Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will

David Foster Wallace (Afterword) , Steven M. Cahn (Editor) , Maureen Eckert (Editor) , Jay L. Garfield (Epilogue) , James Ryerson (Introduction)

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In 1962, the philosopher Richard Taylor used six commonly accepted presuppositions to imply that human beings have no control over the future. David Foster Wallace not only took issue with Taylor's method, which, according to him, scrambled the relations of logic, language, and the physical world, but also noted a semantic trick at the heart of Taylor's argument.

Fate, Time, and Language presents Wallace's brilliant critique of Taylor's work. Written long before the publication of his fiction and essays, Wallace's thesis reveals his great skepticism of abstract thinking made to function as a negation of something more genuine and real. He was especially suspicious of certain paradigms of thought-the cerebral aestheticism of modernism, the clever gimmickry of postmodernism-that abandoned "the very old traditional human verities that have to do with spirituality and emotion and community." As Wallace rises to meet the challenge to free will presented by Taylor, we witness the developing perspective of this major novelist, along with his struggle to establish solid logical ground for his convictions. This volume, edited by Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert, reproduces Taylor's original article and other works on fatalism cited by Wallace. James Ryerson's introduction connects Wallace's early philosophical work to the themes and explorations of his later fiction, and Jay Garfield supplies a critical biographical epilogue.

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From Reader Review Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will for online ebook

Jon Stout says

David Foster Wallace is of great interest to me, first because he was an innovative young fiction writer, admired by the likes of Zadie Smith, second because he was a promising young philosopher, educated in a tradition familiar to me, and third because he commited suicide under tragic circumstances, mourned by many who thought of him as a generational spokesman.

Fate, Time and Language is a work of philosophy, Wallace's undergraduate thesis, which showed his great talent both as a writer and as a philosopher. He deals with a problem in the philosophical literature, and the volume includes not only his thesis, but also the series of articles which frame the issue, as well as some personal reflections on Wallace himself. Wallace deals with a highly technical problem, of which I will give only the briefest sketch, but I must observe that Wallace's writing, even as an undergraduate, is much more readable and enlightening than the journal articles by the professionals.

Wallace addresses a conundrum presented by the philosopher Richard Taylor which purports to prove fatalism. Consider a case of an admiral who can give an order which is sufficient to cause a sea battle the next day. If he does not give the order, the sea battle will not happen. It is either true or false that the sea battle will happen the next day. If it is true, it is necessarily so that the admiral gave the order. If it is false, then it is necessarily so that the admiral did not give the order. Whichever way it is, the admiral cannot do anything other than what is necessarily so. He has no choice in the matter, and fatalism is proved.

About ten professional journal articles attempted to show the flaws in the argument, but none of them convincingly. Wallace's accomplishment was to use developments in modal logic to parse the argument so as to show an equivocation. Modal logic and semantics, developed especially by Kripke and Montague, concern the logic of the possible and the necessary, over and beyond the usual logic of the true and the false. Wallace's solution boils down to distinguishing between "The admiral cannot have given the order." and "The admiral could not have given the order." The difference is in the verb tense, and in the scope of the possibility. The admiral cannot have given the order, once the battle has failed to occur. But this does not imply that the admiral could not have given the order, the day before.

I feel breathless after having tried to give a really brief summary which still makes sense. I hope I conveyed something of what it is about. But what I am most interested in is Wallace's frame of mind in writing this thesis. His advisor said, "I thought of David as a very talented young philosopher with a writing hobby, and did not realize that he was instead one of the most talented fiction writers of his generation who had a philosophy hobby."

I also want to quote Wallace on the gut feeling that motivated him, "If Taylor and the fatalists want to force upon us a metaphysical conclusion, they must do metaphysics, not semantics." Despite the technical brilliance and pyrotechnics, Wallace was motivated by wanting to get it right. The passion for honesty and verisimilitude shows up in his fiction writing, and shows the integrity and penetrating vision of this genius who died too soon.

Joshua Nomen-Mutatio says

Most people, fans of Wallace or not, will want to skip this. Upon e-mail request back in January of this year I was given a digitized version of the photocopied thesis as typed out on an actual typewriter (!) by the barely twentysomething Dave through the gift-giving mediation of one of the friendly fellows who runs the single best source for DFW-related things on this Interlace system thingy we're all on right this instant. I slogged through this paper over the course of a few days after downloading it, feeling like I was "in" on some secret and underground thing and somberly and beautifully contemplating the life and mind of Tiny Budding Genius Depressive College Boy Wallace while doing the dually sigh-*and*-sheer-fascination-inducing mental heavy lifting of following the trajectory of the actual content--content which ultimately led to emotionally and intellectually satisfying conclusions.

Now it's being published in book form with supplemental essays by philosophers, including one of DFW's old professors who acted as his advisor on the paper.

It's difficult, highly technical philosophy. Not my exact cup o' philosophical tea, honestly. But Wallace did it and did it while writing another undergrad thesis at the same time which went on to be known as his first novel *The Broom of the System* . This double-major (English and Philosophy) feat was carried out in the immediate wake of a sort of Mental Breakdown and Subsequent Hospitalization and as such is astounding to me. Oh Dave, I just wanna pinch your cheeks and tell you everything is gonna be alright...

The thesis is also brilliant. Unfortunately and understandably the language of symbolic logic makes most eyes glaze over and their lids droop, including my own, as the response to and representation of the distracted boredom and confusion churning "within." I'm curious to read the commentary that will be published within this professionally bound, non-typewritered version slated for release in a few months.

And for the record, the Big Obvious Sad Thing is still very hard for me to believe and makes me pretty sad when the bare fact becomes a focus. The work remains, however, and in its own incredible way helps to defocus this bare, raw fact-beholding, i.e., makes me feel better.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Popping in here only to confirm that two years hence (since reading Wallace's thesis) I have finally gotten around to reading Richard Taylor's piece "The Problem of Future Contingencies," published five years prior to Wallace's thesis, and which presumably lays to rest what must have been some of the cause of Wallace's anxiety about future determinism.

I'll mark myself down in that column along with those others who find themselves impressed with this essay. DFW-ites without a background in the philosophical sciences are urged great caution.

M. Sarki says

Upon further review of my previous review (which was blank) of the DFW book in question, I remember now giving the book one star because I was led to believe the goodreads rating system, which one star meant I did not like the book, which was completely true. But, in all honesty, I did not like the book mostly because

I could not understand it. And besides not understanding it, I was having no fun while reading it. Much of the French, Italian, and local semi-contemporary philosophy I read I do not understand either, but I love reading it. It is fun for me reading Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, and Alphonso Lingis. And every now and then I get something happening to me while reading it which can only be explained as a sort of revelation, a good idea, or perhaps an inspiration. So, to be fair, the book of DFW's might have been great, but it was lost on me the reader. Just wanting to be honest with all of you here. I looked at some of these other reviews of the same book and realize I am so very very far out of my league of expertise.

Mike says

The whole thing is mental masturbation, but it's done with such skill that it makes it worthwhile. Plus it covers a topic that I've been doing a lot of thinking about lately, and it's good to see I'm not alone in obsessing over fun but useless questions like these. Three and a half stars.

Sharon says

Being a fan of David Foster Wallace I was excited to see this new book. However, I soon realized I was in way over my head when I saw that this was a compilation of philosophy papers in addition to David Foster Wallace's final thesis in undergraduate philosophy. David's voice is still there in and around his theories and formulas. Not any easy read if you never studied philosophy!

Manny says

I haven't actually read this book, only the raw PDF of Wallace's thesis, which MyFleshSingsOut kindly mailed to me the other day. I just finished it. I'm seriously conflicted as to how to react.

On the one hand, I was astonished to find what a close emotional connection I had to it. DFW wrote his thesis in 1985. It's clear to me that he was heavily influenced by Dowty, Wall and Peters's *Introduction to Montague Semantics*. Well: I read that same book just about then, and I was *also* heavily influenced by it! It pretty much pushed me into doing formal semantics of natural language, a subject I've worked with, in one way or another, ever since. I found Wallace's paper easy to read; I've thought a great deal about these issues, and the technical tricks he uses feel completely natural. I've used most of them myself, and I've written some similar papers.

The rest of this review is available elsewhere (the location cannot be given for Goodreads policy reasons)

Joey says

Even though I wasn't a huge fan of DFW and Mark Costello's Signifying Rappers collaboration, I am

grateful for Mr. Costello's perseverance to have his friend's college philosophy thesis published and supplemented by many credible scholars.

This was one of the most engaging texts I've read in quite some time and forced me to review my Intro to Logic notes from my senior year of college.

James Ryerson's intro was far more interesting than anything I've read by D.T. Max about Wallace and provides an inviting arena where complex ideas and invented symbols begin to make sense. Symbols and concepts in Wallace's writing are just as important as variables in mathematical logic proofs to accomplish the divine "click." Perhaps this is the closest academics can come to a time machine in order to understand Wallace's undergraduate psyche and trajectory as both an intellectual and literary powerhouse.

"One of the few giveaways in their exchange that Wallace is also a goofy college kid is that he alludes to Descartes as 'Monsieur D' and Kant as 'the Big K.'" (9)

I believe that Wallace was often in the shadow of his father James, which also simultaneously motivated him to strive for excellence. Though their literary and career palettes perhaps mesh like a Venn diagram, his actual thesis was dedicated to both of his parents, James and Sally. Wallace's father's dissertation for his PhD at Cornell was on the topic of pleasure.

"'I am not interested in logic,' James explained to me, 'I have been amused by the way that logicians move into an area of philosophy, try to axiomatize it, and end up focusing on logicians' problems instead of the other problems that other philosophers are concerned about.'" (4)

David's academic pursuit was focused on situational modality, whereas modality can be seen as a variable or clause in a larger equation:

"Unlike logical modality and plain-old physical modality, situational physical modality, he observed, is not eternal and unchanging but rather highly sensitive to details of time and place (as the Eiffel Tower example illustrates)." (11)

According to Ryerson, "One of Wallace's assets as a philosopher was his instinct for collaboration." (9) Wallace also demonstrated a fear of metacognition: "He was perpetually on guard against the ways that abstract thinking (especially thinking about your own thinking) can draw you away from something more genuine and real." (1)

Ryerson's analyses of Wallace's literary works expose alternative philosophical perspectives that I was previously unaware of:

"Indeed at the simplest level, Lenore just is Wallace." (20)

"The story 'Good Old Neon' invokes two conundrums from mathematical logic, the Berry and Russell paradoxes, to describe a psychological double bind that the narrator calls the 'fraudulence paradox.'" (18)

"Few readers of Infinite Jest will forget the lonely fate of Hal Incandenza, who becomes so alienated from the world that his speech becomes unintelligible to others, or the lifeless zombiehood that befalls anyone who watches the novel's eponymous film, which is so entertaining that its viewer becomes incapable of doing anything other than watch it." (33)

Ryerson does fail to explore the role of drug usage in Wallace's opus during his intro. Is there a morality to using drugs to function at a "higher level"? Perhaps Wallace's Infinite Sierpinski idealism could be a series of checks and balances between the three points of 1) COGNITIVE FUNCTIONS 2) PHYSICAL HEALTH and 3) MIND EXPANSION.

"In Wallace's view, Wittgenstein had left us, again, without the possibility of contact with the outside world." (30) Perhaps David addressed this in fiction through JOI. Jim's Wraith contradicts Wallace's "factual" ideas of situational modality because there is an entirely new set of rules, boundaries, and interpretation of what time is. I.e.: the physical Asian Coke can with condensation. Then again, it is fiction. The author is God.

Maureen Eckert prefaces the actual thesis with bountiful praise: "For here Wallace demonstrates more than the deep familiarity with philosophical ideas, themes, and texts shown in the works he published during his life. This essay isn't merely about philosophy; it is philosophy." (138)

Condensed solipsism can be viewed as the ideal that nothing exists apart from your own mind and mental states. I'd hate to completely summarize the actual thesis, because it a fun challenge to try and wrap your own mind around it, but I will end my review with several points that may serve as a codex or inspire further constructive logical questioning.

*Presuppositions are challenging

*In my personal understanding, Taylor's presuppositions are similar to "pleading the fifth" in America. Coincidently, Wallace affirms that, "the Taylor-presupposition which has come in for the most sustained vigorous attack is his fifth." (152)

*The order of words are important because they influence both meaning and metaphysical value (if you're into that sort of stuff) of modalities.

*Wallace's 5th citation from the Metaphysics text that defines what a fatalist is focuses on the pronoun, "he." Females can be philosophers too!

*How did Wallace create his symbols on a typewriter in the 1980s?

*Wallace's use of Kripke and Montague models utilizes the assumption that the reader is familiar with them, but unfortunately I am not.

*Wallace creates a matrix to represent different language sets.

*Wallace's explanation of his created J-analysis including "mother-relation" and "daughter-relation" is fairly similar to the concept of time travel/space time continuums as explored in the Back to the Future film series. Wallace even uses potential terrorist attacks as means of explanation. The first film was released on July 3, 1985.

Wallace's academic outrage with Taylor is evocative of my personal outage with the Red Sox signing David Price and not updating his Facebook social media website with his current team.

A former mentor of Wallace, Jay Garfield concludes, "I cannot understand what drove David to take his own life; his ending is a source of great sadness; but the memory of our brief time as colleagues is one of pure

joy.” (221)

Randal Samstag says

David Foster Wallace (DFW) was a certified "genius" (a MacArthur grant recipient) who became famous as "one of the most talented fiction writers of his generation" in the words of philosopher Jay Garfield. Garfield contributes an appreciation of DFW in the posthumous book; Fate, Time, and Language. Garfield thought that DFW missed his calling. Instead of becoming a novelist, famous for manic novels like Infinite Jest and The Pale King, Garfield suggests that he could have been an even better philosopher. Garfield says that DFW's essay contained in Fate, Time, and Language; 'Richard Taylor's "Fatalism" and the Semantics of Physical Modality'; which was one of DFW's senior theses at Amherst, proves that ". . . had he lived, he would have been a major figure in our field." The other senior thesis became The Broom of the System, which started DFW onto his career in literary fiction in 1985.

DFW's philosophy thesis is directed against the modern philosopher Richard Taylor, whose article 'Fatalism' (The Philosophical Review, Vol. 71, No. 1, 1962) made the claim that six "presuppositions", commonly accepted by modern day philosophers, lead to the conclusion that fatalism is true. The presuppositions:

1) Any proposition whatever is either true or, if not true, false.

2) If any state of affairs is sufficient for, though logically unrelated to, the occurrence of some further condition at the same or any other time, then the former cannot occur without the latter occurring.

3) If the occurrence of any condition is necessary for, but logically unrelated to, the occurrence of some other condition at the same or any other time, then the latter cannot occur without the former occurring also.

4) If one condition or set of conditions is sufficient for another, then that other is necessary for it and conversely, if one condition or set of conditions is necessary for another, then that other is sufficient for it.

5) No agent can perform any given act lacking some precondition for it.

6) Time does not enhance or decrease an agent's powers.

Taylor's other writings (including the article "The Problem of Future Contingents" included in Fate, Time, and Language) make clear that Taylor didn't think that fatalism was true. Like Aristotle (and Lukasiewicz) he thought that proposition 1) above, a paraphrase of the Principle of Bivalence (PB), didn't apply to future contingent events.

DFW takes a different approach: to demolish Taylor's fatalism argument in support of an overall conclusion that "if Taylor and the fatalists want to force upon us a metaphysical conclusion, they must do metaphysics, not semantics." How we get there is a longish story, all of which I won't tell here, but the story follows a path through Aristotle, Lukasiewicz, and Hobbes to contemporary commentators on Taylor's paper and finally to invention of a system to evaluate physical modalities based on the possible worlds modal logic of Kripke modified by Montague to include time. DFW calls this "System J", presumably in honor of his thesis adviser, the above-mentioned Jay Garfield.

Fate, Time, and Language is about fatalism. Fatalism comes up in a very old argument in the never-never land between logic and metaphysics, Aristotle's argument about the problem of future contingents: "For example, a sea-fight must either take place on the morrow or not. No necessity is there, however, that it should come to pass or should not. What is necessary is that it either should happen tomorrow or not." (On Interpretation, IX, 19a, 29, Loeb translation by Harold P. Cooke). In Aristotle's analysis of the problem, he appears to conclude that contingent future events are an exception to the normal rule that has come to be known as Principle of Bivalence (PB): "In regard to things present or past, propositions, whether positive or negative, are true of necessity or false." (On Interpretation, IX, 18a, 28). He is led to that conclusion by an argument that finds that that if we assume PB for the case of future contingent events then fatalism is proved, a conclusion which Aristotle finds absurd (http://notesfrommylibrary.wordpress.c...).

PB is a crucial concept here, since Aristotle's argument was not that fatalism is true, but that since it is obviously false, there seem to be some "things" (propositions, statements, or sentences) which are neither true nor false, thus contradicting PB. DFW goes to some pains to point out the difference between PB and the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM). He refers to Susan Haack in Deviant Logic (p 65): "I shall approach the question . . . by investigating . . . three principles: the principle of bivalence, the principle that every wff (well-formed formula) is either true or false (hereafter PB); the law of excluded middle, the wff 'p or not p' (hereafter , LEM); and Tarski's material adequacy condition for the definitions of truth, the principle that 'A' is true iff (if and only if) A (hereafter, (T))." (T) is not in scope here. But PB and LEM are at the heart of the issue that Aristotle and Taylor tried to address.

Wallace complains that Taylor commits an "equivocation" between two sorts of non-logical, physical implications: 1) "necessary-of" and 2) "necessary-for" implications. "I give Order -> Sea-battle tomorrow" is a "necessary-of" implication. "Combustion -> Presence of fuel" is of the other variety. "Battle B is a necessary consequence of order O. But would we want to say with regard to 2) that the presence of fuel is a necessary consequence of combustion?" Why is this important? Because, according to DFW, 1) and 2) can be shown to "behave differently under a modus tollens operation (a deny-the-consequent-and-see-what-happens-to-the-antecedent operation." Wallace follows the criticism of Charles Brown's "Fallacies in Taylor's Fatalism" (reprinted in Fate, Time, and Language) that Taylor's propositions 2, 3, 4 and 5 are invalidated by this "equivocation." But, importantly, not (like Aristotle, Lukasiewicz, and Taylor) proposition 1, PB.

But we are still a long ways from Wallace's final argument here. In the course of this argument he shifts from the sea battle of Aristotle to a nuclear explosion on the Amherst campus. (See the manic mind at work here?) "Suppose that the day before yesterday a group of terrorists brought a completely assembled and fully functional nuclear weapon onto the Amherst College campus. Suppose further that yesterday the head terrorist, completely healthy and physically functional and not constrained in any way, sat next to the weapon, with his finger on the weapon's fully functional triggering mechanism, all day, but did not press the trigger and so did not cause a nuclear explosion to occur, and so a nuclear explosion did not in fact occur on campus yesterday. Suppose further, since we're trying to be as Taylor-ish as possible, that a nuclear explosion on the Amherst campus yesterday would be an occurrence causally, physically sufficient for the presence of radiation in excess of, say 20 rads on the Amherst campus today."

But there is no radiation today. This is the condition (R>20) that in Taylor's sense is "necessary for" the occurrence of the explosion yesterday. But, Wallace insists, that rather R>20 is a "necessary consequence of" an explosion yesterday. Does this matter? Wallace thinks yes. "What it means in a nutshell is that the denial of the consequent's obtaining today means only that it cannot today be the case that yesterday the explosion did occur, not that it was the case yesterday that the explosion could not occur." To this reader, we have here reached the end of the argument, but DFW does not stop here.

He says, ". . . we have granted everything that Taylor would seem to want us to grant. But we are still able to reasonably deny the fatalistic conclusion. This is because we can point out that in the absence of radiation today we evaluate P1E's ("E" at some past time) possibility relative to what occurs now, today, at a time later than that designated by P1. We can say that this allows us to conclude only that, given what obtains today, it is not possible that P1E. Were we, however, to say something different, that at P1 it was not possible for E to occur, we would be evaluating the possibility of E at and relative to P1, not at or with respect to any other time, viz., now. But it is this second sort of conclusion that Taylor seems to want us to derive from everything we have been willing to grant to him thus far. It means basically that we would be saying that, given the set of circumstances that obtained yesterday, E was not physically possible yesterday. We would be saying not that it is not now possible that E occurred at P1, but rather that at P1 it was not possible for E to occur. And this would have as a consequence our buying the following: that yesterday, during the whole time the healthy and efficacious terrorist sat unconstrained with his limber finger on the fully functional triggering device of the fully operational nuclear weapon, it was somehow physically impossible for the explosion to occur. And this is clearly wrong . . . . "

Are we done yet? Not by a long shot. We haven't even gotten to 'System J'. And we are not going to go there. The interested reader will need to consult the book, for 'System J' involves typography and "math logic" not available to the current author. Suffice it to say that one of the virtues of this approach in Wallace's mind is that it can be used to invalidate not just Taylor's argument about future contingent events, but his further argument about past events as well. A more cynical reviewer might say that 'System j' gives him a chance to show off his math logical virtuosity and to impress his advisor, Garfield. But this reviewer won't go that far.

I have already quoted Wallace's ultimate conclusion: that we cannot derive metaphysical conclusions by semantic means. But this is perhaps the place to mention the conclusions of Lukasiewicz in an article contained in the book Polish Logic 1920 – 1939, edited by Storrs McCall. This book is referenced in Wallace's thesis, but for the famous article on "Many-valued systems of Propositional Logic." The article that I want to mention is the article "On Determinism" that precedes the article quoted in Wallace's thesis. For in this article Lukasiewicz addresses the same issue as Wallace and comes to the same conclusion as Taylor in his subsequent work: that the principle of bivalence "cannot be proved. One can only believe it, and he alone who considers it self-evident believes it. To me, personally, the principle of bivalence does not appear to be self-evident. Therefore, I am entitled not to recognize it, and to accept the view that besides truth and falsehood there exist other truth-values, including at least one more, the third truth-value. . . . I maintain that there are propositions which are neither true nor false but indeterminate." My own preference would be to extend the courtesy also to propositions that are both true and false; not all propositions, of course, but only those that lie on the margins of thought, iteration, and language.

GONZA says

This collection of essays has a misleading title in my opinion, because more than the concept of Freedom and the self in David Foster Wallace, there are here some critical articles on his doctoral thesis in philosophy in which the author debunked the theory of Taylor on fatalism; the first essays discuss DFW's thesis, but I can not judge how well because it is too far out of my ability, while the following articles deepen some of his ideas, such as those on hedonism or irony. The last essays are more easily understood, but remain difficult parts.

Questa raccolta di saggi ha un titolo fuorviante perché piú che del concetto di Libertá in David Foster

Wallace, ci sono degli articoli di critica alla sua tesi di dottorato in filosofia in cui l'autore smontava la teoria di Taylor sul fatalismo; i primi due saggi discutono proprio della tesi di D.F.W., ma non posso giudicare quanto bene perché é troppo al di fuori delle mie capacitá, mentre i successivi articoli approfondiscono alcune delle sue idee, come per esempio quelle sull'edonismo o sull'ironia. Gli ultimi saggi sono di piú facile comprensione, ma restano ostici.

THANKS TO NETGALLEY AND COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS FOR THE PREVIEW!

David says

This is a well constructed book. One might be forgiven wondering whether the publication of DFW's undergrad philosophy thesis is anything other than an attempt to wring a bit of money out of the name. ("Think we can fool some people into buying a book on modal logic since it's got David Foster Wallace's name on it?") That's not what this is.

At first I was tempted, I'll admit, to simply skip straight to Wallace's work, but I was seduced by the inclusion of various papers that Wallace read in preparation for his project. They are rather readable, though there were definitely times I was glad had some familiarity with symbolic logic. Having read the background, I was able to enjoy Wallace's work much more deeply, and to shake my head with better considered amazement at his level even as an undergraduate. This was actual theoretical movement forward, helping to settle arguments that had been rattling around for years. And amidst the heavy modal logic going there are various recognizably clever and mischievous DFW touches.

Even if you don't end up too jazzed about the modal logic, the opening essay "A Head that Throbbed Heartlike" and the closing remembrance from DFW's advisor for that senior thesis make this book well worth the price.

After reading this, it is also true that I am both grateful that DFW chose to pursue his project in fiction and convinced that he was in fact continuing a philosophical project as he did so.

Theresa says

Most of this book is the key literature surrounding Taylor's 1962 Fatalism, which is the background necessary for understanding David Foster Wallace's paper.

The preface ties together David Foster Wallace's philosophical background with his later published works; the influence of philosophy on all his later writing becomes clear.

Very interesting to see his writing at 23, and to read him in a philosophical tone.

Chrissy says

I never knew I had it in me to follow formal philosophical logic, not to mention ENJOY it.... I should by now just learn to trust David Foster Wallace to make any topic equal parts fascinating and accessible.

This book collects together a history of publications, replies, and counter-replies on the topic of fatalism, the idea that one is rendered incapable of doing anything other that what one does do by the constraints of future realities. For example, if there will be no puddles on the ground tomorrow, it is impossible for it to rain today.

It's an unintuitive idea that demands time to operate with bidirectional symmetry and presents "troubling" realities about free will (air quotes because I'm a determinist-- though with regard to a string of past causation, rather than future constraints-- and so don't find the negation of free will troubling). Although these dialogues were interesting to read, I found the academic replies to Richard Taylor's original argument for fatalism severely lacking, to the point that without any formal training in philosophy, I could see how badly they missed the mark. The collection culminates in a reproduction of David Foster Wallace's undergraduate thesis in philosophy, some 20 years after the original debates, in which he applies reasonable constraints of unidirectional time to Taylor's arguments to show that fatalism does not follow.

I've seen arguments that his thesis was not that impressive, that it could have been boiled down to 3 pages of argumentation instead of its 40-some pages of formal systems, diagrams, and deconstructions of the historical publications. To those dissenters I point out the night-and-day difference in clarity and style between the original papers and DFW's refutation; the marvel of his work is that he managed to produce such a thorough, compelling, lucid, and articulate piece of formal philosophical theory AS AN UNDERGRADUATE THESIS, while simultaneously writing the preeminent Broom of the System as an English thesis. That his work would not have served as a strong standalone academic publication is as irrelevant to its impressive and preternatural quality as it is to the talent he showed from a very young age for translating even the most opaque topics into good writing.

Aside from my undying DFW admiration, I enjoyed comparing the emergence of formal mathematical logic in philosophy to the emergence of the same in cognitive science, both of which occurred around the same time. The impact of formal theory is plain in Wallace's treatment of fatalism: where professional philosophers spent countless journal volumes riposting to and fro with verbal reasoning, Wallace destroys the notion swiftly and cleanly with the use of symbolic logic. Providing formal frameworks sets definitions for terms concretely, allows the derivation of predictions to be tested, and puts an end to the sort of "talking past" into which academic dialogues can so quickly devolve in the humanities. It was a joy to see one of my favourite authors come to the same conclusions so early in his career :)

Jimmy says

In the wake of David Foster Wallace's suicide there has been (and will most likely continue to be) much curious probing of his biography and personal life. Just last year, Rolling Stone columnist David Lipsky published a series of conversations with Wallace that took place in 1996 during the book tour for *Infinite Jest*. The book, entitled - in very appropriate Wallacesque language - *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, strove to understand the emotional underpinnings of Wallace's mental breakdown while a student at Amherst College, as well as some of the content of Wallace's fiction, i.e., the theme of clinical depression and the tough linguistic attempts that human beings make in order to describe the feeling. Much of the published commentary on Wallace's writing career seems to steer in this vein as well; writers struggle to analyze why such a prodigiously talented novelist and essayist was so inescapably hounded by his own mental demons, so much so that he took his own life. Even a popular commencement speech that Wallace gave at Kenyon College in 2005, has now been reformatted as a small book - resembling the sort of physical design a volume by Deepak Chopra might have – its title, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Compassionate Life*. Next month, Wallace's unfinished novel *The Pale King*, will hit bookshelves,

prompting even more commentary, likely concerning the creative struggles and doubt that Wallace underwent in composing what, in retrospect, seems to have been the source of a great deal of his frustration as a novelist. While the aforementioned commentaries, interviews, and published orations aren't unnecessary, they do represent a strained sort of attempt to market Wallace as a highly analytical and philosophical writer. This is probably due to the fact that Wallace could have easily followed in his father's footsteps, and was more than capable of writing as an academic philosopher.

James D. Wallace (David's father) was a philosopher who taught at the university of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Though the two had divergent philosophical tastes, Wallace the elder's thesis adviser at Cornell University was Norman Malcolm, a close friend and disciple of Ludwig Wittgenstein. The younger Wallace became interested in mathematical logic, and became particularly fond of Wittgenstein's work. James' area of philosophical expertise was ethics. At Amherst, in the early eighties, Wallace had a double major in English and philosophy. For his thesis for the former, he wrote the novel *Broom of the System*; a story in the black-humor tradition, thematically concerned with Wittgenstein's notion of solipsism. The main character's - Lenore Beadsman - great-grandmother was a former student of Wittgenstein's at Cambridge, an overbearing influence in her life, determined to prove to her "how life is words and nothing else." The latter, his philosophy thesis, was a paper on the philosophy of fatalism espoused by Richard Taylor in his infamous essay. Wallace's aim at the time was to write philosophy and do philosophy, while writing fiction on the side. Both papers must've been equally overwhelming projects.

The fatalism essay spawned a complicated problem for most philosophers since 1962, commonly referred to as the "Taylor problem". The general, logic symbol-devoid explanation of fatalism is: human actions and decisions have no influence on the future, rather, how things stand in the future determines what happens in the present. This particular philosophical outlook dates back to Aristotle, along with the LEM (law of excluded middle). In his *De Interpretatione*, Aristotle states that truth statements are either true or especially not true. The LEM, in the language of modal logic can be expressed as (p v-p); in other words, with any truth proposition, either that proposition is true, or its negation is true. The narrative example that Taylor used in his famous essay was that of the naval battle scenario. A naval commander is about to perform one of two actions, call the two acts P and P` respectively. If P (the commander puts in the order for a naval battle) then O (there is a naval battle tomorrow), if P` (the commander does not put in the order for a naval battle) then O` (there is no naval battle tomorrow). The argument's logical circularity basically works like this: If P is true, O` is not possible, therefore if P` is true then O is not possible, and vice-versa, and so on and so forth. In other words, the fatalist " … thinks of the future in the manner in which we all think of the past." Also, the argument basically implies that if something occurs in the future, then the conditions necessary for it to occur have already taken place and were determined by that particular outcome. Along with this hypothetical scenario and the true or not true universe of LEM, Taylor included six presuppositions for his argument. The first four presuppositions were more or less already explained in the battle scenario, which Wallace found reasonable enough. It was the last two presuppositions Taylor included that Wallace took issue with.

Presupposition number five states that no agent (in the situation above, this would be the naval commander) can perform a given act if there is lacking, at the same time, or any other time, a condition necessary for the occurrence of the act. Presupposition six disavows the efficacy of time in this hypothetical scenario, e.g., time is irrelevant here. This is where the entire argument becomes, as Wallace said, "ulcer inducing". This is because there is a great deal of semantic confusion concerning exactly what Taylor means by certain descriptions of the agent's ability to put the order in. Is it that the agent physically cannot do so, due to location and temporal restraints, or is it simply that the agent is physically incapable of doing so?

Since this is Wallace's undergraduate thesis, it's steeped in the incredibly dense, convoluted language of formal semantics and modal logic. Symbols of mathematical logic flood the page, and the lay reader, not

versed in the vernacular of this particular school of philosophy is basically incapable of following the way in which Wallace deconstructs fatalism. The system J that he comes up with is described as a system that basically encapsulates every situational-temporal possibility to an infinite degree. The system was named after his thesis advisor Jay Garfield, who in response to the specific issues that Wallace had with the way in which Taylor had collapsed so many logical modalities, gave Wallace a sort of crash-course in Montague grammar and tensed modal logic. It's difficult to summarize, but Wallace found a way around Taylor's tricky problem by honing in on the fatalist's move from semantics to metaphysics. In Wallace's own words, " … the kinds of modalities we are concerned with in the Taylor problem must be regarded as situational physical modalities." Taylor, who never considered himself a fatalist, simply found a neat trick of collapsing modalities from possibility and actuality into logical necessity. Then there is the trickier problem of how physical possibility is sensitive to time. The J system was basically devised for "formalizing, representing, and interpreting tensed physical-modal propositions." Wallace's brilliant thesis concludes by saying that Taylor was attempting to utilize a semantic argument for a metaphysical conclusion, or confusing physical possibility with logical necessity.

Again, the Taylor problem and Wallace's intellectually tenacious thesis statement are incredibly difficult to follow. For the most part, Wallace explains his solution to the Taylor Problem in a language translatable to the lay reader. Even for an undergrad thesis, it's still pretty engaging stuff. Included in this edition, is an illuminating introduction by James Ryerson, commenting on the significance of Wallace's work as a philosopher, and the important intellectual role that mathematical logic and semantics played in the creation of Wallace's debut novel *Broom of the System*, the Taylor essay in its entirety, a series of refutations of the Taylor problem from The Philosophical Review, Wallace's actual thesis, an epilogue by Jay Garfield, and Taylor's response to his critics. It would be something of a fallacy to suggest that the actual problems posed by Taylor's fatalist argument offers some insight into Wallace's motivations as a writer. It might say something about his interest in modal logic, and how intellectually ambitious he was at the time (considering the weight of a task such as that of critically analyzing Taylor's troubling argument). It's possible that his subsequent mental breakdown was informed by how mentally taxing technical philosophy in the vein of modal logic could be. Although, the importance of this paper is to be found in the way in which it reveals what a truly talented philosopher Wallace was, and how his experience with semantics and mathematical logic – in some not-so-clearly-definable-way – helped shape him into the enormously talented fiction writer and essayist that he came to be.

Kate says

"A life is words and nothing else."

"The world is all that is the case."

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."

"The only events which it is within one's power to produce are those which occur."

"What I do is necessary, what I do not do is impossible."

"Every truth is a necessity and every falsehood an impossibility."