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Western Civilization and Time

Main Idea and Book Synopsis

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The first version of this book was published on my website in 2008. Between 2012 and 2014, it was downloaded 46,000 times, and I received numerous comments and reviews from readers. Despite this, the publishers I approached showed no interest in releasing it.

It is a new English translation completed in 2025.

The entire book (online and PDF) is available at:

<https://jacek.kwasniewski.org.pl/ksiazka-cywilizacja-zachodnia-i-czas>

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Main Idea of the Book

Western civilization challenges death. It does so without fanfare but persistently, step by step. This direction was not determined by technology or science, though neither would have been possible without it. Instead, it was guided by a value universally recognized as a priority: time. Time is a value; it has value. No one denies this, and we place this value high on the scale of importance. However, because we constantly experience and discuss it, it has become a banal truth — so banal that it hardly invites deeper reflection.

Yet the value we attribute to time increasingly influences the direction of technological and scientific development, determining which areas of the economy we allocate more or fewer resources to. All these decisions, driven by our preferences and values, guide civilization onto a path that questions the timeless inevitability of death.

What are these values? How do they chart this course? What is their origin? These are the questions this book seeks to answer. We will begin with simple matters. We will define Western civilization and take a look at one of its most distinctive features — increasing speed.

First, we will show what causes Western civilization to accelerate continually. Since we perceive this acceleration as a compulsion to act and exist faster, we will try to understand how it shapes our worldview and value hierarchies. However, we won't forget that people are diverse, and not everyone feels this compulsion equally. Examining these issues, we will see that the increasing speed of civilization translates into a growing value of time. The faster we move, the more we value every hour. We experience this constantly. Upon closer examination, the growing value of time proves to be not just a consequence of fast civilization but also a driving force that propels it forward. Time has become an autonomous (autotelic) value in our minds and hearts.

The growing value of time is manifested not only in haste but also in the desire to stay young as long as possible. Only as young individuals can we effectively compete in this fast-paced race. Old age is slow, and we must be fast. Naturally, this syndrome does not affect everyone equally, but the cult of youth surrounds us. We created it ourselves. The compulsion for Faster created the compulsion for Young. Advertising and industry reflect these expectations.

The growing value of time is not just about the cult of youth. The centuries-long process of secularization displaces God from our daily lives. Along with it, the hope for eternal life fades, making earthly time more significant and valuable. If this is all we have, we want as much of it as possible.

Understanding time as haste, the cult of youth, and the desire for a longer life has created two fundamental civilizational priorities: Faster and Longer. These priorities increasingly influence how we allocate available natural, human, and time resources as societies. The pressure for Faster and Longer constantly demands something new and better: improved health, prolonged life, and accelerated processes in various areas. Yet every achieved change creates new demands. This pressure reproduces itself and seems endless. It increasingly

shapes the direction of development in the economy, technology, and science. Resources are noticeably shifting toward the development of the priority domains of Faster and Longer.

Over the course of a few decades, we have made changes and accelerated the pace to such an extent that it is becoming increasingly clear that further pursuit of the Longer priority directly challenges death. This idea is gradually gaining legitimacy. It first appeared in futurology and is now increasingly present in scientific discussions, such as those within transhumanism.

The formation of such a value system, combined with growing means to fulfill it, prompts the question of what lies at the root of this civilizational mechanism. This leads us to the historical phenomenon of Europe, the so-called European miracle, and Christianity as a significant driving force behind the emergence of our civilization. We attempt to show Christianity as the factor that granted us such power and optimism that we dare to challenge death — that which we have always considered an inevitable and unavoidable evil.

This is where the book concludes, but the answer itself is a mystery, opening us to an even greater enigma. Is Christianity a self-realizing civilizational program gifted to us two thousand years ago? Or is it a mutation of our cultural genotype? Thanks to this culturally mutated European, in a historical blink of an eye, a world was created that, with its power, boundless ambitions, and optimism, strives to replicate or continue, in temporal terms, the act of creation described by this religion.

Do we have the right to avoid speaking of God after such an answer? Can we limit ourselves to speaking only of religion and turn a blind eye to the One without whom this religion has no meaning? Of course, we can. But wouldn't we resemble the atheist in a cartoon joke? God appears to him once again, and the exasperated atheist exclaims, "How many times do I have to tell You I don't believe in You?"



Summary

Introduction

Time is becoming an increasingly significant value. We experience this by chasing after passing deadlines, fleeting youth, and ultimately fleeting life itself. The value of time has been gradually constructed over centuries. In a sense, the entire history of the West is a process of transforming time into a value. This book is about that process: how time has been and continues to be transformed into a value, what caused this transformation, its consequences, and what the future might hold.

Viewing history through the lens of time's transformation into a value (axiologization of time) provides an organized picture of logically interconnected facts, phenomena, and problems. Even a glance at the chapter titles and a reading of this summary reveal how seemingly distant issues are interconnected when approached from this perspective.

Chapter I: Western Civilization and Speed

This chapter analyzes the unique phenomenon of modern Western civilization—its increasing speed across many domains. We define the concept of civilizational speed and identify methods to measure it.

We also define Western civilization by outlining its five dimensions: geographical location, historical heritage, elements of technopolis, value systems, and the sphere of daily life.

Civilizational acceleration is examined from a macro perspective, taking a broad view of the economy, and from a micro perspective, focusing on individuals.

Analyzing acceleration from a macroeconomic perspective, we explore its economic roots: the principles of private market economies combined with the West's unique capacity to transform societal wealth into productive capital. This ability to mobilize productive capital emerged relatively recently, thanks to the unification of property rights definitions and management methods across Western civilization. We discuss the historical process that led to this unification and explain why it accelerates the creation of productive capital. The Western ability to generate productive capital is contrasted with the Third World economies, where wealth often fails to become capital (and is the so-called dead capital).

From an individual perspective, we examine the impact of civilizational acceleration through the LNS (Better-Newer-Faster) value system. This system exerts pressure on individuals as consumers, workers, and producers, shaping their preferences, habits, interests, and judgments. We highlight the feedback mechanism: civilizational pressure transforms individual value systems, which in turn reproduce and reinforce that pressure.

Finally, we list factors that differentiate sensitivity to civilizational pressure across countries, regions, social groups, and economic sectors.

Chapter II: The Growing Value of Time

In the ever-accelerating Western civilization, time has become a scarce and valued resource. The economy has subjected it to market rules. Time resources can be managed rationally, and control over them represents a new form of power.

We provide examples of time resource management and goods whose trade constitutes indirect or direct time transactions. We also explain the relationship between sensitivity to LNS values (Better-Newer-Faster) and the perceived attractiveness of such goods.

The economic value of time and the speed of civilizational processes are interdependent. As one increases, so does the other. Therefore, the growing value of time can be measured by the increasing resources allocated to accelerating various processes. We present an outline of such a measurement. The relationship between time's value and civilization's speed is illustrated by comparing the growth of IT hardware processing speed to rising investment expenditures in the IT sector.

The main part of the chapter discusses the mechanism by which two widespread expectations and demands related to the growing value of time emerged in Western civilization. Both expectations increasingly influence the allocation of civilizational resources and have become crucial elements of our civilizational identity.

The first expectation, *Stay-Young-Longer*, stems from the growing value of economic time. A fast-paced civilization rewards behaviors and personality traits more commonly found among younger people. The young can be faster. The old are slower, less flexible, and less open to the new. We describe how this pragmatically rooted expectation transformed into an independent (autotelic) value, detached from instrumental motivations. *Stay-Young-Longer*, as an autonomous value—also known as the cult of youth—becomes a self-sustaining factor driving civilizational acceleration, stimulating specific allocation processes.

The second expectation, *Be-Longer*, arises from the growing value of our earthly time. It gains significance due to the “eschatological reduction” caused by secularization (a historical outline from the 11th to 19th centuries is provided in the chapter). Secularization removes the belief in “transcendent continuation” from our lives, while the scientific explosion (since the 16th century) has radically diminished humanity's position in the universe. The degradation of humanity's status in the hierarchy of beings and the absence of eternal life perspectives elevate the importance and value of earthly life. We present a list of conditions that have recently turned this increased value into a widespread and strongly articulated expectation to *Be-Longer*.

Be-Longer, like *Stay-Young-Longer*, becomes an autonomous value, stimulating significant allocation processes described in greater detail in Chapter IV.

Chapter III: The Death Taboo

Secularization has increased the value of our earthly time, and the first half of the 20th century brought an unprecedented rise in average life expectancy. However, this did not

immediately lead to widespread articulation of expectations for longer life or demands for its realization. For several decades, these expectations were suppressed due to a peculiar phenomenon: the death taboo, which peaked in the middle of the century.

In this chapter, we analyze the death taboo in detail. We conclude that the death taboo, understood as the repression of death and dying from societal consciousness, was a classic defense mechanism against the mass existential frustration prevalent at the time.

We present statistics on 20th-century demographic processes within Western civilization, which form the basis for our conclusions about the frustration-driven origins of the phenomenon.

At the root of the death taboo lies an unprecedented disparity in the dynamics of increased survival rates between younger and older generations in the first half of the 20th century. The significant improvement in survival rates for younger generations during this period, combined with the lack of progress for older individuals (who comprised two-thirds of the population) and the "scientific" pessimism regarding their future prospects, created a state of mass existential frustration. One of the primary responses to this situation was the suppression of the topic of death and dying.

In contrast, the latter half of the 20th century saw a radical shift in healthcare policies and expenditures. The priority became combating diseases affecting adults and the elderly. The delayed effects of these efforts reversed the dynamics of survival rate improvements. Over the last 30–40 years, older generations have benefited more than the young. This has alleviated existential frustration and is gradually, albeit slowly, reducing the death taboo.

Chapter IV: Toward Timeless Existence

This chapter examines the fundamental consequences of the growing value of time. First, it discusses the characteristic directions toward which increasing civilizational resources are being allocated and the discernible trajectory of Western civilization's development. Second, it explores how the widespread demand for Living-Ever-Longer has created the myth that this desire is eternal. Third, it highlights how the differing paces of secularization and modernization in the West versus other cultural spheres have generated significant intercivilizational tensions.

We argue and substantiate the thesis that the growing value of earthly time can be measured through statistical analysis of healthcare expenditures. These expenditures reflect our preferences for Living-Longer. We present statistical data for the period 1880–2000 and existing forecasts extending to 2075. All these data reveal an almost exponential increase in spending on healthcare and life extension. This trend significantly reflects societal preferences and values. The cumulative effect is one of the most significant reallocations of civilizational resources observable since the mid-20th century. An increasingly larger portion of Gross National Product (GNP) is and will continue to be allocated to fulfilling the preference for Living-Ever-Longer.

In the latter part of the chapter, we note that the expectations for Living-Ever-Longer and Staying-Young-Longer meet the criteria of mythical perceptions of reality. The value of time, when entrenched within mythological structures, transforms into an autonomous and highly potent factor that perpetuates the civilizational mechanism that generated these expectations.

In conclusion, we observe that the ever-increasing strength of demands and desires for Living-Ever-Longer, forecasts in this area, and the lack of a conceivable boundary for these expectations allow us to discern a trajectory for Western civilization's development that extends beyond goals typically considered earthly. Just as an exponential function approaches infinity without reaching it, the trajectory of Living-Longer moves toward its boundary, which also lies in infinity—but in terms of human time.

Chapter V: Death in Retreat

This chapter discusses the increasingly common cultural responses to the clash between achievements and ambitions related to Living-Ever-Longer and the eternal phenomenon of death. We highlight mental, psychological, and moral transformations that are becoming lasting effects of these reactions.

The general response of the West has been an increasing perception of death as an aberration and anomaly. The longer we live on average, the more we perceive the death of children and adults, though not yet elderly, as abnormal. This interpretation of death reconciles its existence with the desire for Living-Ever-Longer and optimism about the future. It legitimizes the allocation of ever-greater resources to the fight for a longer life. It also changes our attitude toward death, fostering active opposition and intensifying the will to combat this Eternal Inevitability.

This spiritual transformation is currently exercised on a relatively small scale. It primarily manifests as opposition to the death of increasingly older individuals who die below the rising average life expectancy. In this way, Western individuals gradually prepare themselves to accept increasingly extraordinary demands and ideas for extending earthly existence.

We also discuss techniques for alleviating terminal stress, offering pragmatic solutions to reduce the dread of dying in a secular age, where individuals often view their impending end as a transition into a terrifying void of nonexistence.

Chapter VI: Victories Over Time – The 20th Century

This chapter explores the directions taken in the latter half of the 20th century in research and expenditures aimed at fulfilling the expectations for Living-Longer.

In the second half of the 20th century, time became one of the leading subjects of modern physics. This shift is undoubtedly linked to the growing sensitivity of Western individuals to this aspect of reality. Since Newtonian physics' concept of absolute time was replaced by the theory of relativity, the door has been opened for serious studies on the possibility and methods of moving through time. While technologies enabling such travel remain impossible,

the theoretical aspects of time travel have become a subject of rigorous theoretical investigation.

We discuss the approaches to analyzing time in modern physics theories (block time, relative time, frozen time, and the controversies surrounding its ontological status) and the paradoxes arising from the collision between the linear experience of time and theories that negate its linearity.

The main section of the chapter examines the successes of science, medical practice, and prevention in overcoming the primary causes of death among middle-aged and elderly individuals in the latter half of the 20th century—namely, cardiovascular diseases and cancer (responsible for two-thirds of deaths). After a period of catastrophic increases in morbidity and mortality caused by these conditions, a breakthrough occurred between 1960 and 2000. The upward trend in cases and deaths was halted and reversed, as evidenced by the statistical data presented.

Finally, we point to a new and alarming phenomenon affecting the health of Western societies—physical inactivity and obesity. This issue has reached epidemic proportions, causing such severe consequences for health and survival rates that it threatens to negate the positive effects of combating cardiovascular diseases and cancer.

Chapter VII: Time and Being in the Future

(Discussion based on the planned revised version)

This chapter discusses the latest (2002–2008) achievements in science and technology—especially in medicine, pharmacology, and biotechnology—in treating diseases and countering the aging process. It also describes experimental, planned, and anticipated technologies and products in this field, as well as the debates surrounding their potential social and cultural consequences.

Once the average life expectancy exceeded 80–85 years, aging itself, rather than specific diseases, began to emerge as a more significant problem. We explore the biological and biochemical aspects of the aging mechanism, as well as the great but only partially realized ideas of Living-Ever-Longer from the latter half of the 20th century: transplantology, implantology, biotechnology, and genetic engineering.

Particular attention is devoted to the most promising current path to life extension—biotechnology. We present successive generations of drugs based on genetically modified proteins. We also examine the applications of genetic engineering techniques for embryo selection (PGD and PGH) and discuss the progress, technical challenges, and ethical issues associated with gene therapies and modifications to germline cells (sperm and eggs).

The already available techniques for modifying humans based on designed and inheritable physical and personality traits, as well as those anticipated shortly, have sparked lively debates about their potential social, cultural, political, and ethical consequences if widely applied. We present opposing viewpoints on the feasibility of implementing these technologies, including the transhumanist movement, whose proponents view such

developments optimistically and positively, believing in the rapid pace and potential of deep hereditary changes to our genomes.

Finally, the chapter presents a hypothesis about the possible future weakening or even extinction of the desire for Living-Ever-Longer. This may occur if humanity loses the will or need to preserve its identity over time, especially as life expectancy significantly increases in an ever-accelerating civilization.

Chapter VIII: The West and Christianity

(Chapter VIII is planned as a separate book on the European phenomenon)

The emergence of modern Western civilization in its current form—with its priorities and developmental trajectory—was determined by an unparalleled process: the transformation of time into a value. This transformation was made possible by the successful implantation of a unique cultural invention—Christianity—into the specific ecological and cultural niche of Europe.

In this chapter, we expand on this thesis. We outline the essential elements of Europe’s ecological niche (geographical location, topography, climate, geological activity, and Greek, Roman, and barbarian heritage) and explain why these characteristics made it particularly receptive to Christianity.

We analyze Christianity’s pro-modernization axiologies, including the Judaic invention of linear time connected to Christian eschatology, Christian metaphysics, the idea of a rational and predictable God, and the sanctification of labor. We also examine the areas transformed by these axiologies, such as science, art, agriculture, technology, individual-society relations, and political, municipal, and corporate organizations.

Special attention is given to the Church and its role in creating Europe’s new ideological space by embedding all components of Christianity into culture and society, intensively and systematically promoting, teaching, disseminating, and supporting these components with a system of transcendent and earthly rewards and punishments.

Christianity can be likened to a specific mutation introduced between the 2nd and 10th centuries CE into Europe’s cultural genotype. Using genetic engineering terminology, the Church acted as a vector through which Christianity penetrated and became an integral part of Europe’s cultural DNA. It also ensured the strong expression of this mutation throughout the European organism.

In Europe’s unique niche, this mutation functioned as a catalyst. It reprogrammed the European individual, instilling a new worldview, values, ambitions, dreams, goals, and fears. In a historical blink of an eye, this culturally transformed European created a civilization unmatched in material power, boundless ambition, and optimism.

Organized Christianity underwent radical secularization in this civilizational process, yet the secularized West appears to replicate Christianity’s eschatological promises in a temporal context and continues to seek ways to fulfill them. Today, it seems to place particular hope in biotechnology as a continuation of the act of Creation.