

Saving Time and Paying for the World

Frederic WILL

School of Advanced Studies, University of Phoenix
Phoenix Arizona U.S.A.
SamuelW981@aol.com

Abstract. This essay illustrates senses in which linear time can be proven to be non-existent. Yet, as the essay agrees, the practical use of linear time, as an organizational principle in life, is unquestionable. Do we live a lie by relying on the non-existent to undergird our lives? Or is *lie* a misleading, and naïve, word for our solution to this state of affairs?

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I. I spend a lot of time on the treadmill. Before beginning to tread, I set the console so that I will be allotted twenty or forty minutes at so and so speed. As I use no audio devices, to distract me from the organic impulsion of the time beat, I am obliged to register the accreting time accomplished. A couple of minutes may go by without my attention wandering back to the timer, but rarely more than that; and often the interval will be as little as fifteen seconds. I watch the clock. My goal is to complete twenty or forty minutes at such and such speed. When I have completed my allotted time I am relieved; a task has been achieved. Over the course of time I have come to pose questions concerning this daily ritual.

1. The time number, registering the number of minutes elapsed on the treadmill, grows larger until at the conclusion of my workout the number returns to zero - default position. *Did something change in the thing measured, in the time itself? Does that explain why the time number got bigger for a while, then smaller? Or did only the measurement change, first rising then stopping? From a higher number to a lower number?*

2. In the treadmill scenario I passed conscientiously through the stages of temporal accretion...13 minutes forty seconds...14 minutes twelve seconds...and on and on. I did the job I had set for myself. I never stopped early, or took a shortcut. (The treadmill was equipped with a dial, by turning which you could modify the panel that recorded your minutes.) I began to wonder if we ever do 'jump over seconds'? We have an expression 'to save time'? Is such a saving what we would accomplish by 'jumping over minutes', 'jumping ahead'? What do we mean by 'jumping

ahead? We might say: 'I am going to Chicago by way of Kankakee to save time'. What would this expression mean? That we were thus going to lose or spend less time than by some other route? That we were going to 'jump over' some extent of time? That the time our trip was going to take was in some way 'saved', banked to our credit? Was it the time that the trip would have taken by the longer route that was saved? *What does saving time mean?*

3. *Has time any substance?* When we speak of 'daylight saving time' might we as well omit the word 'time'? Don't we just fool with our measuring devices, like clocks, at that time of year? Does the thing called 'time' undergo any change? It is tempting to hurry with a 'no', and to add a rough dismissal of the whole concept of time. But if we do so haven't we left a lot of unfinished business? We would seem to be ignoring something about time asserted in phrases like 'I haven't seen you for a long time'. Would you want to say that the word 'time', there, has no referent? If we decide to expunge the word 'time' from that sentence, we have perhaps to expunge the past tense in the sentence. What can the perfect tense, 'I haven't seen', mean? Won't it break down into the sentence "I am using the expression 'I haven't seen' in the present to denote the past, in the present."

Let me review these three sets of questions.

i. *The first questioned the nature of time as we measure it on the treadmill.* At the end of my treadmill workout, the time recorder flips back to zero, ready for the next person's activation of the number system. I am tempted to think that the language about time, with which I framed my account of the treadmill experience, is empty and refers to nothing. There *is* no time. Thinkers I admire, like McTaggart, have argued that time is an illusion. Time is a system that was used to measure my workout, but had no substance of its own. 'Time is the measure of change'.

However, on the gym wall there is a clock. At the start of my workout the short hand pointed to the number four, while the long hand pointed to the number 6. But now at the end of my workout the short hand is pretty close to the number 5, while the long hand is pointing toward eleven. 'Twenty five minutes', as we say, have elapsed. Elapsed? The design on the clock is different now. It is closer now than it was before – before? – to the time when I normally eat my supper. It, the clock design, is farther from the time when I eat my lunch. But has anything changed except the position of the hands on a dial? Of course I have worked up a sweat, burned some free radicals, changed my oxygen / blood

ratio. But these changes are unrelated to the changing of the clock hands, which are themselves the measure of something still unidentifiable, time.

ii. *The second question concerned the nature of time as we describe it in sentences about saving time by doing this or that.* What we can say about ‘saving time’ will reinforce the above sense, that time is either an illusion, or that the terms in which to characterize it are not yet part of this discussion. What does ‘time’ mean in my assertion that I’m going to ‘save time’, on my trip to Chicago, by taking the Berwick Bypass instead of going straight in on the DeKalb Highway, where the rush hour traffic will be heavy? It means that when I arrive at my destination the clock hands will be at a different position than they would have had, had I gone through on the DeKalb. It will mean that I will have my evening drink sooner than I would otherwise have had it. (Sooner? I will in fact have my evening drink just when I have my evening drink.) Something was different, as a consequence of my decision to take a shortcut. What I saw, what saw me, when and where I ate and went to the restroom – and *everything else* – will have been different as a consequence of my change in route. But time will not have been different. Wherever they are, the clock hands will have been making the same round on all the (functioning) clocks in the world.

iii. *The third question concerned the significance of ‘time’ in sentences like ‘I haven’t seen you for a long time’.* Have we decided to expunge temporal expressions from our language and thought? Will we now go around like word police through our sentences, and delete tense words – the ‘was’ in ‘I was going to Cedar Rapids’ – on the grounds that they signify nothing? Signify nothing why? Because ‘I was going to Cedar Rapids’ amounts to nothing more than a present assertion that ‘I am saying now that I was going to Cedar Rapids’?

It might be more accurate to say that we are going to continue constructing the past, and the future, *as constructs*. We are going to do so without concentrating on this as an act of construction: we are going to talk through an *as if*, as if the past and future were other than ‘just constructions’, but we are going to act as if they are constructions and nothing more. We are not going to say that time does not exist, which seems an answer implicit in the foregoing questions, but simply that life continues to exist around the assumption, the working assumption, that time does exist.

II. In language we habitually refer to time-areas which are in fact insubstantial *as if's*. But what does it mean, to refer to these zones as insubstantial, if in fact we live them so habitually that to do without them – without time-references; without the ‘for a long time’, in ‘I haven’t seen you for a long time’ – is to undermine our whole account of living in the world? Does it mean that to live-in-the-world-temporally, and to talk about it, we *must* live a fiction? That we *must* assume the existence of a linear past or future, if only as co-ordinates that make sense of the present? Does all this imply that we live a benign and essential adjustment? Or does it mean that the way we have to live, to survive, is by sustaining a distinctive kind of lie?

III. Are we saying that our living-the-illusion-of-the-reality-of-time is living-a-falsehood? Not quite that simply. In the three examples with which we started, it is as though time functions as a useful explanatory factor. Living a fiction is not that condemnation of the human condition that it might seem to be; for living-a-fiction is close to adopting a benign indifference, an ‘act’ by which we concentrate on this area of life in front of us. It is hard to overstate how deeply we are defined by what we ‘field’ before us. When I speak of the Second World War without thinking of a little boy in Maracaibo, who is living at the time of the Great European War but has never heard of it, I am ‘showing an indifference’ in a move of thoughts not unrelated to my enacted indifference to the unreality of past or future. I know that I describe temporal conditions by neglecting what is dead clear to me, that my discourse is in the present, always. I don’t have to bracket my discourse about time, in order to give continued evidence that I have overridden the linear temporal scheme. I don’t have to know or think about the boy in Maracaibo, in order to include him.

IV. *To repeat.* To live is to live an as-if existence, assuming the validity of our language practices and of our descriptions of how we believe. This kind of pragmatism is realism, conceding that the ways we live in the world – pretending to this or that kind of knowledge or descriptive power – are both unavoidable ‘adjustments’ and compromises with the truth. We are on the brink of noting that ‘too much truth’ is bad for us. Are we not on the brink, but not closer, of saying that the human being lives by lies? Perhaps. But we are nowhere near condemning those lies.

If even this formulation seems objectionable, and to countermand too many seeming promises – e.g. ‘the truth will set you free’ – we need to

consider the possibility of a 'higher level truth' which could encompass the falsehoods or compromises inflicted on us by our survival needs. Such an account might be viewed as the design unfolding through us. This design would be a totality in which compromises with the truth would insert themselves as constructive material. The ultimate Shaper, in this account, would be a supreme artificer. A Final Adjustor, with this supreme status, would itself be a guarantor of the truth-value of partial truths. Would such a Guarantor God be a solely mental construction, or could we endow it with substantiality, converting it into a personal God? Would this God qualify as a God of the Theologians, as well as of the mathematicians?

V. The religions of the Book appeal to a personal God, whose intersection with history is identical with accompanying language. *Im Anfang war das Wort*. The guarantor God we adumbrate here resembles a master planner or architect, who delights in the graded limits each level in the hierarchy of Beings imposes on the level below it. It is hard to ascribe, to this God our language is birthing, personal traits or even personality, which might seem to be priceless enough to be ordinary with what-is. But an adjustor, if not a charmer, this God might be.

As an adjustor / artificer / artifex the God appropriate to this essay might gladly tolerate the anomalous position in which humanity finds itself, dependent for its existence-orientation on such crutches as a temporal frame without ground. And that is only the beginning of the compromises such a God would need to be willing to make, in 'his' flexible enthusiasm to make something truly fresh out of man. We have already discussed the isolated instance of our temporal world-making. A far wider issue insinuated itself on the heels of the temporal. Our location of references – to this region of discourse or that of indication – implicated us in a grand strategy of denial, of all we do *not* reference in our thinking and stating – e.g. the boy in Maracaibo who is contemporary to but unaware of the Second World War. The galactic implications of this kind of denial dwarf the exclusions we must make, in the construction of a coherent temporal world-picture. We are now into the implications, for our all-hungering minds, of not being God. We exist as longing to know completely or thoroughly, but at our most penetrating, as in the *General Theory of Relativity*, we only illustrate more luminously how much we have to exclude, in understanding to our highest limit.

On the humblest level of perception, we might well say, we know that we might not know, or that our reality, hoping ignorance, might be rendered especially evident to us.

VI. To be human, then, is to immerse yourself in the limit which endlessness makes distinct to you. It is a condition supported by a creator who is the obverse of the role player you are: whose immensity is defined off by your narrowness of focus, whose unicity is given significance by your particularity. In our serene limitation as creatures, we support the creative power of the universe, in a kind of ontological yin-yang. If all this is 'to be human' are there hints here for the kind of life we should live around these realia? Has our finitude portals, through which we can glimpse the opposable structure indissolubly attached to us?

As-if living, confident of our tenses, comfortable with the seeming globality of our concern of the moment – with this historical topic, with that medicine, or with that article of clothing – is our element, and the mark of our understanding. We cannot will to overthrow such traces. Death, we might say, is the only natural disaster that can shake loose a free-air perspective, from the benign claustrophobia our lives are. In death, by the account of many revered traditions, the condition of limit, which is life, is transformed into reunion – with the obverse. Many formulations of this reuniting await our querying interest – for at no point do the life stakes more insistently accumulate.

The gamut of releasing formulations is broad, for death is an 'erschuetterndes Ereignis' (Karl Rahner), opening explosively. At the separation from body the soul / person 'returns to nature', 'rejoins its creator', 'withers in a zone of pain'. Simply to realize the limitation of our limits is to exceed all expectations. Even to become 'but dust again' is to take on the wonder of limitlessness. While to become 'one in spirit' with the adjustor forces is so greatly to surpass limit that limit vanishes. The implication for our obverse, in the release of our death, can only be imagined – but seems to follow. The great obverse is a ravenous consumer, of the strategically layered positions we exist as.

VII. We started with time. We needed fully to grasp one instance of the kind of compromise existence permits us, in our quest to create a 'human universe'. We needed to feel what pragmatism is, in world construction; a making do with descriptive systems that 'make sense' of an unsure world. The ascription of tense is an example of this pragmatism, for a moment's

inspection discloses the inexistence of past or future. Would an examination of the category of space have offered the same explicatory platform? At first sight, space seems to rely less than time on being constructed by us. I am easily convinced that the garden, in which I am now sitting, is always in the present. Time vanishes into this garden. But what about the space that divides my porch from the flowering crab tree in the front yard, some thirty meters away? Has that separating space a reality not compromised by the adjudication of some world-shaping principle? No. The space I ascribe to the distance in question, from porch to tree, has no reality as I sit here on the porch. As I consider the yard I observe objects in a field; an azalea here, over there a tricycle, and further on over there the crab tree itself; but the 'over there' has no meaning, simply indicating a simultaneity in the instant, on the face of it. And from this porch to the moon, or to the Cepheid galaxy, which I can see from the Palomar Observatory down the road? I know what my Astronomy Professor told me, that the distance from me to the Cepheid galaxy is X light years. Has the statement meaning? Can we translate it realistically, as we translated assertions of pastness and futurity into byproducts of 'statements in the present'? To do so we would have to declare that the distance from my porch to the Cepheid Galaxy is that of two phenomena over the eyes' surface, 'close' to each other but difficult to measure. We would join Bishop Berkeley in his conviction that the sun is the size of a shilling.

VIII. The undermining of temporal and spatial abstractions – which seems justifiable but at the same time wrong headed – only forces us back to the consideration of denial, falsehood, and pragmatism. 'Received opinions' about time and space play into the pragmatism of making life livable. What if we were to act on the 'realistic' views of time or space, which we have just presented? Would we get ready for crossing the sidewalk by taking ant-sized steps to cover the distance between the image of the sidewalk, in my eye, and the image of the border of my lawn, beside which the sidewalk runs? Would I abjure all commitments to the illusion of temporal measure, and while living as I do reject any disposition to measure myself by clock time? Would each of my acts become a present of which no time-status was predicated? Both the purisms, temporal and spatial, would in their ways consign me to dysfunction. The pragmatism we discuss here is nothing more than a strategy for survival – and that's a lot.

We talked of a boy in Maracaibo. We could have talked of anything we do not account for at any moment of consciousness; even of that moment of consciousness, to the degree I 'cannot reflect on it'. A human

life is a narrow point of attention to what is not everything it is not; that moving point depicts the larger frame in which to place the puzzles of spatial and temporal perception. At the ground level of human existence, where the earth-moving equipment of consciousness is plugging along, digging up the individual's what-is, the spatio-temporal screening process is at its most plainly constitutive. But the spatio-temporal is only part of the décor of a human existence, and of the pragmatic strategies on which it battens. We can better appreciate this perspective by reviewing one of our most systematic acts of life-giving illusion.

Our most explicit gesture, toward harvesting the profits of the as-if stance, is art. Focus acquires here its elaborate dignity, designing this or that as a total experience for the sense-mind, and gathering to itself the fruits of both temporal deception and spatial similitude. In the work of art the illusion of temporal extent is cunningly negated, overridden as decisively as the measured-minute time on the screen of my treadmill; while the illusion of spatial distance is transformed into the simulated thickness of characterization and plot. Focus is rewarded by the harvest gathered by art, more fully than in any other specialized action. Nowhere else is the this and thus not-that so seemingly justified. Nowhere else does the as-if enterprise so finely insist on its geographical location; next door neighbor to the master obverse, Death.

IX. We have been sketching a map of the human condition, its survival strategies, and above all the dimensions of loss and sacrifice required of it--to be itself. To be or think anything is not to be or think everything else. This staggering proposal lays the foundation for human existence. Within that structure lie the twin limitations of temporal and spatial facticity, in which we may indulge recuperative skills adequate only to sustain our existence. The realm of art belongs on this map of human energies, as a model for the rewards of focus, the prow of the ship of human consciousness. That whatever is is *not* everything else also serves as a boundary flag to stake out the realm where at every moment consciousness is. The far side of that realm is death, yes, but far side means *obverse*, in this case. Human death is the obverse of human life.

X. Death is the definer of the human condition – of the denials and accommodations that make us up--in the sense that the inside of a coat is the definer of the outside. Each aspect of the coat – outside, inside – is the other aspect looked at in a different way. Death, therefore, is nothing, as is life, unless viewed as an obverse. The itinerary of life to death is nowhere

clearer than in the falsehood instrumental to life's continuance. The replacement of temporal and spatial actuality, by the artifices necessary to our existence, indicates the fragility of our adjustment to being-on-earth. (I repose the speculation: mustn't there be a creator / regulatory agency supervising, 'from above', the ontological levels at which progressively subordinate creatures make their survival adjustments?) It would be too little to say we are epistemologically fragile; we hold tremulously to artifice, in our quest to be effective. How clearly this fragility dominates our focusing procedures – concern with what lies just before us, our willing donning of blinders when it comes to 'the boy in Maracaibo'. Supporting ourselves on this example, we have questioned the value of truth to the human mind. At the very least we concluded that 'a little truth is enough'. Art, as we finally remarked, is a zone of gratification for us; it batters on, and nourishes, our rarified position between falsehood and truth-quest. Death is the twin other face to these selected aspects of the human condition. It may in fact be the sweet release of death, on the edge of this vibrant enterprise, which gives life its vivacity. Homer will have had that paradox in mind, when he showed us Calypso envying the mortal condition. Odysseus, liar, artificer, denier, prow-sharp concentrator, was all that potential for use which is so keenly forbidden to the god.

And God? How does God relate to the yin / yang ontology of death and life, seamlessly twinned as they are? Is God simply the whole, as in pantheistic views? To honor in God what must be a central definition, creative force, and yet to find place for him / her / it in a theater where all the seats are reserved, we have to think of God as structure. Structure occupies no place, can be coterminous with death and life. Has it the requisite energy to launch a universe? What kind of creative power resides in structure? Are we talking about the principles of mathematics, a demiurge from the Platonic trove?

Logic requires a creative principle like the mathematical, which is inherent to all existence without losing itself in that existence. The principle of construction has the power to generate all that is. But has this principle the elements of the organic in it? From a structural viewpoint, the God we are describing seems hard to square with the introduction of existence-forms like the human, which have in them the power to grow, and not solely the power to grow more complex. With the organic, it might seem, we are from the start launched on the Long March toward Personality. Structural foundations no longer seem adequate to account for the unique-only for the categorial. Yet the personal fails on many accounts to meet the requirements of the primal stuff. For one thing, the personal, meeting the fault line separating 'life' from 'death', evaporates or is subsumed – or

has to be imagined irreducible to its obverse – a recusance, from within what-is, that undercuts the pervasive unity the mere thought of Being resides on.

Certain Religions of the Book, claiming a salvational intervention into history, try to confect a language committed to solving the yin / yang ontology puzzle. Death, they claim, is not an obverse, but another realm, through which we pass to a new state – in which we submit to an evaluation of our lives on earth. The hovering dominance of a male spiritual figure, over each of these three book religions, renders irrelevant the gymnastics of construction, and frees us from large difficulties of conceptualization – by placing the personal, as we know it, at the center of creation. A universe is built in which we feel at home. (The great Eastern psychology-religions – Buddhism and Taoism – provide the same meaning-shelter for the human, but cop out on accounting for the Ultimate Creative Act and its subsequent stage sets.)

The constructional path has insisted on itself, in the present essay, because we are here building a thought universe from the ground up. We started with epistemological analysis, which rapidly made its way into ontology – dismissing a classic thought-mainstay, time. Space followed shortly after. The power of consciousness, focus, then took center stage, as a descriptor for the way we make our path through what-is, shedding – in order to exist – all that was not our perceiving; at which point we now enriched that dismissive account of non-being, by folding in the account of art! That account was of a major awareness zone in which we can batten on tensions, between the myths of space / time and the actuality of neither space nor time; a jigsaw manna; the kind of sandbox activism in which the animal-man indulges as a relief from a too stark demystificatory drive. No more than that need be said, to bring us back to the pragmatism we described above, and which is the climate of the from-the-ground-up world construction we are undertaking here. The space-time illusion is at the heart of our adjustment to the universe by denial. Our denial itself – say of whatever we are not conscious of – is the heart of our adjustment; too much truth, we noted, would be unbearable. From such threads of argument, we can see the whole cloak of survival weaving itself. The entry into the system of God, or the gods, comes at just the point where our adjustments have enabled us to map our world. Naturally some of us chafe at the intervention, into our growing system, of a Book Religion god which surges down from above, and deprives us of our constructional authority.