*I dedicate this story to every last person who is trying to improve life for anyone, be it themselves or others. It’s not always glamourous, it certainly isn’t always agreeable, but in the end you are helping to make the world and the humans in it just a bit better. And that’s enough.*

**2031**

“Alright, let’s see if this works…”

“Excuse me?”

I turned around.

I was in someone’s living room. Or at least, I assumed it was. The entire place was black tiled, but that big red thing they were sitting on certainly looked like a sofa. I just wasn’t used to sofa’s being so… metallic.

“Who are you? Are you one of the people in the teleportation trials? Oh, yes!”

I raised an eyebrow. “Wait, is that a good thing?”

The person on the couch flicked their hair. I’d assume they were a teenager from their outfit if not for the fact I could see they were middle aged. “They compensate you for damages.”

“Ah. No, I’m afraid not. I’m actually a time traveler.”

“Get out.”

“No, I’m serious. I come from the past-“

“Oh, less exciting.”

I breathed in. Maybe social norms had drifted and the standards for politeness had changed. If so, that could actually be a good thing.

“I come from the past to ask you if you’ve figured out how to be good yet. Y’know, ethics, morals, that kind of thing.”

They looked at me. “Oh. Alright then. How far in the past?”

“2021 or so.”

“Easy then. Don’t use social media, it all ends in tears. Recycle, vote for the greens, invest in carbon offset technology. Oh, and vote yes for net neutrality. That good?”

“Uh… sorry, I kind of knew all that already.”

The person looked at me. Then, standing up from their couch, they walked to a curtain and opened it, revealing a sun so bright I had to avert my eyes. I could feel heat radiating in through the glass.

“We’re in winter at the moment.”

“Ah.”

“Forgive me for assuming you hadn’t figured that one out yet.”

I looked at them. I considered staying here and seeing if much had changed in the ten years I’d been away.

Too little time, even with a time machine. I twisted the watch on my wrist. “Thanks!”

Mum looked up as I appeared back in the living room, still a bit damp from the time stream. We’d learned our lesson after the first couple of trials, and she’d laid a towel out on the floor underneath me to catch any stray droplets. The towel itself was, if anything, looking less dirty than when we’d laid it out.

Raw liquid time did strange things to matter.

“How was the future?”

I shook my head, hair receding then ceding as my baldness from advanced age caught up with my current years.

“Alright. Nothing new though. Going to go a bit further, I think.”

She smiled. “Good luck!”

I twisted the watch. “Thanks.”

**2121**

Instead of a house, this new place seemed to be a featureless void, made up of lime green shapes rising out of similarly colored walls. If this was a place of habitation, maybe it was home to robots or something? I hadn’t met any robots on my two test drives, so that could be fun.

“Oh.”

I turned around, and saw someone standing in the doorway. They were tall and thin, what I’d call emaciated in my own time. They had on a puffed up bodysuit of the same lime green, along with a pair of glasses with tinted shades.

“Your the ghost?”

I shrugged. “Probably not? Specify, if you would.”

“Veri old owner sed that there was a ghost in there house. Said thay were from the past.”

Oh. Guess that made sense.

“Yeah, that’s me. Actually, would you mind answering a few questions?”

They nodded, leaning backwards, only to be caught by a mass of the lime green that enveloped them as they sat, forming a seat.

“Ok, so, first things first, what’s all this? I’m from 2021 and I don’t recognize it.”

They clapped pairs of fingers together, one from each hand.

“Smart matter! Takes form of whatev we desire. Veri useful!”

I nodded. “Cool, cool. Other question. Why all the… green?”

The same half clapping gesture. “Chroma-keying! I am seeing onli what I wish to base on mi preferences!”

“Oh that’s… very cool actually.”

Stood to reason that green screening would survive another hundred years.

I had a bevy of other questions to ask, about the language or the culture or how mankind overcame climate change if at all, but they could wait. For now, I had a more pressing question.

“Hey, since it’s been a hundred years and all, did you guys get any further with moral philosophy than us?”

The man looked at me sideways, before a look of understanding dawned. “OH! Yes, I can help. Trust onli what person looks like, because anithing else can be change.”

I made a sweeping motion with my hands, cutting him off. “Wait, that isn’t right. You can’t just judge a person based on their looks!”

“Certainli can! Well kept means effort put into appearans, grease and pimple mean lack of higiene, scars and pox mean radiation sickness. Mani things can be judged! Then, based on judgement, treat them amount of goodness deserved!”

That… didn’t quite click, but I wasn’t going to challenge them now.

“Anything else?”

They looked at me.

“More? But that it. Treat person based on appearance. Be good to others if thay good to you.”

“What is being good?”

At this point they looked equal parts confused and concerned. “Doing what thay ask of you? Ar you stupid?”

That really was the extent of it. Strange.

“Um, yes. Thank you for talking!”

I activated the watch again, and plunged back into the time stream.

“Any better?”

I shook my head.

“Hundred years, you’d think they’d have figured something out. I don’t get it. I mean, we still had slavery that far in the past, didn’t we?”

Mum shrugged. “I think your history is a little off.”

“I think history itself is off, all things considered. I have a time machine, I can check.”

She was halfway through her book at this point. Turning a page, she sighed.

“If you’re sure.”

I twisted the watch, and held my breath. This would be a long jump through time, and I didn’t want to run out of air midway through.

**3,021**

This time, I wasn’t inside a house, which was to be expected since I doubted many structures would continue to exist for a thousand years.

Looking around, I saw a landfill surrounding me, endless piles of trash and things that had no analogue in my own time. Looking up, I blinked, then rubbed my eyes.

Ok. Either this was an eclipse, or the sun had gone red a few million years too early.

What had happened here?

“^$#^%&@!\*%$?”

I turned around as a screech of keening metallic noise rang out across the wasteland. It was coming from a robot, an actual honest to god humanoid robot, who had what looked like a weapon at its side.

“<|}><}|>}}<>|>?”

I couldn’t understand a word it was saying, if those even were words.

“I’m… uh, I come from the past? Do you understand this?”

The robot paused.

After a while, it spoke.

“Language Pack Atomic English Received. Is This Your Language Of Preference?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Understood. Authorisation Level: Human Is Now In Place. Query of purpose?”

I looked around. “Could you… explain the current situation? Also, why is the star red? And am I safe here?”

The robot moved a hand into a salute, or at least I assumed so since it wasn’t one I recognized.

“War For Earth Currently In Action Between Custodial Robots Of Multiple Solar Empires. I Represent The Neo Byzantine Alliance Located In Alpha Centauri And Surrounding Systems. Sun Is Red Due To The Climax Of The First Solar War, In Which A Strangelet Bomb Was Fired At The Opposing Hypo-Antarctic Fleet.”

“How did that make the star red?”

“Missed.”

“Ah.”

“Safety Is Not Guaranteed Beyond The Next Five Minutes Due To This Being A Warzone.”

“Oh.”

“Any Further Questions?”

Maybe it was pointless to ask a robot about ethics. But then again, maybe that was just some 21st century prejudice that would screw me over. Besides, even on the off-chance it didn’t have it’s own ideas on the matter, it could probably find something in that database which it had downloaded the language from.

“I come from the past. 2021, to be exact. And I’m looking to see if I anyone in the future has figured out how to be good. In the sense of ethical behavior, morals, etc. etc.”

The robot raised its head slightly, and a whirring noise issued from its head.

“Ethics: Defined As A Set Of Moral Practices That Govern A Person’s Behaviour. Morality: Principles Concerning The Difference Between Right And Wrong. Current Status: There Is As Of Yet No Consensus On Morality Between The Solar Powers, However Many People Follow A Set Of Moral Guidelines Created By Others To Enforce Goodness In Their Own Life And Provide Meaning.”

“That’s good to hear! Can you tell me about some of them?”

“Yes. Confucianism, Utilitarianism, Kantian Categorical Imperetivism, Judaism-“

I held up a hand.

“Wait.”

“Yes?”

“Do me a favor. Check if any of the major schools of ethics were invented after 2021.”

Silence. “Query Complete. All Current Noteworthy Schools Of Thought Existed In Close To Their Current Form Pre 21st Century.”

I reached up, and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Alright, cool, cool, good to know. Thanks for the help.”

“This Unit Is Thankful To Be Of Service. Does This Complete Your Requests?”

I nodded, fiddling with the watch. This had been a bust as well. “Yeah, yeah. That’s everything.”

“Understood.”

The voice had changed. I looked up.

The robot was levelling its weapon at me.

“Please Relinquish Your Time Travel Device For The Good Of The War Effort.”

I froze in place. I looked at the robot, and the barrel with a glowing end currently pointed at my head.

As quickly as I could, I twisted the dial of the watch.

Mum looked up from her reading, and sniffed the air. “Is something burning?”

I looked at my hair in the mirror, scowling at the line through the side of it that would likely take some time to grow back after being grazed by the laser beam.

“Yeah. Close enough. They still didn’t have anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was all just based off of the same people as in our time. Why in the fresh hell would people still be following morals from centuries ago?”

Mum looked at me, with an expression like I was missing something blindingly obvious.

“Oh. Wait, actually… yeah, not sure why I expected anything different.”

“Some things change, some things remain the same, I guess.”

I looked down at the watch.

“I need to go further.”

“You’re up to the year 10,000 now, right? Since that was the farthest you got in your test drive, you should probably be careful about-“

I twisted the dial. Once, then twice, then a third time.

I took the deepest breath I could.

**1,002,021**

I surfaced from the time stream coughing for air, breathing in as deeply as I tried to expel the time from my lungs.

I coughed up something onto the ground beneath me. The something proceeded to make the plants wither away, then dissolve into ash, then reform into buds.

I’d have to get a scuba kit or something if I wanted to do this more often.

“Greetings.”

I looked up. There was a man sitting nearby, collapsed into what for all intents and purposes seemed to be a fold out camping chair. They themselves looked human in a way I would recognize, which was immediately suspicious, since humans existing this long looking just like me was not only unlikely but actively not happening judging by what I’d seen in the past.

“You’re probably confused. Come, sit down. I’ll explain everything.”

There was another camping chair which had *definitely* not been there a moment ago. On the other hand, I was tired, it had been a long day, and I wouldn’t mind a conversation with someone who didn’t have a laser rifle this time around.

I sat down.

“Hi, I’m here-“

“From 2021, yes, in search of the solution to your ethical and moral questions.”

I blinked. “How did you-“

“You haven’t exactly been subtle. I looked you up, and found your chain of encounters. Logically, all I had to do was wait here to meet you.”

I looked at him.

I slowly reached for my watch.

He laughed. “Oh, you misunderstand me. I don’t have an agenda in mind. I just wanted to answer your question.”

I paused.

“Alright then. I’ll hear you out.”

He smiled. “Glad to hear it.”

“So, what is it? What is the truth behind ethics and morals?”

He hesitated.

“Knowing your time of origin, you cannot know how tempting it is to say 42.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“I know, I know. It’s an absolute proven fact that you would try and punch me if I did. So, instead of that, how about I answer your question with a question: If you had omnipotence, what would be the most ethical way to treat the people around you?”

That… was not a question I had an answer ready for. I thought.

“Well, if I could do anything… I guess I’d give everyone what they want. But that might cause conflict if multiple people want the same thing, or mutually exclusive things, so I guess… a simulation, or something? Have everyone be in a simulation wherein they receive what they want, and there’s an A.I. or something in charge of making sure nothing goes wrong for any of them, and they keep on being happy.”

The man nodded. “A good idea. Everyone ends up happy, without their happiness impinging on anybody else’s. Tell me, why do you think that happiness is the goal of morals? What if it’s spiritual enlightenment, or great deeds, or any of that kind of thing?”

“Because the end result of all those things is happiness, so in the happiness simulation they would achieve those as their method of becoming happy.”

He smiled. “Alright then. Here’s my question for you. If you know what the most ethical thing to do to someone is, that being giving them what they want in the form of an A.I. controlled simulation, why are you asking everyone about it instead of doing that if you knew already?”

“Look, I don’t know what kind of crazy future tech you have, but I don’t have access to simulations or A.I. or any of that. I guess I could borrow some from the future, though-“

“Don’t mind that. What’s the next best option? Like, step down from simulations and all that.”

“Paid actors, I guess?”

“Then why aren’t you paying actors?”

“Because I can’t afford to!”

“Alright. What’s the best you can do at the moment to help people come closer to happiness?”

I thought. “I mean… helping them out, being polite, doing what they ask of me, that kind of thing. Maybe a bit more than that if they’re really important.”

“Ok then. That’s the most ethical course of behavior. Doing the best you can in the circumstances to make the people around you happy.”

I blinked. “That’s it?”

“Yup.”

“Then… hang on, what’s the meaning of all the history of ethics and philosophy? Why have people had such a hard time with this?”

“Because people vary. Some people have the time and energy to make others happy to a greater degree. Some people can barely manage to keep themselves afloat, let alone the people around them. Different people receive happiness from different sources, which means they assume other people want the same thing as them when they really don’t. And that’s not even getting into the real outlier oddballs who don’t receive happiness in the same way as anyone else in the world.”

“Do you mean, like… sadists? Evil people?”

“Not really. You’ll find most people are “evil” because of circumstances or bad information, if you look closely enough. No, I’m talking about the fact that even if in a hypothetical future someone were to entomb every last human in a happiness simulation, there would probably be some oddball who wanted out, searched the archives of human knowledge for a different direction to go in, and developed a time machine so they could go back in time several million years to have a discussion with an early human.”

He looked at me. “Completely hypothetically, of course.”

I looked down at my watch. “Alright then. I guess that’s it. So if the best way forward is to make other people as happy as possible, then I should probably use this to go and find some of that simulation tech-“

“About that. I’m not just here to give you the answer to that particular question. I’m also here to answer another question you might not have even asked yet. Time travel is funny like that.”

He looked at me, head to the side.

“Why do you think you were the only time traveler apart from me up until now?”

Huh.

I hadn’t actually noticed that.

But wait, that was a good point. If someone had discovered time travel, there would have been traces of them in history. And I wasn’t arrogant enough to think I was the smartest person in all of humanity throughout time.

“The answer is that time travel breaks ethics.”

I looked up. “What?”

“Once you have time travel, you can do just about anything. It’s the closest you’ll get to omnipotence, like in that hypothetical I mentioned earlier. But it also means that doing the right thing becomes a hell of a lot harder. Fix world hunger, kill Hitler, have Hitler fix world hunger himself instead of going to war. With a time machine, you have infinite options, so how can you know which is the best one? And if you’re not doing your best, then you’re not behaving ethically. Humans weren’t made to think on that scale, so It becomes decision paralysis on a cosmic level. In the end, everyone who figures out time travel abandons it because it’s stopping them from doing anything.”

He smiled. “Honestly, it’s impressive you made it this far. Having a set goal and question in mind must have helped. But now that you’re finished, there’s nowhere else to go.”

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“You don’t. Maybe I’m another time traveler trying to weed out the competition. Maybe I’m a psychic alien at the end of time trying to lure you in. Maybe this is just a hallucination, and you’re actually drowning in the time stream. But, regardless of whether this is real or not, look back on what I said. Can you find an issue with it?”

I…

I couldn’t.

“What do I do now?”

He stood up, and the chair disappeared as he did so. “I wouldn’t know. But my advice? Do whatever makes you and others happy. And I think you know what that means in this instance.”

I nodded, slowly. I reached down for the watch.

“Oh, and by the way…”

I looked back, and he was holding out a plastic bag.

“You might want this.”

Mum had just finished her book when I arrived back at the living room, dropping down onto the towel like a drowning fish. I took a few moments to breathe, and then stood back up.

“Is that… a scuba mask?”

I took it off, dumping it on the counter and loosening the air tanks from my back. “Long story.”

She looked at my wrist, and gasped. “Wait. Where’s the time machine? What happened to it?”

“It got washed away in the time stream. I made it back here, but I’m not sure where it ended up. I might be able to make it again, but I’m not sure I remember how.”

“Oh. That’s sad. Did you at least get your answer?”

I thought.

I could probably look further. There was a lot of future history I hadn’t covered, and that man may not have even represented the farthest point in it. There was so much more still to find.

Too much.

“Yeah. I think I did. Anyway, I’m going to go clean up a bit.”

Mum smiled. “Unprompted? Just what was it that you found in the future?”

I shrugged, picking up the towel and squeezing the time out of it over the sink. “Someone who was willing to help me. They didn’t do it for any real reason, they didn’t want a reward from me. They were just… good. I think I’ll try and follow their example.”

“That’s a good answer to your question. I’m happy you found what you were looking for.”

Comfortable silence.

“Mind you, I’ve been telling you that from the start. Why did you have to go to the future before you were willing to accept it?”

I sighed.

“Well, what can I say…”

Have Time Machine, Will Travel

By Joshua Adam Meischke

*One of the things which interests me the most about modern-day society is how we view the past, and how the past would view us. We consider our worldview “normal”, but that’s something which is purely based on our surrounding and upbringing and current culture. Therefore, I’d like to write a story about time travel, and someone going forward in time to find out what ethics are in the future when we have them all figured out.*

*In the course of writing this story, I began to think more about what kind of ethics would even be present in a future society. An option I considered taking was having them violently reject our behaviors today, but quite apart from not being able to think of a good reason for it, I don’t really want to write a story passing judgement on people living in a society they can’t easily change from within.*

*That got me thinking about the fact that a lot of ethics and morals really exist because of the fact that humanity has a finite capacity for action: There are a lot of things we can’t do, so we try our best to figure out the best action we* can *perform. So in the future, if we end up being able to do anything, then what does ethics look like? Does everyone get what they want in the end, or are some people still unhappy? If that’s what the end result of being good to each other is, should we feel bad about not being able to reach that standard yet?*

*I’m not sure that this short story is fully able to tackle these questions. But what I do know is that I live in a world under late-stage capitalism, where climate change and social issues run rampant despite the fact people are living in much better conditions than they were a thousand years ago, and I sometimes feel powerless about fixing it. This is a story meant for those people who are just doing their best from day to day, or even a little bit below that because some days you aren’t feeling up to it. Not being able to achieve perfection is as much a result of your circumstances as your own self. And feeling guilty about it, quite apart from not fixing anything, reduces happiness with no way to improve yourself because of it. And I’m not future time-god, but that doesn’t sound ethical to me.*

Inspirations:

*Terry Pratchett – For his wordplay and sense of fun while writing speculative fiction, as well as creating whole laws of physics to give his works a sense of wonder, or the readers a good laugh in some cases.*

*Douglas Adams – Ditto, as well as the way he comes up with insane ideas, takes them to the fullest extent possible under human imagination, somehow creates a compelling story out of them in the process, then writes it down and calls it a sci-fi story. I can only aspire to copy his approach.*

*Zach Weinersmith – For creating a comic about science and philosophy and disguising it as a comedy, which it also is, but still. In fact, I think that one of the main lines of the piece is drawn near-directly from this comic, although it is used in a very different context: https://www.smbc-comics.com/comic/time-travel-2.*