winston Churchill, too. H.G. Wells managed to write four million words of fiction and eight million words of journalism over the course of his lifetime, but modern audiences remember him exclusively for his first four sci-fi novels (and they don't remember him that fondly). He is not a canonical writer and maybe not even a great one. However, his influence remains massive. Like the tone of Keith Richards guitar or Snidely Whiplash's mustache, Wells defined a universal cliché -- and that is just about the rarest thing any artist can do.

The cliché that Wells popularized was not the fictional notion of time travel, because that had been around since the eighteenth century (the oldest is probably a 1733 Irish novel by Samuel Madden called *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century*). Mark Twain reversed the premise in 1889's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. There's even an 1892 novel called *Golf in the Year 2000* that predicts the advent televised sports. But in all of those examples, time travel just sort of happens inexplicably -- a person exists in one moment, and then they're transposed to another. The meaningful cliché Wells introduced was *the machine*, and that changed everything. Prior to the advent of Wells' imaginary instrument, traveling through time generally meant the central character was *lost* in time, which wasn't dramatically different from being lost geographically. But a machine that gave the protagonist agency. The time traveler was now moving forward or backward on purpose; consequently, the time traveler now needed a motive for doing so. And that question, I suspect, is the core reason why narratives about time travel are almost always interesting, no matter how often the same basic story is re-told and re-packaged: If time travel *was* possible, why would we want to do it?

Now, I will concede that there's an inherent goofballedness in debating the ethics of an action that is impossible. It probably isn't that different than trying to figure out if leprechauns have high cholesterol. But all philosophical questions are ultimately like this – by necessity, they deal with hypotheticals that are unfeasible. Real-world problems are inevitably too unique and too situational; people will always see any real world problem through the prism of their own personal experience. The only massive ideas everyone can discuss rationally are big ideas that don't specifically apply to anyone, which is why a debate over the ethics of time travel is worthwhile: No one has any personal investment whatsoever. It's *only* theoretical. Which means no one has any reason to lie.

2A

Fictionalized motives of time travel generally operate like this: Characters go back in time to fix a mistake or change the conditions of the present (this is like *Back to the Future*). Characters go forward in time for personal gain (this is like the gambling subplot¹ of *Back to the Future Part II*). Jack the Ripper uses H.G. Wells' time machine to kill citizens of the seventies in *Time After Time*, but this was an isolated (and poorly acted) rampage. Obviously, there is always the issue of scientific inquiry with movement

¹ This subplot refers to the actions of a character named Biff (Thomas Wilson) who steals a sports almanac from the future in order to gamble on pre-determined sporting events in the present. There is a popular urban legend about this plot point involving the Florida Marlin baseball team: In the film, Biff supposedly bets on a Florida baseball team to win the World Series in 1997, which actually happened. The weird part is that *Back to the Future 2* was released in 1989, four years before the Florida Marlins even had a Major League franchise. Unfortunately, this story is completely false. The reference in the movie is actually a joke about the futility of the Chicago Cubs that somehow got crossed with another reference to a (fictional) MLB opponent from Miami whose logo was a Gator. Now, I realize that by mentioning the inaccuracy of this urban legend, I will probably just perpetuate its erroneous existence. But that's generally how urban legends work.

though time, but that motive matters less; if a time traveler's purpose is simply to learn things that are unknown, it doesn't make moving through time any different than exploring Skull Island or going to Mars. My interest is with the explicit benefits of being transported to a different moment in existence -- what that would mean morally, and how the traveler's goals (whatever they may be) could be implemented successfully.

Here's a question I like to ask people when I'm 5/8 drunk: Let's say you had the ability to make a very brief phone call into your own past. You are (somehow) given the opportunity to phone yourself as a teenager; in short, you will be able to communicate with the 15-year-old version of You. However, you will only get to talk to your former self *for fifteen seconds*. As such, there's no way you will be able to explain who you are, where or when you're calling from, or what any of this lunacy is supposed to signify. You will only be able to give the younger version of yourself a fleeting, abstract message of unclear origin.

What would you say to yourself during these fifteen seconds?

From a sociological standpoint, what I find most interesting about this query is the way it inevitably splits between gender lines: Women usually advise themselves *not* to do something they now regret (i.e., "Don't sleep with Corey McDonald, no matter how much he pressures you"), while men almost always instruct themselves to do something they *failed* to attempt (i.e. "Punch Corey McDonald in the face, you heartless coward"). But from a more practical standpoint, the thing I've come to realize is that virtually no one has any idea how to utilize such an opportunity, even if it were possible. If you can't directly explain that you're talking from the future, any prescient message becomes worthless. All advice comes across like a drunk dialer reading a fortune cookie. One

person answered my question by claiming he would tell the 1985 incarnation of himself to, "Invest in google." That sounds smart, but I can't imagine a phrase that would have been more useless to me as a teenager in 1985. I would have spent the entire evening wondering how it would be possible to invest money into the number 1 with a hundred zeroes behind it.

It doesn't matter what you can do if you don't know why you're doing it.

2B

I've now typed fifteen hundred words about time travel, which means I've reached the point where everything becomes a problem for everybody. This is the point where we need to address the philosophical dilemmas imbedded in any casual discussions about time travel, real or imagined. And there are *a lot* of them. And I don't understand about 64 percent of them. And the 36 percent I do understand are pretty elementary to everyone included the substantial chunk of consumers who are very high and watching Anna Faris movies while they read this. But here we go! I will start with the most unavoidable eight:

- 1.) **If you change any detail about the past, you might accidentally destroy everything in present-day existence.** This is why every movie about time travel makes a big, obvious point about not bringing anything from the present back in time, often illustrated by forcing the fictionalized time traveler to travel nude. If you went back to 60,000 B.C. with a tool box and absent-mindedly left the vice

grip behind, it's entirely possible that the world would technologically advance at an exponential rate and destroy itself by the sixteenth century.² Or so I'm told.

- 2.) **If you went back in time to accomplish a specific goal (and you succeeded at this goal), there would be no reason for you to have traveled back in time in the first place.** Let's say you build a time machine in hopes of murdering the proverbial "Baby Hitler" in 1889. Committing this murder would mean the Holocaust never happened. And that would mean you'd have no motive for going back in time in the first place, because the tyrannical Hitler -- the one you despise -- would not exist. In other words, any goal achieved through time travel would eliminate the necessity of the traveler needing to travel. In his fictional (and pathologically grotesque) oral history *Rant*, author Chuck Palahniuk refers to this impasse as The Godfather Paradox: "The idea that if one could travel backward in time, one could kill one's own ancestor, eliminating the possibility said time traveler would ever be born -- and thus could never have lived to travel back and commit the murder." The solution to this paradox (according to Palahniuk) is the theory of splintered alternative realities, where all possible trajectories happen autonomously and simultaneously (sort of how Richard Linklater describes *The Wizard of Oz* to an uninterested cab driver in the opening sequence of *Slacker*). However, this solution is actually more insane than the original problem. The only modern narrative that handles the conundrum semi-successfully is Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko*, where schizophrenic heartthrob Jake Gyllenhaal uses a portal to move back in time twelve days, thereby allowing himself to die in an

² For whatever the reason, I've always assumed vice grips would be extremely exhilarating for Neanderthals.

accident he had previously avoided. By removing himself from the equation, he never meets his new girlfriend, which keeps her from dying in a car accident that was his fault. More importantly, his decision to die early stops his adolescence from becoming symbolized by the music of Tears for Fears.

- 3.) **A loop in time eliminated the origin of things that already exist.**³ This is something called “The Bootstrap Paradox” (in reference to the Robert Heinlein story “By His Bootstraps”). It’s probably best described by David Toomey, the author of a book called *The New Time Travelers* (which appears to be a principal influence on Season 5 of *Lost*). Toomey uses *Hamlet* in a used-book store, built a time machine, traveled back to 1601, and gave the book to William Shakespeare. Shakespeare then copies the play in his own handwriting and claims he made it up. It’s recopied and republished countless times for hundreds of years, eventually ending up in the bookstore where Toomey shops. So who wrote the play? Shakespeare obviously didn’t. Another example occurs near the end of *Back to the Future*: Michael J. Fox performs “Johnny B. Goode” at the school dance and the tune is transmitted over the telephone to Chuck Berry (who presumably stole

³ Semi-unrelated (but semi-interesting) footnote to this paradox: Before Fox plays “Johnny B. Goode,” he tells his audience “This is an oldie—well, this is an oldie from where I come from.” Chuck Berry recorded “Johnny B. Goode” in 1958; *Back to the Future* was made in 1985, so the gap is twenty-four years. That’s almost the same amount of time. Yet nobody would ever refer to *Back to the Future* as an “oldie,” even if he or she were born in the 1990s. What seems to be happening is a dramatic increase in cultural memory: As culture accelerates, the distance between historical events feels smaller. The gap between 2010 and 2000 will seem far less than the gap between 1980 and 1970, which already seemed far less than the gap between 1960 and 1950. This, I suppose, is society’s own version of time travel (assuming the trend continues for eternity).

- it). In this reality, where does the song come from? Who gets the songwriting royalties?
- 4.) **You'd possibly kill everybody by sneezing.** Depending on how far you went back in time, there would be a significant risk of infecting the entire worldwide population with an illness that mankind has spent the last few centuries building immunities against. Unless, of course, you happened to contract small pox immediately upon arrival -- then *you'd* die.
- 5.) **You already exist in the recent past.** This is the most glaring problem and the one everybody intuitively understands – if you went back to yesterday, you would still be there, standing next to yourself. The consequence of this existential condition is both straightforward and unexplainable. Moreover ...
- 6.) **Before you actually attempted to travel back in time, you'd already know that it worked.** Using the example from Problem # 5, imagine that you built a time machine on Thursday. You decide to use the machine on Saturday in order to travel back to Friday. If this worked, you would already see yourself on Friday. But what would then happen if you (and the Future You) destroyed your time machine on Friday night? How would the Future You be around to assist with the destroying?
- 7.) **Unless all of time was happening simultaneously within multiple realities, memories and artifacts would mysteriously change.** The members of Steely Dan (Donald Fagen and Walter Becker) met at Bard College in 1967, when Fagen overheard Becker playing guitar in a café. This meeting has been recounted many times in interviews, and the fact that they were both at Bard College (located in

Annandale-on-Hudson) is central to songs like “My Old School.” But what if Fagen built a time machine in 1980 and went back to find Becker in 1966, when he was still a high school student in Manhattan? What would happen to their shared personal memories that first meeting in Annandale? And if they had both immediately moved to Los Angeles upon Becker’s graduation, how could the song “My Old School” exist (and what would it be about)?

- 8.) **The past has happened, and it can only happen *the way it happened.*** This, I suppose, is debatable. But not by Bruce Willis. In Terry Gilliam’s *12 Monkeys*, Willis goes back in time to confront an insane Brad Pitt before Pitt releases a virus that’s destined to kill five billion people and drive the rest of society into hiding (as it turns out, Pitt is merely trying to release a bunch of giraffes from the Philadelphia zoo, which is only slightly more confusing than the presence of Madeline Stowe in this movie). What’s distinctive about *12 Monkeys* is that the reason Willis is sent back in time is not to stop this catastrophe from happening, but merely to locate a primitive version of the virus so that scientists can combat the existing problem in the distant future (where the remnants of mankind have been to forced to take refuge underground). Willis can travel through time, but he can’t change anything or save anyone. “How can I save you?,” he rhetorically asks the white-clad dolts who question his sudden appearance in the year 1990. “This already happened. No one can save you.” *12 Monkeys* makes a lot of references to the “Cassandra Complex” (named for a Greek myth about a young woman’s inability to convince others that her futuristic warnings are accurate), but it’s mostly about predestination – in *12 Monkeys*, the assumption is that

anyone who travels into the past will do exactly what history dictates. Nothing can be altered. What this implies is that everything about life (including the unforeseen future) is concrete and predetermined. There is no free will. So if you've seen *12 Monkeys* more than twice, you're probably a Calvinist.

These are just a handful of the (nonscientific) problems with going backward in time. As far as I can tell, there really aren't any causality problems with going forward in time – in terms of risk, jumping to the year 2077 isn't that different than moving to suburban Bangladesh or hiding in your basement for five decades. Time would still move forward on its regular trajectory, no differently than if you were temporarily (or permanently) dead. Your participation in life doesn't matter to time. This is part of the reason that futurists tend to believe traveling forward in time is more possible than the alternative – it involves fewer problems. But regardless of the direction you move, the *central* problem is still there: Why do it? What's the *best* reason for exploding the parameters of reality?

With the possible exception of eating a dinosaur, I don't think there is one.

3

“Even back when I was writing really bad short stories in college,” a (then) thirty-four-year-old Shane Carruth said in an interview with himself, “I always thought the time machine is the device that's missed most. Without even saying it out loud, that's the thing people want the most: The ability to take whatever it is that went wrong and fix it.”

Carruth was the writer, director, producer and co-star of the 2004 independent film *Primer*, the finest movie about time travel I've ever seen. The reason *Primer* is the best

(despite its scant seventy-eight-minute run time and \$7000 budget) is because it's the most realistic – which, I will grant, is a peculiar reason for advocating a piece of science fiction. But the plausibility of *Primer* is why it's so memorable. It's not that the time machine in *Primer* seems more authentic; it's that the time travelers themselves seem more believable. They talk and act (and *think*) like the kind of people who might accidentally figure out how to move through time, which is why it's the best depiction we have of the ethical quandaries that would emerge from such a discovery.

Here's the basic outline of *Primer*: It opens with four identically dressed computer engineers sitting around a table in a non-descript American community (*Primer* was shot around Dallas, but the setting is like the world of Neil LaBute's *In the Company of Men* – it's a city without character that could literally be anywhere). They speak a dense, clipped version of English that is filled with technical jargon; it's mostly indecipherable, but that somehow makes it better. They wear ties and white shirts all the time (even when they're removing a catalytic converter from a car to steal the palladium), and they have no interests outside of superconductivity and NCAA basketball. The two brightest engineers – Abe (David Sullivan) and Aaron (Carruth) – eventually realize they have assembled a box that can move objects backwards through a 1,300-minute loop in time. Without telling anyone else, they build two larger versions of the (staunchly unglamorous) box that can transport them to the previous day.⁴ Their initial motive is solely financial – they

⁴ This is too difficult to explain in a footnote, but one of Carruth's strength as a fake science writer is how he deals with the *geography* of time travel, an issue most writers never even consider. Here, in short, is the problem: If you could instantly travel one hour back in time, you would (theoretically) re-materialize in the exact same place from which you left. That's how the machine works in the original *Time Machine*. However, the world would rotate during that hour you were missing in limbo, so you would actually re-

go back a day, drive to the local library, and buy stocks over the Internet which they know will increase in value over the next twenty-four hours. They try to do nothing else of consequence (at least at first). They just sit in a hotel room and wait. “I tried to isolate myself,” Abe says when describing his first journey into the past. “I closed the windows, I unplugged everything – the phone, the TV, and clock radio. I didn’t want to take the chance of seeing someone I knew, or of seeing something on the news ... I mean, if we’re dealing with causality, and I don’t even know for sure ... I took myself out of the equation.”

If this sounds simple, I can assure you that it is not. *Primer* is hopelessly confusing and grows more and more byzantine as it unravels (I’ve watched it seven or eight times and I still don’t totally know how it works). Characters begin to secretly use the time machine for personal reasons and they begin multiplying themselves across time. But because these symmetrical iterations are (inevitably) copies of other copies, the system starts to hemorrhage – Abe and Aaron find themselves bleeding from their ears and struggling with handwriting. When confusing events start to happen in the present, they can’t tell if those events are the manifestations of decisions one of them will eventually make in the future. At one point, no one (not Abe, Aaron, or even the viewer) is able to understand what’s happening. The story does not end in a clear disaster, but with a hazy, open-ended scenario that might be worse.

What’s significant about the two dudes in *Primer* is how they initially disregard the ethical questions surrounding time travel; as pure scientists, they only consider the practical obstacles of the endeavor. Even when they decide to go back and change the

materialize in a totally different spot on the globe. *Primer* manages to work around this problem, although I honestly don’t see the solution as much as I understand the dilemma.

past of other people, their only concern is how this can still work within the framework they're manipulating. They're geniuses, but they're ethical Helen Kellers. When they're traveling back for financial purposes, they discount their personal role in the success of the stocks they trade; since stocks increase in value whenever people buy them, they are retroactively inflating the value of whatever commodities they select (not by much, but enough to alter the future). When Abe and Aaron start traveling back in time to change their own pasts, they attempt to stoically ignore the horrifying reality they've created: Their sense of self – their very *definition* of self – is suddenly irrelevant. If you go back in time today and meet the person who will become you tomorrow, which of those two people is actually you? The short answer is, “both.” And once you realize that the short answer is “both,” the long answer become “neither.” If you exist in two places, you don't exist at all.

According to the director, *Primer* is a movie about the relationship between risk and trust. This is true. But it also makes a concrete point about the potential purpose of time travel – it's too important to use only for money, but too dangerous to use for anything else.

1A

I used to have a fantasy about re-living my entire life with my present-day mind. I thought this fantasy was unique to me, but it turns out that this is very common; many people enjoy imagining what it would be like to re-inhabit their past with the knowledge they've acquired through experience. I imagine bizarre things I would have said to

teachers in junior high. I think about women I would have pursued and stories I could have written better and about how interesting it would have been to be a genius four-year-old. At its nucleus, this is a fantasy about never having to learn anything. The defining line from Frank Herbert's *Dune* argues that the mystery of life "is not a question to be answered but a reality to be experienced." My fantasy offers the opposite. Nothing would be experienced. Nothing would feel new or unknown or jarring. It's a fantasy for people who want to solve life's mysteries without having to do the work.

I am one of those people.

The desire to move through time is electrifying and rational, but it's a desire of weakness. The real reason I want to travel through time is because I'm a defeatist person. The cynical egomaniac in Wells' original novel leaves the present because he has contempt for the humanity of his present world, but he never considers changing anything about his own role in that life (which would obviously be easier). Instead, he elects to bolt 800,000 into the future, blindly hoping that things will have improved for him. It's a bad plan. Charlton Heston's character in *Planet of the Apes*⁵ tries something similar; he hates mankind, so he volunteers to explore space, only to crash back on a post-apocalyptic earth where poorly dressed orangutans employ Robert's Rules of Order. This is a consistent theme in stories about traveling to the future: Things are always worse when you get there. And I suspect this is because the kind of writer who's intrigued by the notion of moving forward in time can't see beyond their own pessimism about being alive. People who want to travel through time are both (a.) unhappy and (b.) unwilling to

⁵ I realize *Planet of the Apes* isn't technically about time travel. Time moves at its normal rate while the humans are in suspended animation. But for the purposes of the fictional people involved, there is no difference: They leave from and return to the same geographic country. The only difference is the calendar.

compromise anything about who they are. They would rather change every element of society *except* themselves.

This is how I feel.

This is also why my longstanding desire to build a time machine is not just hopeless, but devoid of merit. It has nothing to do with time. I don't think it ever does (for me, H.G. Wells, Shane Carruth, or for anyone else). It takes a flexible mind to imagine how time travel might work, but only an inflexible spirit would want to do so. It's the desire of the depressed and lazy.

On side two of the Beach Boys *Pet Sounds*, Brian Wilson laments that he "just wasn't made for these times" ("these times" being 1966). He probably wasn't. But he also didn't want to be. I assume Wilson would have preferred to deal with the possibility of thinking liquid metal before he would accept the invisible, non-negotiable shackles of the present tense. Which – sadly, and quite fortunately – is the only tense any of us will ever have.