

It Doesn't Matter What We Do: From Metaphysics to Ethics in *LOST*'s Time Travel

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Miles: Hey, Dan, we don't get involved, right? That's what you said.

Daniel: It doesn't matter what we do. Whatever happened happened¹.

“LaFleur”

Hurley: How long have you known he was your dad?

Miles: Third day we were here, I was in line at the cafeteria, and my mother got in line behind me. That was my first clue.

Hurley: But all those Dharma dudes end up dead. Don't you want to save him?

Miles: I can't save him! They're going to get killed no matter what I do, so why bother?

“Some Like It Hoth”

In *LOST* Season 5, several characters begin jumping through time. Questions immediately arise. Should they try to change what happened? Are they able to do things that conflict with what happened? We see a mostly-consistent picture of the metaphysics of time travel. (Metaphysics is any philosophy about the nature of reality.) The working theory of most of Season 5 is that the past happened, and thus nothing can change what occurred. Everything they do will be what had happened all along. Daniel Faraday first summarizes this view as “Whatever happened happened.”

The Metaphysics of Time Travel

Philosophers sometimes call Daniel's view the fixed or static view of time. The alternative approach considers time open and the future not yet fixed. Only necessary truths about the future are true, things that have to happen no matter what, such as “1+1=2” and “Either I'll eat an Apollo bar tomorrow, or I won't.” On the open view,

¹ The creators of the show put a comma between the two instances of “happened,” but I can't bring myself to break the punctuation rule not to put a comma between subject and predicate in a three-word sentence.

anything contingent (not necessary) is neither true nor false. It's hard to think about time travel on this view. If John Locke begins in 2004 and goes to 1954, and there's no truth about the contingent future at 1954, then there's no truth about Locke being in 2004 to have come back in time. To say he'll be born and will end up on the island is to say something neither true nor false. What truths would explain why he's in 1954, then?

The only way to make sense of time travel with open time is that any events resulting from time travel are in a different past, not the original past. For a while during Season 6, the writers gave hints of misdirection along such lines. Maybe the flash-sideways reality that had Oceanic 815 landing safely in Los Angeles was caused by the final events of "The Incident" when the hydrogen bomb from 1954 exploded in the electromagnetic pocket under the Swan Station. If so, then one reality contained an unsuccessful attempt to change the past, and another included the changed past.

No one would change the actual past. They might generate something like a new timeline, whose existence is caused by events in a previous timeline. Should we call it a previous timeline? It does seem as if there's something earlier about the original timeline. It's what causes the later one, after all, and causes usually precede their effects. But we're talking about time travel, where causes don't always precede their effects. Ben Linus turned the Frozen Donkey Wheel in 2004 and caused events that brought Locke to 1954.

The original timeline can't be earlier in time. The flash-sideways is 2004, a different 2004 from the original 2004. Is it later than the original? On this theory it's at the same time but the same time on a different timeline. So how is one timeline earlier? You have to postulate hyper-time. Within each timeline, there's a temporal sequence, an

ordering of events in a chronology, with earlier and later events. But one timeline is later along a different axis, not the axis of regular time but the axis of hyper-time.

Should we postulate a second dimension of time to make sense of time travel and changing the past, where it's not really the past that you're changing but the creation of a new timeline at a later point in hyper-time? Is this different from alternate realities? If Jack creates a new timeline, it's a sort of alternate universe. But it would be a different matter to travel to an existing alternate universe and then to do things different from the past of the original universe you started in. The difference is whether the alt-reality is created by your actions in the past or already exists independently from your actions.

LOST executive producer Damon Lindelof co-wrote an alt-reality time-travel story in the semi-reboot of *Star Trek* in 2009. It had no past-changing, since the people from the original timeline traveled to the past of a different reality. The flash-sideways of *LOST*, even well into the final episode, could've been that, but it turned out to be a sort of pre-afterlife, with no connection to the events of "The Incident" or any past-changing.

One reason to prefer fixed time is that it fits best with physics. The open view requires a determinate fact about which events are now and which aren't yet (the ones not true or false yet). But physics doesn't allow for determinate facts about which events are now, since facts about what's simultaneous with my current thought depend on the frame of reference. This means that, according to the open view, (a) which statements are neither true nor false and (b) which statements are true or false depends on (c) what frame of reference you pay attention to. But how could whether something has any truth or falsity to it be based on which physical frame of reference you focus on?

A significant paradox can occur if you can change the actual past. It's a straightforward contradiction to say Jack both did and didn't blow up a bomb at the Swan construction site. Except for parallel reality time travel or hyper-time, you get such a contradiction. But even with hyper-time, a paradox can occur. If Jack detonates the bomb, and it leads to Oceanic 815 not crashing, then in the new timeline Jack couldn't travel back in time to blow up the bomb. That means he wouldn't be there to prevent the Swan accident, and the plane would crash after all. Executive producer Damon Lindelof explains why they didn't want to do this on *LOST*:

Paradox creates issues. In *Heroes*, Masi Oka's character travels back from the future to say, "You *must* prevent New York from being destroyed." But if they prevent New York from being destroyed, Masi Oka can never travel back from the future to warn you, because Future Hiro no longer exists.²

It's hard to see how this interpretation of the flash-sideways could ever have fit with what the producers had already stated about time travel. They could never have time travel that prevents its own occurrence, and that's what the flash-sideways would have been if it had involved past-changing. It had to be either an alternate reality or something altogether different, and it turned out to be the latter.

Given that the season finale didn't change the past, all time travel in Season 5 assumes fixed time (with the possible exception of the never-explained outrigger following Sawyer and company when they flashed to 2007 in "The Little Prince"). Some characters question the fixed view at the end of Season 5, however, and we don't get resolution on which approach is correct until the series finale.

Daniel Faraday returns from Dharma Initiative headquarters in Ann Arbor, Michigan to prevent the Oceanic 815 crash. He no longer believes "whatever happened

² Jeff Jensen, "Lost: Mind-Blowing Scoop From Its Producers" from *Entertainment Weekly* online, Feb 22, 2010. URL: http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20179125_3,00.html (or <http://tinyurl.com/lost-jensen>).

happened,” seeing free will as the variable to allow changing the past. He thinks he can prevent Charlotte’s death by nuking the construction site of the Swan, right at the time when the Incident occurred at the Swan site when drills hit into the powerful electromagnetism of the golden light at the heart of the island. If the explosion could seal off the energy released by the Incident, Desmond wouldn’t have been entering those numbers every 108 minutes, so he wouldn’t have caused Oceanic 815 to crash by failing to get back to the Swan Station in time to type them in.

Daniel had taken a different attitude earlier. In “Because You Left,” Sawyer realizes they’re at a time after Oceanic 815 crashed, and he tells his companions they should try to stop the helicopter from leaving the island and (as far as they know) exploding. Daniel says it won’t work. “Time is like a stream. We can move forward on that street. We can move in reverse, but we cannot ever create a new street. If we try to do anything different, we will fail every time. Whatever happened happened.”

Later in the same episode, when they discover that they’re at a time between the creation of the Swan and the Oceanic 815 crash, Sawyer wants to get some food from the Swan. Daniel steers him away, “because Desmond didn't know you when he first came out of there. That means you never met, which means you can't meet.” He adds, “You're wasting your time. If it didn't happen, it can't happen. You can't change the past, James.”

But Daniel has strikingly different attitudes at other times. In “Jughead” he meets his mother Eloise Hawking in 1954, and he urgently pleads with her to bury the hydrogen bomb brought to the island by the U.S. military, saying it won’t blow up if they just do what he says. But in “LaFleur” they stumble on two Others attacking two Dharma

Initiative members, and Daniel's response is, "It doesn't matter what we do. Whatever happened happened." Why the urgency about the bomb, then?

The Shooting of Benjamin Linus

Sayid Jarrah, captured by the Dharma Initiative in 1977 ("Namaste"), finds that the boy who's been sneaking him food is Ben Linus ("He's Our You"), the future murderous leader of the Others. Sayid thinks he may be in 1977 to do eliminate Ben before he can become evil. After Ben helps him escape, Sayid shoots him. When Jin Kwon finds young Ben ("Whatever Happened Happened"), he brings him to Juliet Burke, who can't save him. His only hope is with the Others. The ensuing debate gets to the heart of a crucial ethical question for time travel.

Kate Austen wants to save Ben. He's just a boy. How could they allow him to die when they can save him? He'll become a murderer later, but he's not a murderer yet. Jack Shephard won't lift a finger, largely because of his attitude toward adult Ben. Kate thinks maybe Jack is supposed to save Ben, and she thinks they caused this by bringing Sayid back in time, so they ought to help. Meanwhile, Miles assures Hurley that Ben will survive, because they encountered him in the future. They may not know how, and they have no explanation how he'll forget that Sayid shot him when he meets Sayid in 2004, but they can be sure he'll somehow survive, because he did survive.

Kate brings Ben to the Others, and Richard Alpert agrees to save him. He warns, though, that Ben will lose his innocence, and he'll forget what happened. Now we see why Ben later didn't remember Sayid, and we learn what turns Ben into the liar and murderer he ends up becoming. The very process of saving his life that Kate initiates

leads him to be the kind of person Sayid wanted to prevent. She wouldn't have brought him to have that happen if Sayid hadn't shot him. Instead of preventing Ben's murderous ways, Sayid brought about the events that caused Ben to lose his innocence.

This is consistent with "whatever happened happened". There's no past-changing, just some characters thinking they can, trying, and failing. There's even the ironic attempt to avert a bad result indirectly bringing it about. If Sayid couldn't prevent murderer Ben, should he have not bothered shooting him? If it's ever all right to shoot a child, it takes a great moral reason. Sayid thought he had one, but what if it's impossible to change what happened? Should Sayid not have tried? But it also seems to follow that Sayid couldn't have refrained, because what actually happened was that he shot him. Does that mean none of our actions are our own choice?

The ancient Epicureans held that no one is free if any statements are true ahead of time. Contingent statements are neither true nor false. Carneades the Skeptic (c.214-129 B.C.) responded to the Epicurean view by distinguishing truth and necessity³. It might be true that I will do something even if it's not guaranteed by the very nature of the universe or even by things outside my control. What makes it true is that I'll do it. I choose to do it of my own volition. That's so for any future decision of mine. What makes it true hasn't happened yet, but it's true nonetheless. What anyone else does will either contribute to its happening or be irrelevant. You can't prevent what will happen, but at the same time our reasons for what we do are our own. Truth about the future doesn't prevent freedom in ordinary cases. Why should it prevent freedom with time travel?

³ Cicero (106-43 B.C.) reports Carneades' view, but it's hard to know where Carneades ends and Cicero begins. See Cicero, *On Fate* 18-48 (selections) in *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, 2nd ed., ed. Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson (1997) Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis, IN, pp.46-49.

The Man-in-Black: Manipulating Time Travel

The main antagonist of *LOST* is the Man in Black, the Smoke Monster, the twin brother of the island's protector Jacob. For almost half of Season 5, he was posing as John Locke. He manipulated Richard Alpert to tell a time-traveling real John Locke that he needed to leave the island and then die to bring everyone back, knowing full well that Locke's corpse would arrive on Ajira flight 316 and that some of the Oceanic 6 who had left the island were on that plane but had disappeared. He got Richard to give Locke his compass so Locke could give it to the younger Richard in 1954 to set Richard toward thinking Locke was important. He appeared to Locke as Christian Shephard at the Frozen Donkey Wheel before moving the island, explaining how important it was to bring everyone back who had left. It was important to his plan that all Jacob's candidates die.

His manipulation of Ben Linus required that Richard trust Locke to allow Ben to go in with him, because he was unable to kill Jacob himself. What the Man in Black set in motion is a causal loop, like Sayid bringing about the circumstances that cause Ben to lose his innocence, the very reason Sayid wanted him to die. The Man in Black learns what happens with Ajira 316, who was on it, and who died, and he sets in motion events that bring that about. Some of this he apparently discerns from John Locke's memories as he adopts his form, but his chronologically earliest appearance to Locke was as Christian Shephard right before Locke turned the Frozen Donkey Wheel, at a time before the Black Rock destroyed the statue of Tawaret in 1867. (Right before Locke turns the wheel, Sawyer and those with him see the full statue from behind, as shown in "LaFleur").

This means the Man in Black was able to anticipate much of his plan well ahead, perhaps from what he saw in Locke's mind as he spoke to him, although that couldn't

give him all he needed (say, to send him to Eloise Hawking). Perhaps he has limited foreknowledge (limited because he seems unaware of his own death as it approaches). This raises free will problems of its own, but the solution at the end of the last section applies equally well to those. Someone can know what someone else will do, but what makes it true isn't the foreknowledge. It's the person's own action in the future. If he knows what's going to happen and what he needs to do to fulfill it, what should we say about his actions? He kills indiscriminately and manipulates people to disastrous ends just so he can get off the island. Is leaving so important to be worth it? Is it any excuse to say that whatever happens will happen? He's still responsible. Our ordinary moral views apply just as well to a being with such abilities, and the fatalistic argument that nothing we do matters seems to be a mistake here as much as it was with young Ben.

The Incident

The big time travel quandary appears in the last few episodes of Season 5, and the writers dragged out its implications all the way to the series finale. When Daniel returns from Ann Arbor ("The Variable"), he convinces Jack and Kate to go to the Others with him to find his mother, Eloise Hawking, to convince her to blow up the bomb at the Swan site, with the hope of preventing the Incident that caused the pushing of the button every 108 minutes, which would prevent the Oceanic 815 crash. Lots of deaths and plenty of difficult circumstances could be prevented. Jack agrees.

Kate, on the other hand, doesn't see such results as good ("Follow the Leader"). Jack thinks he was sent to 1977 to fulfill this purpose. She accuses him of trying to kill them and everyone else on the island, since their current selves would die in a nuclear

explosion but then another timeline would replace the current one without them having experienced the island. Sayid later asks her why she took Ben to the Others. She replies, “Since when did shooting kids and blowing up hydrogen bombs become OK?”

Sawyer has a similar view (“The Incident”). He tells Jack he could’ve gone home and prevented his parents’ deaths, but “what’s done is done.” When Jack says it doesn’t have to be, Sawyer replies, “What did you screw up so bad the first time around you’re willing to blow up a damn nuke just for a second chance?” Even self-interested Sawyer thinks it’s too much to blow up a nuke for a redo, and Kate insists that you can’t displace morality for a good outcome, when the doing so will wipe out a whole reality. With past-changing, the consequences of any time travel could be astronomical. You could wipe out the entire world only to replace everyone with more-or-less duplicates but with slightly different lives. Isn’t that mass murder?

After Jack leaves, Miles comments, “Has it occurred to any of you that your buddy’s actually going to cause the thing he says he’s trying to prevent? Perhaps that little nuke is the Incident. So maybe the best thing to do is nothing. I’m glad you all thought this through.” Miles assumes Jack’s goal is good. He turns out to be right that Jack causes what he tries to avoid. But was his intended goal good? Kate and Sawyer think not. This is the same Miles who said he wasn’t going to try to prevent his father’s death (“Some Like It Hot”), and his stated reason was that he couldn’t prevent it if he tried (but given his animosity toward his father, perhaps he had other reasons). Is Miles right that it doesn’t matter what you do, something Daniel had said (in “LaFleur”) when encountering the first people they saw in 1974? Or is he right that you should do nothing?

Kate uses ordinary moral considerations. We can't excuse inaction or refusing to do what we know is right. Even if it already happened that Sayid shot Ben, does that make it all right? It doesn't matter what he hopes to achieve. The action is wrong in itself, and Sayid did it knowingly and deliberately. It's not morally all right just because it was already true in 2007 that it had happened in 1977. He commits a well-intentioned moral wrong arising from his own beliefs, desires, and character. He's morally responsible.

Jack was also responsible for what he did. He caused the Incident rather than preventing it, as Miles had warned. That doesn't remove his responsibility for attempting to do something very bad, either in the case where he succeeds or in the actual outcome where he fails to change the past but succeeds in blowing up the bomb, thus creating the very thing he wanted to prevent, the Incident.

The Rules Don't Apply to You

Several instances show Desmond Hume is different. When he foresees Charlie Pace's death but keeps preventing it in Season 3, he says he's forestalling fate. Charlie will die, but he keeps preventing it for Charlie's sake. This doesn't involve changing the past, since Desmond isn't time traveling, but there's some plan according to which things are supposed to happen, and Desmond modifies it by foreseeing things that he then prevents. Eventually course-correction kicks in, however, and Charlie does die.

In "Before You Left," Daniel attempts to save the time-jumpers by sending future Desmond to Eloise. He goes to the Swan and gives Desmond a message that somehow Desmond forgets for years but remembers suddenly in 2007, and by that time he knows who Daniel is and realizes it was Daniel who'd asked this of him. Daniel tells Desmond

he's different, that the rules don't apply to him. What rules? Can Desmond change the past when no one else can? He doesn't change the past in this case. He has an encounter with a stranger that he thinks little of, forgets, and suddenly remembers years later.

We see other instances when Desmond is special. Two involve time travel back and forth between the present and past. In the Season 2 finale "Live Together, Die Alone" Desmond activates the Swan failsafe. We learn in Season 3's "Flashes Before Your Eyes" the failsafe sends his consciousness back to an earlier time in his life when he was about to propose to Penny but changed his mind. He encounters Eloise and learns he can change minor details about his past but not major things. The universe course-corrects. This would be a flat-out violation of fixed time. Past-changing isn't possible with fixed time.

One way to avoid this is to interpret his consciousness-time-travel as a dream. He remembers things but differently, and whoever sends him the dream is sending him a message. That would make this more consistent with fixed time. However, the next time he consciousness-time-travels (in Season 4's "The Constant"), Desmond actually does something to change the past that then affects his present. He convinces Penny in 1996 to give him her phone number so he can call her in 2004. He remembers her phone number in 2004, which he hadn't been remembering. Has he changed the past? It seems so.

The producers even indicate that they want to see Desmond's consciousness-time-travel as changing the past. The following exchange appears in the Season 4 DVD commentary on "The Constant":

Damon Lindelof: There it is. You can't change the future. Those are the rules on *LOST* which are very hard to adhere to. Because if you tell the audience that something that Desmond does in '96 can alter the present, you go back to the episode we did last year where Ms. Hawking comes to Desmond and says no

matter what you do the course of time will find a way to course correct. So you can save somebody's life who's supposed to die but eventually the universe will find a way to kill them anyways.

Mark Goldman: So you can change the immediate future?

Damon Lindelof: Yeah, you can change the immediate future.

If this is how to think about Desmond's consciousness-time-travel, then it's not really fixed time. Time travel can change the past, in principle. It's just that something prevents it most of the time. Even in Desmond's case (presumably his specialness allows him to do it) it prevents major consequences beyond the immediate future of his later time-traveling self. He can influence something about to happen by traveling back eight years.

What's going on metaphysically in these cases? It would make no sense if Desmond changed his actual past, because that would be contradictory. It can't be true that he didn't get Penny's number and also did get Penny's number. So it must be that he "first" didn't have it and "then" later did, where "first" and "later" don't mean moments in time but either (a) moments earlier and later in hyper-time or (b) events in one alternate reality causing events in another. Desmond must either create a new timeline with different features from his original one, and then he continues to experience the new one rather than the original, or he's moving to an already-existing alternate reality whose past his consciousness was always in (and thus nothing actually changed).

The ethical questions depend on which theory is right. If Desmond causes things to happen differently in an alternate reality, where the original reality stays as he remembers it, then he's influencing another world, not changing anything. Any consequences are still important, because they affect real people, but he doesn't wipe anyone out of existence. On the other hand, if Desmond created a new timeline to replace the original, and it involved someone dying who otherwise might have survived, or

someone surviving who otherwise might die, then the ethical issues come into play more immediately. It's good for our characters that the writers limited what could be changed to immediate future events that would eventually be course-corrected, and thus no big changes would occur. That rules out a nuclear explosion destroying much of the island and leading to Oceanic 815 not crashing. Otherwise, the potential ethical consequences could be enormous, as Kate and Jack's discussion in "Follow the Leader" makes clear.

Time Travel Ethics in *LOST*

So what should we conclude? The way *LOST* has designed time travel, it usually involves no changing of the past. It's almost as if the fixed view of time is correct. But small changes occur with Desmond Hume, as long as they don't lead to major differences long-term. The long-term consequences of any small changes aren't all that important, apparently, since course-correction takes care of anything very different from what originally occurs or originally is supposed to occur (which is hard to imagine without some kind of intelligent fate-like being, perhaps the island itself, guiding things along, but the show never gets close to speculating about such a being besides the occasional comments from characters about the island having purposes for people).

In a fixed-enough timeline, how should we think about ethics? Someone who can't change the past obviously shouldn't bother trying, at least once they know they can't. But is Daniel right when he says it doesn't matter what you do? Daniel convinces Pierre Chang to evacuate the women and children from the island, which saves a number of lives, including Miles, Charlotte Lewis, and their mothers. He already knew they'd go, but he was willing to be the reason they did, since he had no idea what led to it. It turned

out it had been him. He similarly knew the hydrogen bomb didn't explode in a way that would do any serious damage to the island. He still pleaded urgently with his mother to bury it. He knew she needed to, and he knew it would get done, but he also knew he might be the only reason it would get done, so he embraced his role in bringing about the events he knew would occur. Why? He knew he should.

It turns out the ethical issues during time travel aren't all that different from what usually applies to our lives without time travel. It's wrong to shoot children, as Sayid did. It's dangerous to blow up a nuclear bomb in a huge electromagnetic field with very suspicious properties, since you have no idea what the consequences might be. Trying to do something that you know will kill lots of people is usually a bad idea, unless you're sure the good effects are not only worth it but so worth it to count against the very strong resistance we should have to doing something like that. If you can prevent a horrible wrong, then do so. If you know you can't, try to do what you can to mitigate it.

These are basic ethical principles. Kate seems fully aware of them and perhaps offers the most balanced view on the ethics of time travel of all the characters. Jack was so sure of some purpose that he had little evidence for, and he had no concept of what his actions might cause. Sawyer was largely acting out of self-interest. Sayid had good intentions but did wrong in carrying them out. Miles moves between apathy out of anger to his father and the false cynicism that what interfering can't be good. Kate recognizes the potential disaster that would occur if Jack's plan works, and she rightly resists it (not knowing that her worry was unwarranted, because it couldn't succeed). She condemns Sayid's action and insists that they help the boy. She recognizes that the morality in time travel is just morality period. The same principles apply.