Lost in Space

Flying several miles above ground for several thousand miles gives one pause for reflection. "Don't worry about the world coming to an end today, sir," says one of the children in Peanuts. "It's already tomorrow in Australia." Enroute to Taipei, I suspected that travelling halfway around the world to participate in the 3rd International Conference Philosophy for Children would stand me on my head.[1] I was right. I knew before I left that half of today in Taipei is somehow concurrent with half of yesterday in Kalamazoo. So my head was already spinning a bit as my plane traversed time zone after time zone, making today earlier and earlier until, suddenly--it was tomorrow.

Explaining this time-trick to those experiencing it for the first time is much more challenging than explaining daylight savings time changes in spring and fall. No doubt this contributed to a rash of very early morning calls back home by participants from the Western World, informing loved ones that they had arrived safely.

My own arrival was safe enough--no doubt partly because the connecting evening flight from Seoul to Taipei was postponed until the next morning--in deference to Typhoon Ophelia, which was causing devastation in various parts of Taiwan. So I arrived a day late, June 23 instead of June 22--even though it was still June 22 in Kalamazoo. There I was, alone at Taipei International Airport, not knowing where I would be staying or whom to call. I experienced another rush of metaphysical anxiety--"Did they get my FAX indicating that I was coming to the conference after all? Where am I, anyway? What will become of me?" A flash of doubt crossed my mind--maybe my colleagues were not joking when they said, "Nice knowing you, Mike" as I left Kalamazoo with a one-way ticket to Taipei. [Another source of some anxiety--I had only a one-way ticket because my preferred date of return had a waiting list of 300 people. Peter Yang, our conference organizer, urged me to come ahead anyway--that everything could be worked out from Taipei.]

I shared a room with Michael Whalley, who arrived several days before. He had already visited Caterpillar, Peter Yang's Philosophy for Children Center. As I unpacked my bags, Michael asked me if I believed that 1 is greater than 0.999 ad infinitum. I assured him that I did. He told me that while visiting Caterpillar he learned of a 9 year old Taiwanese boy who has produced 3 elegant proofs that 1 and 0.999 ad infinitum are equal to each other. "How can they be equal?" I asked. Michael showed me one of the proofs:

Let:

$x = 0.999$ ad infinitum

Multiply each side of the equation by 10:

$10x = 9.999$ ad infinitum

Subtract x from each side of the equation:

$9x = 9$

Therefore: $x = 1$

Stunning, simple, elegant.

As usually happens, thinking about infinity pushed my intuitions to the brink. "Something sneaky is happening here," I protested. "If you start at 0.9 and add 0.09, then 0.009, etc., you'll never get to 1--no matter how long you go on, even to infinity." "I thought 1 was greater, too," replied Michael. "But there's the proof--no denying that."

So, there I was, thousands of miles from home, just yesterday having proceeded from that day's afternoon to morning--only to find yesterday morning becoming today--and now being pressed to acknowledge that 1 equals something utterly diferent than itself. "But," I finally asked myself, "how different is it? Starting from 1, I can never get to

0.999 ad infinitum, since any number I pick will have an infinite number of decimal numbers between it and 1!"

This little mind-bender quickly made the rounds at our conference, resulting in much discussion. Shades of Zeno, many remarked. "I'm having an anxiety attack," announced one of the participants over his microphone--the proof seems right, but the answer seems clearly wrong. Howls of laughter from the audience expressed shared exasperation with the problem.

But what has this to do with the philosophical thinking of children? These were adults fumbling with infinity. Was there any evidence of philosophical struggle in this 9 year old Tiawanese math whiz? If we balked at his first proof, would he calmly reply, "If you're not convinced by this proof, I can show you 2 more"? Even if a mathematically precocious 9 year old can perform such feats, can he see any philosophical challenge here?

Since we did not meet this boy, we had no opportunity to pursue the matter with him. Those who doubt that even the brightest young children are ready for serious philosophical thought many have a ready diagnosis--mathematics is not philosophy. Admittedly, it is not--or not necessarily. But the boundaries are blurry at best. [I've even heard philosophers say that some "philosophy" is not philosophy--and other philosophers rejoin that those "philosophers" are not really philosophers!] With nothing further to go on with this 9 year old, his particular case seems to me to be unsettleable.

However, my visit to Taipei reminded me of another case. "Like being in a big city and not having maps... It is nice to know [to] have security to know where you are." These are the words of 7 year old Michael, discussing whether the universe is infinite with one of Garth Matthews's students.[2] Michael worried that if the universe is infinite, it cannot be located anywhere--nor can anything be absolutely located within it.

Wandering through the crowded streets of Taipei reminded me of young Michael's thoughts. Around every corner, it seemed, was a similar sequence of shops (clothes, cameras, books, food, jewelry, trinkets,...), and unbroken lines of motorbikes parked on the sidewalks. Naturally, most of the street signs were in Chinese. The occasional English street signs frequently had spellings different than the streets listed in my little book, Taiwan--a Survival Kit. Where is "downtown" Taipei, I wondered? [A meaningful question when asked of Kalamazoo.] Everywhere? Where is the center? Does it go on forever? Where am I? I am lost....

Gareth Matthews's student asked young Michael, "What if there is no end? How can we have security? Say we [are] lost in a Chinese city."

> "That goes on forever?" Michael asked. "No maps? No English? [We] would have to try not to crash into cars and drive around like being lost." [Matthews, p.36]

Michael was thinking of being lost while driving a car. I was on foot--trying not to crash into cars and motorbikes. But the effect was the same--I could just as easily be lost without maps in a Chinese city.

> "Does finding out if the universe has an end tell us who we are or what we are?" asked my student.
>
> "No," replied Michael, "but it makes us more secure."
>
> "How do we react to space and death?" asked my student later in the discussion.
>
> "It is more important," said Michael firmly, "to know where you are than what happens after you die. Most people don't think about death. It is more important to think about maps in [a] Chinese city than dying. I think I would rather have the maps." [Matthews, p.36]

I agree with Michael. It is more important to think about maps in a Chinese city than dying. It's not that death is unimportant--or that what happens after you die is of no concern. But what about the thought of being lost without maps in a Chinese city (or anywhere else)--forever?

Usually we stuck together, walking the streets of Taipei in small groups.

Unaccompanied by our hosts, we sometimes temporarily lost our way. But being lost with friends is, I am tempted to say, infinitely better than being lost alone and without maps. My maps were people--the many friendly, gracious hosts from Fu Jen Catholic University and colleagues from around the world, gathered together for a few days, helping each other find their way about.

So, it may be objected, I turn away from the infinite after all. Like the 9 year old Taiwanese boy, I seek a proof that brings the infinite under control so that 1 seems to equal 0.999 ad infinitum. By boxing up the infinite in this way, I disguise it--and thereby turn away from philosophy itself. I trade in philosophy for maps. Perhaps. But there may be another way of understanding what I am saying.[3]

Consider Patrick McManus's little story about fileting fish:

> I spread newspapers on the porch, then dumped the spiny, slimy pile of bluegills on them. Immediately, as I stared down at the pile, the philosophical question of guilt came to mind. Would there be any reality to the guilt I would feel if, instead of fileting the bluegills, I used them in their entirety as fertilizer for Bun's roses? Would my guilt amount to anything in the endlessly expanding universe with its trillions of stars, some of which were probably orbited by worlds containing intelligent life, one being of which was probably at that very moment staring down at the equivalent of a slimy, spinly pile of bluegills, wondering how he could get out of fileting them? That would certainly be one test of his intelligence. As to the question of guilt, I could only answer, "Yeah, probably." I had killed them. So I would filet and eat them. I picked up a bluegill and had at it with the fileting knife.

Somehow this seems right to me--responsibility is to be found here, not from the standpoint of an endlessly expanding universe. We might object that the narrator should experience a prior guilt--not at the thought of not fileting all the fish, but at catching so many more than he needs in the first place (or, some might urge, for catching any at all). But this objection does not come from the standpoint of an endlessly expanding universe either.

I think of the McManus passage as philosophical humor. We recognize its humor precisely because of a shared understanding of guilt and responsibility. The narrator's wife, Bun, will have none of his celestial speculations, at least not about this matter--nor will he in the end. Everyday responsibilities cannot be evaded through such cleverness. No more delaying tactics. No, you may not simply stuff them in the refrigerator. No, you may not simply dump the surplus in the garden. What about the protesting voice of the bluegills themselves? It cannot be heard from the outer reaches of an endlessly expanding universe. It comes, if at all, only from where they dwell.

Thoughts such as these raced through my mind as I returned home, flying past where East meets West and today becomes yesterday, which will soon be today again.

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ENDNOTES

1. This conference was held June 25-28, 1990 at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taipei, under the auspices of the International Council for Philosophy With Children (ICPIC).

2. Philosophy and the Young Child (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p.35.

3. From Patrick F. McManus, Rubber Legs and White Tail-Hairs (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1987), pp. 127-28.