

Book Reviews

Back to the Future and Philosophy: Essays on Traveling Through the Space-Time Continuum

JOSHUA HETER & RICHARD GREEN, editors. ***Back to the Future and Philosophy: Essays on Traveling Through the Space-Time Continuum***. McFarland, 2026.
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The original *Back to the Future* is widely considered one of the best films ever made. Marty McFly, Doc Brown, and the time-traveling DeLorean are pop culture icons, whose influence has never seemed to fade. The 40th anniversary of the release of the original film was celebrated in 2025 with a theatrical re-release, a limited edition 4K Ultra HD/Blu-ray set of the trilogy, and numerous other forms of merchandise. A *Back to the Future* stage musical continues to tour the world. This continued presence in popular culture can probably be best accounted for by the film's comedic, adventure elements. The science fiction elements, particularly its depiction of time travel, tend to be treated less seriously. This collection, edited by Joshua Heter and Richard Green, shows that the film supports deeper philosophical reflection on not just the metaphysics of time travel, but also questions about personal identity, knowledge, science and technology, sex and gender, and ethics. I do have some quibbles about how the chapters are grouped together. Overall, the book's 27 chapters survey quite a lot of philosophical terrain and are written in an accessible way. The book could thus serve as a nice introduction to philosophy for the layperson. Even those more familiar with philosophy can still enjoy how these issues are connected to one of our most enjoyable movie franchises.

After a short editor's introduction, the first section is "All About Time Travel." The first film famously plays with what philosophers call "the grandfather paradox": if time travel were possible, could you go back in time and kill your own grandfather? Wouldn't that undermine your own existence, making it impossible for you to have ever been born and grown up such that you could travel back in time? One way to address the grandfather paradox and tell a consistent time travel story is to deny the possibility of changing the past. *Back to the Future* does not take this approach. When Marty McFly (perfectly played by Michael J. Fox) time travels from 1985 back to 1955, he accidentally interferes with his parents, George and Lorraine, falling in love. Much of the plot centers around Marty trying to correct this mistake and ensure that he and his siblings will be born. We learn at the end of the first movie, however, that Marty's adventures in 1955 led to significant improvements to the lives of George and Lorraine, and the rest of the McFly family.

Several chapters offer attempts to make this story coherent. Taylor Cyr and Grace Scott's "Back to a New and Improved Future" focuses on an approach involving the concept of "hypertime": a second temporal dimension such that you can describe the activities of the time traveler and the changes they bring about. You can think of Marty's experiences throughout the movie as tracking different points in hypertime. Near the beginning of the movie, Marty sees Doc shot dead by Libyan terrorists on the early morning of October 26, 1985. After his adventures in 1955, Marty returns to that same night in 1985; this time, Doc is shot but survives. How can Doc both be shot dead and not shot dead? Because these events happen at the same "time" but different "hypertimes."

While this account captures some aspects of the franchise's plot, Doc Brown himself mentions a second way of making backwards time travel coherent: traveling to the past can create an offshoot universe, an alternative timeline where events can play out very differently. This framework is offered to explain *Part II's* dystopic version of 1985 Hill Valley, run by the ruthless and very wealthy Biff. As John M. DePoe mentions in his "McFly Meets McTaggart," this multiversal approach means the characters are not really changing the past, but traveling to a parallel universe.

In "Driving in Fourth Gear through the Fourth Dimension," Nikk Effingham makes a valiant effort to give a coherent understanding of time travel across the franchise, by combining the hypertime and multiversal approaches. But other authors (e.g., DePoe, p. 34; Cyr and Scott, p. 37; Johnson, pp. 65-66) are less confident that *Back to the Future* really offers a consistent time travel story. The first film's depiction of Marty and his siblings "fading from existence" in a family photo is repeatedly cited as incoherent. Ryan Falcioni's "Cinematic Determinism and the Grammar of Storytelling" and Dennis M. Weiss's "The Flux-Series of Time" (which puzzlingly is not included in this section but in Section IV) give up on this philosophical goal, defending the cinematic, narrative aspects of the movie's plot. This feels like a bit of a cop-out for a text focused on philosophy. But given the herculean efforts seen in Effingham's attempt to make coherent the movies' travels through time, it is perhaps understandable for these authors to try to justify the movie's logical incoherence.

Section II focuses on issues of knowledge and belief. Kate C.S. Schmidt explores the traditional contrast between making decisions with your "head" or your "heart," defending the films' characters trusting their hearts. For example, in the first film, Marty writes a letter to the 1955 version of Doc to help him avoid being shot and killed in 1985, despite reflectively knowing that informing someone of the future risks catastrophe. Schmidt nicely draws on the ways philosophers have defended the rationality of emotional appraisals of the world. In "Time Travel and Knowledge of the Future," Kristie Miller defends the thesis that knowing about the future need not prevent us from having freedom to deliberate about what to do. In the last chapter of this section, David Kyle Johnson highlights Marty's experience of waking up after his return to 1985 and not being sure whether his time-traveling adventures were or were not a dream. According to Johnson, the logical impossibility of the time travel story means Marty has good reason to believe he was dreaming. This is a great example of the intersection of film interpretation and philosophical argumentation.

Section III contains some especially interesting chapters on ethics. Two focus on the sequence from *Part II* in which Old Biff takes the sports almanac from 2015 and gives it to his younger self in 1955. Daniel Malloy uses the confrontation between Old Biff and Young Biff to analyze the nature of obligations to oneself. Duties to oneself, such as Young Biff's promise to use the sports almanac as his older self instructs him, are philosophically puzzling: how can a promise to yourself ever be binding if you are able to release yourself from the promise whenever you want? In "Betting on the Past," Zack Garr elucidates how sports betting works in order to argue that possessing knowledge of the future would make only some bets morally unacceptable. This section also contains Don Fallis's exploration of reasons time travelers should keep other people in the dark about the future, and Zhuang Xuanpu's attempt to articulate general moral standards about the actions of time travelers and who should have access to time machines.

Section IV, "Matters of Value," is the book's least coherent grouping of chapters. The most well-suited chapter is S. Evan Kreider's discussion of *Back to the Future's* aesthetic expression of nostalgia for 1950s America. John Garcia's "The Punch that Changes Everything" excellently applies virtue ethics to George McFly's journey from being a cowardly victim of Biff's bullying to courageous protector of Lorraine. But it is puzzling that this chapter isn't found alongside Section III's chapters on ethics. Dennis M. Weiss's "The Flux-Series of Time," which really should be in the first section on time travel, offers a rather weak rationale for the alleged incoherence of the franchise's time travel stories. Fortunately, this section ends on a higher note with Justin Kitchen's interesting defense of Doc Brown as "the *quintessence* of eroticism!" (p. 132) No, dear reader, Kitchen does not argue that Doc Brown's wild hair and lab coat make him the sexiest man alive for 1955 (or 1985). Rather, he shows how Doc Brown's relationships with his friend Marty, his partner Clara, and the pursuit of scientific knowledge itself embody higher forms of love articulated by Plato and the early Greek Stoics.

The next section contains several interesting discussions of sex and gender in *Back to the Future*. Catherine Villanueva Gardner starts things off pondering Michael J. Fox's 2022 suggestion that a reboot of the series should make the main character female. She argues that the movies' narratives rely so much on conventional and problematic gender ideology that swapping the main character's gender would be very tricky. For example, the 1955 version of Lorraine developing a crush on her son Marty would be even more complicated to make acceptable to the audience if it were Lorraine desiring "a queer relationship with her own daughter" or George (a known peeping-tom) having a crush on his own daughter (p. 145). Next, Leigh E. Rich and Michael N. Robinson's "The Feminist McFly" shows how the model of moral development from care ethics is illustrated in the narrative arc for Marty and Doc. Finally, Ben Almassil examines the conceptions of masculinity represented in the franchise, from the toxic masculinity that influences Marty's reactions to being called "chicken," to a more feminist vision represented by the partnership between Doc and Clara in the third film.

Section VI returns to a metaphysical topic: personal identity. The chapters by Jeremy C. DeLong and Joe Slater cover much of the same territory: they survey major accounts of personal identity over time (particularly, physicalist and psychological views)

and use them to answer the question of whether the people we see at the beginning of the first film in 1985—George, Lorraine, Marty’s siblings, and Biff—are the same people we see at the end of the film. Slater more provocatively frames this as an investigation into whether Marty’s manipulation of the space-time continuum constitutes “temporal manslaughter”: for example, whether the timid, older George we see at the beginning of the film ceases to exist when Marty’s exploits in 1955 create a newer, more confident version of George. Casey Rentmeester’s “From Density to Destiny” takes a different approach to the issue of identity, drawing on Heidegger’s work on Aristotle to describe the process of character change George undergoes.

Section VII is unfortunately another hodgepodge, with its three chapters only unified by drawing on some work in the history of philosophy—though the chapters are each interesting in their own right. First, Leonard Kahn addresses the film’s use of the Freudian notion of the Oedipus complex. Next, Elad Megomedov offers a unique spin on the metaphysics of time travel by showing that Sartre’s theory of freedom would make the plot of the movies impossible—because time travel would lead to the total collapse of the universe! Lastly, Jon Robson examines what Aristotle, the Stoics, and Frederick Douglass have to offer Marty about how he should respond to insults. All of these probably had better homes in other sections of the book on matters of value, the metaphysics of time travel, and ethics, respectively.

The book ends on a strong note with three chapters on philosophy of science and technology. John P. Irish’s “Doc Brown’s Paradox and Dr. Frankenstein’s Plight” and Kenneth R. Pike’s “Doc Brown’s Techno-Ethical Journey” address the ethical challenges faced by scientific innovators like Doc Brown who pursue profound theories and technologies that also pose significant dangers. Irish’s focus is narrowly on comparing the narratives and themes of *Back to the Future* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Pike provides a general discussion of the motivations and goals of innovators, and their ethical obligations when their inventions prove successful. Pike’s discussion of Doc Brown’s moral relationship to the power provided by his time machine pairs well with Zhuang Xuanpu’s earlier chapter covering the ethical dilemmas posed by time travel. The other chapter in this section, Keith Begley and Aadil Kurji’s “Great Scott! The Logic of Certain Scientific Discovery” provides a great introduction to how scientists come up with hypotheses and attempt to confirm them. They offer a very thoughtful discussion of how unusual Doc Brown’s invention of the time machine was compared to the research trajectory of his scientific idols, since he was provided with information from the future that his decades of work would eventually prove successful.

One limitation of the book is that the chapters were clearly written independently, and are not in conversation with one another. This is most apparent with chapters that do not address the metaphysical complexity (perhaps incoherence) of the films’ depiction of time travel. For example, Kristie Miller’s discussion of deliberative freedom assumes a single-timeline view where there are determinate facts about what happens in the future (pp. 54-55). It would be interesting to have known how a multiversal account would affect her thesis.

Nonetheless, I consider Heter and Green's collection a solid entry to this genre of books examining philosophical issues in popular culture. Even if *Back to the Future's* science fiction tends to lean more toward the fiction than the science, the franchise raises numerous interesting philosophical issues that are nicely discussed by the authors of this volume.

MITCHELL HERSCHBACH
Lecturer, Department of Philosophy
California State University, Northridge
mitchell.herschbach@csun.edu

