That Useless Time Machine

ROBERTO CASATI AND ACHILLE C. VARZI

Dear Review Committee:

It is not our practice to raise complaints against a negative review report. We believe in peer refereeing and we respect it, whatever its content and consequences. However, in the case of our latest grant application (project named 'The Time Machine') we find it necessary to express our astonishment at the motivations with which our request for funding was turned down. Your main objection appears to be that our project is 'philosophically interesting' but 'practically useless', by which you mean that the project 'has no potential for applications.' We do not quite think that the main criterion for judging the scientific value of a project should be its practical usefulness, but never mind that. Let us agree that usefulness is a relevant criterion, especially when large amounts of money are involved. Why should that be a reason to turn down our project? Quite frankly, we cannot think of a project with better application potential than ours. Some examples:

—Cultural tourism: one could send herds of history fans back in time to witness the crucial episodes of the French Revolution, or to watch the Egyptians build the pyramids, or to videotape Socrates' lectures.
—Exotic safaris: we have already received several applications for dinosaur hunting expeditions (they got extinct anyway).
—Error detection: we could take a closer look at our past mistakes and learn how to avoid them in the future.
—Historic documentaries: think of the huge saving in set design, costumes, special effects, etc. (How much did *Gladiator* cost?)

And so on and so forth. Honestly, can you think of a project with better prospects for useful and thrilling applications?

Sincerely Yours,
The 'Time Machine' Research Group

Dear 'Time Machine' Research Group:

Thank you for your letter. We agree that it would be interesting to exploit a time machine for the uses that you suggest. It would also

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000572 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be remarkable if we could use it to prevent all sorts of unpleasant events that happened in the past. It would be remarkable, for instance, to be able to go back to November 22, 1963, and prevent Lee Harvey Oswald from killing John Kennedy, or to go back to April 14, 1912, and steer the Titanic around the iceberg. It would be excellent indeed to be able to do such things. However, suppose your project were to be successful. Suppose you *will* manage to build a time machine. Then why *didn't* you do any of those things? Why is it that our past history is still full of such sad events? *Either* this means that your project is doomed to fail and you will never manage to build a time machine; *or* it means that the project will succeed but that you are not going to use your time machine for those good purposes. In the first case, logic shows it would be pointless to support your project. In the second case, ethics dictates that it would be wrongdoing. Either way, you must concede that the reasons against your project are overwhelming.

Cordially Yours,
The Review Committee

Dear Review Committee:

Certainly you have noticed that our suggestions for practical applications of the time machine did not include any uses that could result in an alteration of the natural course of history. As a matter of fact, we believe that no such alteration is logically possible. According to our project, it is logically possible to *visit* the past but not to *modify* the past. No time traveler can undo what has been done or do what has not been done. So the logic is safe. This does not mean that the time traveler will be ineffectual during her stay in the past, of course; it simply means that what she is going to do is something that she has already done. An accurate catalogue of all the past events would include an account of the arrival of the Time Machine from out of nothing as well as an account of all the actions and reactions that followed. And ethics is safe too. For, if indeed we managed to go back to Dallas, we could not stop Oswald from doing what he did. Nobody would be able to stop Oswald because nobody was able to stop him (and nobody was able to stop Oswald because nobody will ever be able to do so, even if they came from the future). Alas, the past is full of sad events but there is nothing that we can do about that.

Respectfully Yours,
The 'Time Machine' Research Group

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000572 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Dear 'Time Machine' Research Group:

We appreciate the distinction between changing the past (impossible) and affecting the past (possible). However, this simply reinforces our initial impression: your project has no practical value. If in order to travel to the past one has to have been there already, and if one can only do what has already been done, then *à quoi bon l'effort*? Why should we invest in a 'Time Machine' at all? We are afraid that our decision is now final.

Yours with best wishes,
The Committee

CNRS, Institut Nicod, Paris
Columbia University

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000572 Published online by Cambridge University Press