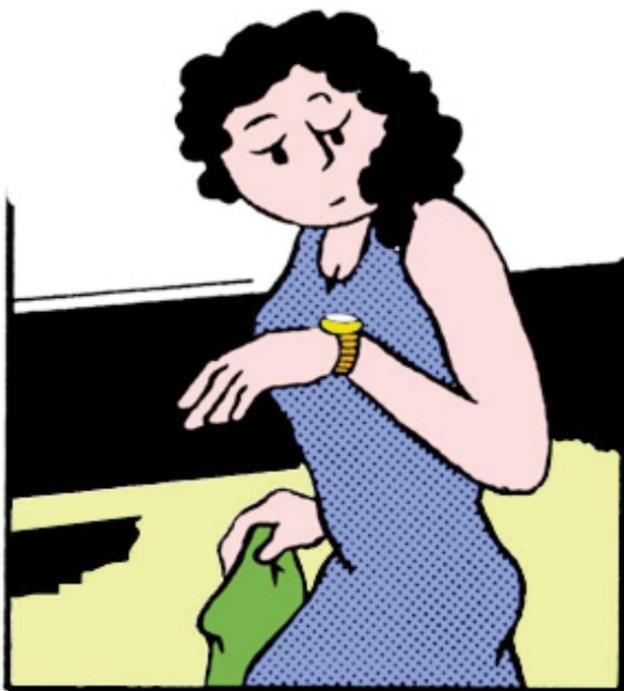


An Experiment with Time

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An Experiment with Time

“What exactly is Time?” asked King Solomon.

“The antechamber of Eternity,” said Melchizedek.

TIME MAY BE MORE MYSTERIOUS THAN WE IMAGINE. And for anyone wishing to explore that mystery, I would recommend a book—little-known today—entitled *An Experiment with Time*.

Written by J. W. Dunne, a British engineer and philosopher (and gentleman—some of the experiment was conducted from an armchair in the library of his club), *An Experiment with Time* created a stir when published in 1927. Despite his assurances that it required “no previous knowledge of science, mathematics, philosophy, or psychology” and was “considerably easier to understand than are, say, the rules of Contract Bridge,” much of the book is abstruse. But the philosophical portions—which delve into ontology and epistemology, and employ such terms as infinite regress, retro-causality, and quantum-interconnectedness—may be skipped. At the core of the book is a simple experiment, which Dunne performs, explains, and urges the reader to repeat.

Dunne had been bewildered by a series of precognitive dreams. In one of them, he had dreamt of the eruption of a volcano on a French island and the death of 4000 islanders. When the newspaper arrived, it headlined the eruption of Mount Pelée on Martinique and a death-toll of 40,000. Seemingly, the horrifying dream had been prompted by his *later* reading of the newspaper account. Of his predictive dreams, this one was the most dramatic; but all were perplexing. They seemed to violate rules far more fundamental than those of contract bridge.

His experiences led Dunne to make a study of the relationship between time and dreaming. He went to sleep each night with a notebook and pencil under his pillow. And in the morning he quickly recorded his dreams, before they faded from memory. When he compared their images with the occurrences in his daily life, Dunne made a startling discovery. Generally, a dream derived its imagery from

vivid or unusual happenings within a space of 24 hours—24 hours *in either direction*. That is to say, his dreams were influenced by events of both the past day and the next! Impossibly, they were “comprised of images of past experiences and images of future experiences blended together in approximately equal proportions.”

Extending his study to the dreams of friends and relatives, Dunne found similar correlations. He realized that he had discerned a “hitherto overlooked peculiarity in the structure of Time.” And he concluded that the standard model of Time—a series of events flowing into the future—was simply a mode of human perception. Indeed, “past” and “future” were nothing more than artifacts of the waking mind. Beyond our daily experience existed a timeless Present.

What was the significance of his findings? For one thing, Dunne pointed out, they provided an explanation for the curious phenomenon of *déjà vu*. (Why do we feel that something has happened before? Because we *dreamt* of it the previous night.) But more importantly, they supported belief in the immortality of the soul. For if Time was an illusion, Eternity was real.

Can it be then? Are dreams a window into the nature of the cosmos? Can they afford us a glimpse into the meaning of existence? Can we explore the deepest of mysteries while dozing in bed (or lounging in an armchair at our club)?

The reader may repeat Dunne’s experiment and decide for himself.

