Chapter 2
Philosophical Space and Time

"I do not believe that there are any longer any philosophical problems about Time; there is only the physical problem of determining the exact physical geometry of the four-dimensional continuum that we inhabit." [1]

2.1 Time: What Is It, and Is It Real?

"Time is generally thought to be one of the more mysterious ingredients of the Universe."[2]

Before going any further with time *travel*, it will be well worth the effort to take a closer look at time itself, the 'stuff' or 'thing' or . . . ? that we are interested in traveling 'through' or 'around' or 'across' or . . . ? Oddly enough, I'll start with religion, as philosophical theologians had identified time as something unusual long before Newton's words on time in his *Principia* that I mentioned in the Introduction, and many thousands of years before science fiction writers and their time travel stories.

We can, in fact, trace the religious interest in time back at least sixteen centuries to the Christian theologian St. Augustine and his *Confessions* (in which he famously admitted "What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me: but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled."). Certainly the seventeenth century Spanish Jesuit Juan Eusebius Nieremberg caught the spirit of wonder that time holds for the devout when he wrote, in his *Of Temperance and Patience*, that "*Time* is a sacred thing; it flows from Heaven . . . It is an emanation from that place, where eternity springs . . . It is a *clue* cast down from Heaven to guide us . . . It has some assimilation to Divinity."

Going outside Christianity, we can easily find other equally strong reactions to the mystery of time. From Plutarch's *Platonic Questions* we learn that when the question of time's nature was put to Pythagoras, he simply uttered the mystical "time is the soul of the world." The *Laws of Manu* of Hinduism, the *Torah* of

[1] H. Putnam, "Time and Physical Geometry," *Journal of Philosophy*, April 1967, pp. 240–247.

[2] P. Horwich, *Asymmetries in Time*, MIT Press 1987.

P.J. Nahin, *Time Machine Tales*, Science and Fiction,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-48864-6_2

Judaism, the *Koran* of Islam, and the revealed truths of Gautama Buddha are all full of references to time. It is, in fact, to the pagan gods of Greek mythology that we owe our 'modern' image of Chronos, or Father Time.

Not just the Greeks made time a god. In the *Bhagavad Gita* (*Song of the Lord*), the central religious-romantic epic of Hinduism that predates Christ by five centuries, one of the characters reveals his divine nature and declares his power thus: "Know that I am Time, that makes the worlds to perish, when ripe, and bring on them destruction." And in the even older Egyptian Book of the Dead, which dates back over three thousand years, the newly deceased was thought literally to become one with time itself. The merging of time and the resurrection of the body after death in the Book is shown in the line "I am Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, and I have the power to be born a second time."

The Greek philosopher Plato (circa 400 B.C.) gave us a curious way to think of time: as a *closed loop*. While Plato did think of time as having a beginning, his conception did not have time extending off into the infinite future as does the modern, everyday view. Rather, Plato visualized time as curving back on itself—as *circular* in nature. This was, in fact, a reasonable reflection on what Plato could see everywhere in nature, with the seemingly endless repetition of the seasons, the regular ebb and surge of the tides (the old English word *tid* was a unit of time), the unvarying alternation of night and day, and the rotation of the visible planets in the sky. Whatever might be observed today, it seemed obvious to Plato, would happen again in nature. Circular time in science fiction was briefly mentioned in Chap. 1,[3] and it occurs outside that genre, too, as in James Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake*, which opens in mid-sentence and ends with the first part of the same sentence. This view of time has a powerful, ancient visual symbol, the Worm Ouroborous, or World Snake, that eats its own tail endlessly.

Circular time, with its closed topology, was favorably presented in Stephen Hawking's famous book *A Brief History of Time*. In it he concludes that there is no need for God because in circular time there is no first event and hence no need for a First Cause. Vigorous philosophical rebuttals were quick to come, of course![4]

Turning to fiction, Ray Bradbury wrote a beautifully poetic passage about the mystery of time in "Night Meeting," one of the splendid sub-stories in his episodic 1950 masterpiece *The Martian Chronicles*. A man of A.D. 2002, who is one of the modern inhabitants of Mars, somehow meets the ghostly image of a long-dead Martian one cold August night. The conditions are just right for such a cross-time encounter. As the man thinks to himself, "There is the smell of Time in the air

[3]Another example from science fiction is the story by I. Hobana, "Night Broadcast," in which a television signal from the past is picked up by a gadget that is probing the *future*: "By going far enough into the future one comes upon what we call the past." You can find this tale in the *Penguin World Omnibus of Science Fiction*, Penguin Books 1986.

[4]See, for example, W. L. Craig, "What Place, Then, for a Creator?: Hawking on God and Creation," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, December 1990, pp. 473–491, and R. Le Poidevin, "Creation in a Closed Universe Or, Have Physicists Disproved the Existence of God?," *Religious Studies*, March 1991, pp. 39–48.

tonight. . . . There was a thought. What did Time smell like? Like dust and people. And if you wondered what Time sounded like it sounded like water running in a dark cave and voices crying and dirt dropping down on hollow box lids, and rain. And, going further, what did Time *look* like? Time looked like snow dropping silently into a black room or it looked like a silent film in an ancient theater, one hundred billion faces falling like those New Year balloons, down and down into nothing. That was how Time smelled and looked and sounded. And tonight . . . tonight you could almost *touch* Time."

Well, lovely words, yes, but they don't really tell us what time *is*. Perhaps Einstein the physicist can tell us. In the *New York Times* of December 3, 1919, we find him quoted as follows: "Till now it was believed that time and space existed by themselves, even if there was nothing [Newton's view]—no Sun, no Earth, no stars—while now we know that time and space are not the vessel for the Universe, but could not exist at all if there were no contents, namely, no Sun, no Earth, and other celestial bodies." Less than 2 years later Einstein stated this view again (*New York Times*, April 4, 1921): "Up to this time the conceptions of time and space have been such that if everything in the Universe were taken away, if there were nothing left, there would still be left to man time and space." Einstein went on to deny this view of reality, saying that, according to his general theory of relativity, time and space would *cease to exist* if the universe were empty. This has the ring of one of Einstein's favorite philosophers, Spinoza, who declared in his *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* that "there was no Time or Duration before Creation." In a correspondence with Samuel Clarke—Newton's friend who translated Newton's *Optiks* into Latin—the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (who began the correspondence in 1715) expressed similar ideas: "Instants, consider'd without the things, are nothing at all . . . they consist only in the successive order of things."

The pragmatic scientist would certainly agree with Leibniz. After all, what could it even mean to talk of time unless you can measure it? And what you use to measure time is a clock—some kind of changing configuration of matter involving spinning gears, ticking pendulums, and rotating dial pointers. Mere *unchanging* matter, alone, is not sufficient to measure time because a still clock measures nothing. *Changing* matter seems to be required. Yet, not surprisingly, not everybody agrees. The counterview, the view that time has nothing to do with change, was expressed in an interesting manner by a science fiction fan in a letter to the editor of *Wonder Stories* (January 1931): "Just one thing, you have these time-traveling yarns, good stuff to read all right, but bunk, you know; because if there's no such thing as time, which there isn't, *only change* [my emphasis], how can one travel in . . . something that doesn't exist. To our planet which goes around the Sun there is simply a turning and warming of one side and then the other, i.e., years, days, minutes, etc., is something purely artificial, invented by man to tell him when to do certain things, work and stop work . . ."[5]

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[5]This fan's idea was not new. For Plato's most famous student, Aristotle, time was *motion* (in a world in which nothing moved, argued Aristotle, there would be no time), and he expressed this

Going even beyond the ideas of Einstein, Spinoza, Leibniz, Plato, Aristotle, and our science fiction fan, at least one metaphysician felt that time would have no meaning, even in a massive and changing universe, without the additional presence of conscious, rational beings.[6] That sounds very much like an echo of the French philosopher Henri Bergson who, in 1888, somewhat mysteriously declared that time is “nothing but the ghost of space haunting the reflective consciousness.” A few years before Taylor, however, a fellow philosopher had argued for exactly the opposite view, that temporal passage is independent of the existence of conscious beings.[7]

All this divergence of opinion perhaps explains why even a lightweight Hollywood movie like Mel Brooks’ 1987 *Spaceballs* can get a laugh from a time joke. Even kids know that the characters, when talking about time, haven’t the slightest idea of *what* they are talking about. The movie, a spoof on such classic films as *Star Wars*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, quickly reaches a point of crisis. To find out what to do next, the evil Lord Helmet and his chief henchman decide on a novel approach: they will look at an instant video of their own movie! (Instant videos are available *before* the movie is finished.) Perplexed at watching on a television screen everything that he is doing as he does it (the screen correctly shows an infinite regression of television screens, each being watched by a Lord Helmet), Lord Helmet initiates the following rapid-fire exchange. (It is, of course, a clever take-off on Abbott and Costello’s “Who’s on First?”)

What the hell am I looking at? When does this happen in the movie?
Now! You’re looking at now, sir. Everything that happens now, is happening, now.
What happened to then?
We’re past that.
When?
Just now, now.
Go back to then.
When?
Now.
Now?
Now.
I can’t.
Why?
We missed it.

view in his famous metaphor “Time is the moving image of eternity.” For Aristotle, then, time and change were inseparably intertwined. For Aristotle the world had existed for eternity, and the circularity of time was a central and powerful image; using his vivid illustration, it is equally true *in circular time* that we live both before *and* after the Trojan War.

[6] R. Taylor, “Time and Life’s Meaning,” *Review of Metaphysics*, June 1987, pp. 675–686.

[7] S. McCall, “Objective Time Flow,” *Philosophy of Science*, September 1976, pp. 337–362.

When?
Just now. [The henchman then sets the video to rewind.]
When will then be now?
Soon.

We may laugh at this, even dismiss it as mere movie madness, but could any of us *really* do much better if, like Saint Augustine, we were backed into a corner and asked to explain time? Somehow, I think even the distinguished twentieth-century Harvard professor Hilary Putnam whose words open this chapter would find it difficult to know where to begin. He might even become as confused as the time traveler in the 1968 film *Je t'aime, Je t'aime*, whose oscillations in time, from present to past and back again, leave him so befuddled that he decides he'd rather be dead. What, then, *can* we say about time? Despite Putnam's bold words, I suspect that most people would come down on the side of Augustine.

The mystery of time was well captured by R. H. Hutton (1826–1897), the literary editor of the *Spectator*, when he wrote in his 1895 review (see note 1 in the Introduction) of Wells' *Time Machine* that "the story is based on that rather favorite speculation of modern metaphysicians which supposes *time* to be at once the most important of the conditions of organic evolution, and the most misleading of subjective illusions . . . and yet Time is so purely subjective a mode of thought, that a man of searching intellect is supposed to be able to devise the means of traveling in time as well as in space, and visiting, so as to be contemporary with, any age of the world, past or future, so as to become as it were a true 'pilgrim of eternity.'"

Novelist Israel Zangwill (1864–1926) wrote a similar but much more analytical review of Wells' novel for the *Pall Mall Magazine* (see note 1 in the Introduction). Zangwill was the only Victorian reviewer to attempt a scientific analysis of time travel. Although he thought Wells' effort was a "brilliant little romance," Zangwill also thought the time machine—"much like the magic carpet of *The Arabian Nights*"—was simply "an amusing fantasy." Zangwill continued in his review with what was even then a common idea about a way one might actually be able, at least in principle, to look backward in time; one could travel far out into space by going faster than light and then watch the light from the past as it catches up to you. (Note, carefully, that Zangwill was writing in 1895, 10 years before Einstein's special relativity put a limit on possible speeds.) In this way, Zangwill wrote, one could watch "the Whole Past of the Earth still playing itself out."

Indeed, even before Zangwill, the well-known French astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842–1925) had made this dramatic idea a centerpiece of his 1887 novel *Lumen*. That book, a best-seller in Europe even before its appearance in England, describes how a man just dead (in 1864) instantly finds his spirit on the star Capella, where he is able to watch the light then arriving from the Earth of 1793. In particular, he watches the French Revolution play itself out and sees himself as a child. Flammarion may have, in fact, been inspired to write his novel by an essay written several years earlier (in 1883) by the British physicist

J. H. Poynting (1852–1914). Poynting's essay,[8] which opens with the statement that it was, in turn, inspired by an anonymous pamphlet published "30 or 40 years ago" on the same topic, specifically mentions watching historical events from Capella.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the idea of watching the past by outrunning light had drifted down into juvenile literature, as in the 1904 novel *Around a Distant Star* by Jean Delaire (the pen name for Pauline Touchemoline (1868–1950)), in which a young man builds a spaceship that can travel at two thousand times the speed of light. With it, he and a friend travel to an Earth-like planet nineteen hundred light-years distant and use a super-telescope to watch the Crucifixion (and then the resurrection) of Jesus. Early magazine science fiction also found the idea of looking backward in time with delayed light to be an irresistible one, involving romance and murder.[9] In another tale incorporating human emotions, a scientist loses his wife to a rival who kidnaps her and then escapes in a faster-than-light rocket ship headed for parts unknown. After searching for them with his own brilliant invention of the 'ampliscope' (several quantum leaps beyond the telescope), the scientist locates the couple, skipping from planet to planet light-years distant. His only pleasure, then, is to use his own faster-than-light craft to outrun the images of his lost love and watch them over and over. Eventually, however, he comes to realize the ultimate futility of it all. As the final line of this sad tale says, "It would be senseless, I knew, chasing on and on after yesterdays."[10]

The reality of time received a new twist with the additional imagery of instants of time being likened to the points on a *straight* line. In the West it was the Christian theological doctrine of *unique* historical events that gave rise to *linear* time in the minds of the common folk. The creation of the world and Adam and Eve, the adventures of Noah and the cataclysmic Flood, the Resurrection—these were all events that occurred in sequence, *once*. None would happen again and so, for Christianity, circular time just would not do.[11] In addition, it has been argued that the major spiritual content of Christianity—a significant reason for its popular support even in the face of brutally harsh Roman suppression—is that it brought the *expectation of change* into the static world of ancient times. It was, in fact, in ancient religious teachings that our modern view of linear time had its origin, a view that most people today (including the most hardened agnostic physicist) find to be as natural as Plato and Aristotle found circular time.

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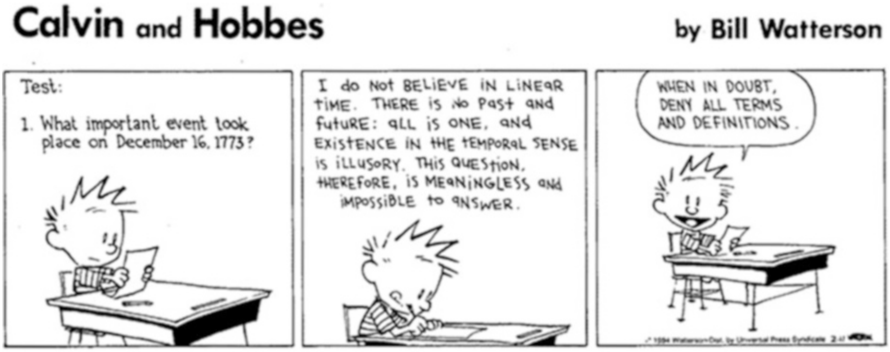
[8] J. H. Poynting, "Overtaking the Rays of Light," in Poynting's *Collected Scientific Papers*, Cambridge University Press 1920.

[9] As in, for example, G. A. England, "The Time Reflector," *The Monthly Story Magazine*, September 1905.

[10] D. D. Sharp, "Faster Than Light," *Marvel Science Stories*, February 1939. The year before saw the appearance of a story with the same idea, a story that specifically cites Flammerion: M. Weisinger, "Time On My Hands," *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, June 1938.

[11] Still, just to show how one can find support for almost any view in the same religious dogma, Ecclesiastes 1:9 would seem to be a claim *not* for linear time but rather for circular time!: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun."



Even though linear time was the norm after Christ, there were still enough questions about time to perplex the deepest of thinkers, and the next 2000 years resulted in plenty of thinking. Discourses on time by such philosophers as Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Kant, Nietzsche, and Hegel can be found by the yard in any decent university library. Nearly all (if not indeed all) of these presentations have metaphysical, even theological, underpinnings. For example, Descartes is generally believed to have argued for a discontinuous, atomistic nature to time (recall the *chronon* from Chap. 1). This is the modern view of his thinking, because in his *Meditations* (1641), in particular in the third meditation on God's reality, Descartes appears to argue that God must continually recreate the world at each *separate* moment of its existence. That is, the world is recreated in a discontinuous succession of *individual* acts by God.[12]

Finally, with Newton's discussion of *absolute* time, which is the belief that time is the same everywhere in the universe, there was for the first time a *physicist* writing about time (although, as I mention in Chap. 1, Newton's views were also influenced *heavily* by theological considerations, in addition to mathematical physics). But, despite Newton's genius, the mystery of time remained a mystery.

In 1905 Einstein's name appeared among the contributors to the study of time, and so at last something besides metaphysical speculation on the subject was added to the body of human thought. Einstein's paper on special relativity introduced the revolutionary idea of *relative* time, which is the anti-Newton belief that the passage of time is *not* the same everywhere, but rather depends on local conditions. In retrospect, Einstein's 1905 work seems to be the perfect reply to the comment by Isaac Barrow (1630–1677)—Newton's teacher and the first Lucasian professor of mathematics at Cambridge (the chair once held by Stephen Hawking centuries

[12]For more on this, see R. T. W. Arthur, "Continuous Creation, Continuous Time: A Refutation of the Alleged Discontinuity of Cartesian Time," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, July 1988, pp. 349–375.

later)—that "because *Mathematicians* frequently make use of Time, they ought to have a distinct idea of the meaning of the Word, otherwise they are Quacks."

Then, just 3 years after Einstein, along came a second astonishing paper by the Cambridge philosopher John Ellis McTaggart (1866–1925). This paper[13] claims to prove that whatever time might be *thought* to be (even by Einstein), it really isn't that because time isn't even real. (This would seem, I think you'd agree, to have potentially profound implications for time travel!) The method of the paper is to deny the reality of time via an infinite-regress argument that one philosopher[14] has called the *pons asinorum* ("bridge of asses") of the riddle of time. As McTaggart's own opening sentence freely admits, "It doubtless seems highly paradoxical to assert that Time is unreal, and that all statements which involve its reality are erroneous."

McTaggart began his analysis by observing that there are two separate and distinct ways of talking about events in time. Following his terminology, one can say that events are either future, present, or past (the so-called *A-series*), or one can say that events temporally ordered by each being later than some other events, earlier than others, and simultaneous with still others (the so-called *B-series*). He then continued by asserting that time requires change, and followed that with the observation that the A-series (but not the B-series) incorporates such change. That is, if event X is earlier than event Y, then X is *always* earlier than Y and thus there is no change in this (or in any other) example of a B-series. As a specific example, let Y be the birth of a child, and let X be the birth of its mother. In contrast, if X is first in the future, then is in the present, and finally is in the past, then we have an example of change (and hence of *time*) in the A-series; for example, let X be the next time you blink.

With this rather pedestrian start, McTaggart then pulled his rabbit out of the hat. It makes no sense, he argued, to talk of the 'future,' 'present,' and 'past' of an event because these terms are mutually exclusive. That is, no two of these predicates can apply at once, and yet, paradoxically, every event possesses all three and thus we have a contradiction. It therefore, concludes McTaggart, makes no sense to talk of future, present, or past. And because it makes no sense to talk of them, they do not exist, and so there can be no A-series and hence no change, and thus no reality to time. McTaggart apparently realized just how befuddling all that would appear to just about everybody who read it, and so he played devil's advocate (D.A.) in his paper by trying to anticipate the various objections people could raise. Of course, he always managed to refute the D.A. at every turn. It is worth the effort to go through the details of McTaggart's 'proof,' as that will make it clear what there is about

[13] J. E. McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," *Mind*, October 1908.

[14] L. O. Mink, "Time, McTaggart and Pickwickian Language," *Philosophical Quarterly*, July 1960, pp. 252–263. The phrase *pons asinorum* has its origin in a plane geometry theorem: the angles opposite the equal sides of an isosceles triangle are themselves equal. Seeing the truth of this is said to separate the quick-witted from the dull. It isn't clear (to me, anyway), however, on which side of McTaggart's 'proof' the quick-witted were imagined to fall. You'll see what I mean in just a moment.

'traditional' philosophical reasoning that so irritates modern philosophers trained in mathematical physics (and what makes physicists roll their eyes when confronted with arguments like McTaggart's).

The predicates of future, present, and past are really not incompatible for any event, the D.A. says some will claim, because the real predicates we should use are '*was* future,' '*is* present,' and '*will be* past,' and these *can* be possessed all at once by any event. Nice try, counters McTaggart, but that will not solve the problem. By allowing such modified predicates, we must actually allow for all nine possibilities, some of which are still incompatible. That is, the 'was,' 'is,' and 'will be' could each be potentially attached to 'future,' 'present,' and 'past': for example, 'was past' is incompatible with 'will be future.'

Oh, counters the D.A., we can eliminate that concern by allowing even more complex predicates to arrive at a third level of structure, such as 'is going to have been past,' and 'was going to be future,' and those *are* compatible. But McTaggart swats that argument away, too, by displaying new incompatibles, as well as by showing that the process of ever-increasing predicate complexity is a vicious infinite regress that drags along the seeds of its own doom at every step.[15] There is simply no escape from incompatibility, he says, and so there is no time.

Well! What can one do when presented with such an argument, one that seems to claim philosophers can wrest free the secrets of nature by pondering the historical accidents of English syntax? As David Hume once said, "Nothing is more usual than for philosophers to encroach on the province of grammarians, and to engage in disputes of words, while they imagine they are handling controversies of the deepest importance and concern." One modern philosopher apparently agreed with Hume, at least in the case of McTaggart's 'proof,' and he was pretty blunt with his evaluation of it: "McTaggart's famous argument for the unreality of time is so completely outrageous that it should long ago have been interred in decent obscurity. And indeed it would have been, were it not for the fact that so many philosophers are not sure that it has ever really been given a proper burial, and so from time to time someone digs it up all over again in order to pronounce it *really*

[15]Here's a clever way to systematically generate McTaggart's infinite regress of complex predicates, as presented by M. Dummett, "A Defense of McTaggart's Proof of the Unreality of Time," *Philosophical Review*, October 1969, pp. 497–504): "Let us call 'past,' 'present,' and 'future' 'predicates of first level.' If, as McTaggart suggests, we render 'was future' as 'future in the past,' and so forth, then we have nine predicates of second level, where we join any of the three on the left with any of the three on the right:

past		past
present	in the	present
future		future

Similarly, there are twenty-seven predicates of third level . . . "Dummett's construction clearly shows that, at the N-th level, there are 3^N predicates, most of which are incompatible.

dead. These periodic autopsies reveal that something more remains to be said."[16] That is certainly true, in as much as McTaggart's disarmingly innocent argument has caused disagreement and furrowed brows among philosophers for decades.

It is, in fact, easy to find examples of the continuing debate over McTaggart's analysis and, as silly as it strikes physicists, it still has a pulse in some quarters. While at least one philosopher has argued that McTaggart simply didn't really understand his own proof, this philosopher nevertheless agreed with McTaggart's conclusion about the unreality of time.[17] Another writer has illustrated how McTaggart's ideas have found their way into modern philosophical debates on the meaning of time in the cinema, particularly in the analysis of *anachrony*, the telling of a story out of normal time sequence, such as occurs in time travel movies.[18]

Other sorts of metaphysical proofs for the unreality of time have been offered besides McTaggart's. For example, it has be argued that time is unreal, at least in a world empty of consciousness, because the concepts of past, present, and future could not possibly have any meaning unless events could be remembered, experienced, and anticipated. Or, for a second example, some have held time to be unreal, at least in a deterministic world (as some argue four-dimensional spacetime to be), because any event whose occurrence follows from present conditions, and from physical laws, would exist (they say) *now*. This view, which seems to assert that everything should happen at once, I personally find to be sufficiently obtuse as not to be bothered by it.[19] Debates between those who believe in the common-sense idea that present, past, and future are attributes of events (the 'tensers') and those who deny it (the four-dimensional spacetime, block universe 'detensers') continues to now and then still flair up on the pages of philosophy journals. At least one philosopher likes both views![20] Most modern physicists, I think, simply don't care about this line of inquiry.

On the other hand, less than a month before his death Einstein revealed his feelings about the meaning of present, past, and future, and his words appear to be ones that show some sympathy to the philosophers. In a letter written on March 21, 1955, to the children of his dearest friend who had just died, Einstein wrote—with full knowledge that his own illness would be his last—"And now he has

[16]F. Christensen, "McTaggart's Paradox and the Nature of Time," *Philosophical Quarterly*, October 1974, pp. 289–299.

[17]Q. Smith, "The Infinite Regress of Temporal Attributions," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Fall 1986, pp. 383–396. To this came a rebuttal a year later by L. N. Oaklander, in the same journal (Fall 1987, pp. 425–431).

[18]G. Currie, "McTaggart at the Movies," *Philosophy*, July 1992, pp. 343–355.

[19]But if, upon reflection, it starts to bother *you*, see R. Gale, "Some Metaphysical Statements About Time," *Journal of Philosophy*, April 1963, pp. 225–237. We'll soon get to some of the more common philosophical questions on the nature of four-dimensional spacetime, such as 'is it deterministic or is it fatalistic?,' and 'does free-will have any meaning in four-dimensional spacetime?' Even physicists are interested such questions!

[20]R. Weingard, "Space-Time and the Direction of Time," *Nous*, may 1977, pp. 119–131.

preceded me briefly in bidding farewell to this strange world. This signifies nothing. For us believing physicists, the distinction between past, present, and future is only an illusion, even if a stubborn one."[21] Later in this chapter I'll return to these curious words and speculate on what Einstein may have meant by them.

I started this opening section on a religious note, and I'll end it on one. If you think the philosophical speculations on the nature of time that I've so far cited are 'really far out,' here's yet another one that leaves all the rest in the dust. In a paper that took real nerve to write (or, perhaps, simply a wicked sense of humor—and I write that in pure admiration) we read of how a spacetime that supports time travel can give the start for a *physics* explanation to the theological concept of Hell! After introducing just a bit of elementary spacetime physics (which I'll skip describing here because we'll do it later in the book), the author[22] shows how to 'construct' a compact region in spacetime (Hell) with the following properties:

1. While "so small even the Hubble Telescope couldn't image it" it can hold an infinity of physical beings;
2. Each of the beings in it are doomed, because of its time travel property, to an infinitely long personal future of damnation;
3. Each of the beings in it, because of its time travel property, can view all the future stages of their own personal damnation and so be "continually presented with a reminder of the impossibility of escape—a refinement no causally normal Hell can seemingly offer." In other words, and not to be too ironic about it, 'Theological Progress Through Physics!';
4. Each of the beings in it are continually being compressed together ("brought into dismaying proximity" with themselves) and so will spend eternity "listening to a cacophony" of their own cries of despair from *their personal future*.

There's more, but that's probably enough for you to get the idea. Richmond does admit that, as it stands, his time travel creation of Hell is not compatible with either quantum theory or even general relativity. Still, it *is* something to ponder, don't you think, when the subject of time travel comes up!

2.2 Linear Time and the Infinity of Past and Future

"A thousand years is a huge succession of yesterdays beyond our clear apprehension."[23]

—H. G. Wells

[21]Quoted from B. Hoffmann, *Albert Einstein: Creator & Rebel*, New American Library 1972, pp. 257–258.

[22]Alasdair M. Richmond, "Hilbert's Inferno: Time Travel and the Damned," *Ratio*, September 2013, pp. 233–249.

[23]This line appears in Wells' 1944 doctoral thesis, written for the University of London. You can find an abridgement of the thesis in *Nature*, April 1, 1944, pp. 395–397.

The modern concept of linear time as a straight line extending from the dim past through the present and disappearing into the misty future gives rise immediately to twin questions: "Did time have a beginning?" and "Will time ever end?" As one philosopher put it (long before physicists became seriously interested in singularities like the Big Bang) "Endings and beginnings are rooted in the very conception of time itself."[24] Starting at the beginning, we'll ask if the past has been forever? Early Biblical scholars, of course, believed the answers to both questions to be *no*.

They believed that the world came into being because of a First Cause, God's creation of everything. Those scholars expended vast quantities of energy (and, need I say it, time itself) in calculating the date of creation. Martin Luther, for example, argued for 4000 B.C. as roughly when everything, including time, began. Johannes Kepler adjusted this by a notch, to 4004 B.C., and later the Calvinist James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, tweaked it again. His date is the most impressive of all, at least in detail: the first day of the world was 4003, 70 days, and 6 h before the midnight that started the first day of the Christian era. Six days after that first day of the world, Adam was made, and as a final dash of specificity, this last date was declared to be Friday, October 28! Ironically, then, though Christian theology may be given credit for introducing linear time, it certainly did not provide very much of it. The beginning of time was just 6000 years or so ago, and of course The End—in the form of the Battle of Armageddon—has been awaited (with varying degrees of eagerness) for the last 1000 years.

The discovery in the seventeenth century of geological time cast a certain amount of skepticism on those early calculations concerning the duration of the past. With the discovery that the very Earth itself could be decoded for its history, the lure of trying to decode a mere book of admittedly finite age declined for most people although it cannot be denied that modern Creationists still find such a task to have its rewards). Geological time was discovered to a *chasm* of time extending backward for billions of years, a duration that is really incomprehensible for the human brain. It has become fashionable for geologists to refer to such enormous durations with the apt term *deep time*, a subtle play on the metaphor of the "ocean of time."

It is nothing less than humbling to historians who pause to think on how little of the past is known, that is, recorded. As the ever anonymous wit once put it, "History is a damn dim candle over a damn dark abyss." Still, even as enormous as is the age of the Earth, it is not infinite. But of course our planet is very old, and the universe is many billions of years older. Is the age of the universe also the duration of the past? Or is the past itself actually *infinite*?

An implicit assumption of the infinity of the past (and of the future, too) can be found in Book Three of Lucretius' science poem *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) where, just before the birth of Christ, Lucretius argues for the irrationality of fearing death: "The bygone antiquity of everlasting time before our birth

[24] I. Stearns, "Time and the Timeless," *Review of Metaphysics*, December 1950, pp. 187–200.

was nothing to us. Nature holds this up to us as a mirror of the time yet to come after our death. Is there anything in this that looks appalling, anything that means an aspect of gloom? Is it not more untroubled than any sleep?"

One philosopher[25] has traced the origins of rational support for the finite duration of the past to as far back as the sixth century A.D. The argument presented then by the Christian philosopher Joannes Philoponus of Alexandria (who is otherwise known as John the Grammarian) is simply that the world could *not* have been forever because that implies an infinity of successive acts could have taken place which (according to Philoponus) is impossible. A variation on this is the claim that if the past were infinite in extent, then everything would have happened by now! Infinity was just too big for the ancient mind (Zeno's hoary pre-Christian paradoxes, as is well-known today, are based on subtle errors in the use of infinity).

This view on the impossibility of an infinite past seems to have been the prevalent view; even as late as the twelfth century the debate among Christian theologians was not about the possibility of an infinite past, but instead about whether the Biblical 'six days of Creation' actually had taken place simultaneously. For many, the past was 'obviously' finite in duration.[26] Not all Christians accepted that conclusion, however, and the following century saw St. Thomas Aquinas (a follower of Aristotle) arguing for the opposite view of an infinite past.

Thomas' contemporary, St. Bonaventure, however, argued again for a *finite* past, and it is with Bonaventure that we start to see some mathematical sophistication.[27] Bonaventure argued that in a world infinitely old, the Sun would have made an infinite number of its annual trips around the ecliptic. But for each such trip the Moon would have made twelve monthly trips around the Earth, and so this second infinity would be twelve times as great as the first one, and how could that be? Infinity is infinity, and how can something be twelve times bigger than infinity? This argument doesn't have any strength today because of the nineteenth century German mathematician Georg Cantor's work on the concept of infinity,[28] but it *is* clever. Agonized, convoluted theological analyses of God, infinity, and eternity continued long after Aquinas and Bonaventure. Two examples should capture the spirit of those times.

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[25]G. J. Whitrow, "On the Impossibility of an Infinite Past," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, March 1978, pp. 39–45. Whitrow adds modern scientific support to the idea of a finite past by citing the prediction from general relativity of a singularity in spacetime at some finite past time; that is, the theory's prediction that time—and everything else—had its beginning in the now famous Big Bang.

[26]C. Gross, "Twelfth-Century Concepts of Time: Three Reinterpretations of Augustine's Doctrine of Creation *Simul*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, July 1985, pp. 325–338.

[27]See, for example, L. Sweeney, "Bonaventure and Aquinas on the Divine Being as Infinite," *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy*, Summer 1974, pp. 71–91, and S. Baldner, "St. Bonaventure on the Temporal Beginning of the World," *New Scholasticism*, Spring 1989, pp. 206–228.

[28]For simple high school-level presentations on Cantor's astonishing infinity results, see my book *The Logician and the Engineer*, Princeton 2013, pp. 169–171.

Consider first this one, on the supposed immortality of the soul. If $A = B$, then $2A = 2B$. Next, let A = 'half alive' and B = 'half dead,' where $A = B$ in the same sense that a glass half-full is also half-empty. Thus, to be completely dead is to be completely alive, and so the soul is immortal. Outrageous? *Yes*, in my opinion, but I do also have to admit the 'reasoning' does have a certain charm!

For my second example, let me begin by setting the historical stage. After publication of the English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* in 1651, with its arguments against the power of the Church and for civil power (with some criticism tossed in, as well, for universities), Seth Ward counterattacked. Ward, who was both a minister (later a bishop) in the Anglican Church and Savilian Professor of Astronomy at Oxford, was greatly offended by the secular nature of *Leviathan*. Even before Leviathan, in fact, Ward certainly would not have liked Hobbes' earlier denial of the existence of immaterial substances (such as souls). Ward's 1652 book *A Philosophical Essay Towards An Eviction of the Being and Attributes of God, the Immortality of the Souls of Men, the Truth and Authority of Scripture*, was the first of a two-punch reply to Hobbes. The second came in 1654 with the appearance of Ward's *Vindiciae academiarum*. In both of these works Ward attempted to undermine Hobbes' credibility by attacking his mathematical ability. (Hobbes had long been fascinated by, and was considered an expert on, the ancient problem of 'squaring the circle,' a task that has been known to be impossible only since 1882.[29]) In his *Essay*, Ward also attempted to defend the view that the world has a finite age—that is, it had a specific moment of creation, presumably by God. In an opening note, in fact, Ward cites Hobbes' rejection of immaterial substances as the motivation for his writing *Essay*.

To support his view of a finite age for the world, Ward invoked infinity in an interesting way. He argued that nothing is permanent, certainly not humans. Each is created; one can imagine tracing a chain of creation events backward in time through successive generations. Now, there are only two separate and distinct possibilities to where this chain could lead to in the past. First, it could terminate, after a finite number of generations, at a *first* generation, that is, with the 'creation' of the first human. If that is the case, then, said Ward (in effect), 'case closed.' If that is not the case, however, then the chain of successive generations never terminates, that is, the chain is infinitely long. But that, argued Ward, is nonsense—how could anything *infinitely* long have an end (our present *now*)?

Why Ward thought this an unanswerable paradox is hard to understand; after all, one can imagine a line in some coordinate system *beginning* at the origin and yet still being infinitely long (an example is the positive x-axis). This counter-example was not put forth by Hobbes in his own self-defense, but rather was offered by one of Ward's own colleagues at Oxford, John Wallis, the Savilian Professor of Geometry. As for Hobbes, he was little bothered by Ward's argument. As he pointed out (surely with a smile on his face), Ward was in danger of impaling

[29]The problem of 'squaring the circle' is, given a circle of area A, to construct (using only compass and straightedge) a square of area A.

himself as a theologian on his own sword: Ward's argument 'proved' the finite age not only of the world but of *everything*, including God (thus raising the awkward question of who, or what, made God?).

Similar problems with infinity lay behind Kant's rejection of an infinite past. It is interesting to note that Kant, somewhat paradoxically, thought an infinite *future* a possibility. Why did Kant think time could be infinite in one direction but not in the other? One philosopher tells us[30] that Kant "failed to make himself clear," and I think that *understates* the case. I say that because Kant's argument was that the duration of the future is less problematic than is that of the past because it is only the past that influences the present. The best I can do in 'explaining' this is to speculate that if the present depends on an *infinite* past, then perhaps Kant thought that the possibility of so much influence was simply too much for the present to handle! In any case, Kant's view falls apart if we consider the possibility of backward time travel and the resulting implication that the future could also influence the present.

There is, as will come as no surprise, a philosopher for every conceivable point of the compass, and so a paper by one on the logical possibility of an infinite past soon prompts a rebuttal by another.[31] In illustration of this, you'll recall the quote from Augustus De Morgan in the opening section of this book, concerning the philosophers of his times; De Morgan went on in his critique to amusingly summarize the metaphysics of those times as follows: "Here we go up, up, up,/And there we go down, down, down,/Here we go backwards and forwards/And there we go round, round, round."

So, with De Morgan's words in mind, here are a few more examples of how people have struggled with the issue of the past. One quite interesting, *scientific* twist on the duration of the past was pointed out before the exchange between Smith and Ells. In a paper[32] observing that although general relativity and its predicted spacetime singularity in the distant past may indeed allow for a finite past, that does not completely close the door to the possibility that the Big Bang was a continuation from a previous contraction phase of the universe, and so on, *ad infinitum*. (You'll recall the discussion in Chap. 1 of this idea in science fiction: see note 53 in that chapter.) To quote T. S. Eliot (from his "Little Gidding"):

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[30]J. Bennett, "The Age and the Size of the World," *Synthese*, August 1971, pp. 127–146. See also Q. Smith, "Kant and the Beginning of Time," *New Scholasticism*, Summer 1985, pp. 339–346.

[31]See, for example, Q. Smith, "Infinity and the Past," *Philosophy of Science*, March 1987, pp. 63–75, and then read E. Ells, "Quentin Smith on the Infinity of the Past," *Philosophy of Science*, March 1988, pp. 453–455. Smith's paper "The Uncaused Beginning of the Universe" appeared in this same issue (pp. 39–57), stating that he believed, *really*, only in the *logical* possibility of an infinite past and that the universe had in fact originated in an uncaused (no God required) Big Bang singularity. And, indeed, he *had* so argued for a finite past, in "On the Beginning of Time," *Nous*, December 1985, pp. 579–584.

[32]R. Weingard, "General Relativity and the Length of the Past," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, June 1979, pp. 170–172.

"What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from."

Even without entertaining such an oscillating, accordion-like universe that endlessly expands and shrinks, it is possible to have a universe that originated in a *single* Big Bang a finite time ago in the past but yet *has no first instant*! This astonishing statement shocks most at first encounter, but it is simply the cosmological version of a well-known mathematical result. The instant $t = 0$ is not actually part of spacetime, because the Big Bang was quite literally a singular event for which the laws of spacetime physics fail. Thus, all instants in time are greater than zero—and there is no smallest number greater than zero. If you name a positive number, no matter how small, I can name a positive number still smaller, such as one-half of yours. (Of course, if there really is merit to the idea of a quantum of time, the chronon, this argument goes out the window.)

In an ingenious observation that seems to have been missed by most philosophers, E. A. Milne, a professor of mathematics at Oxford, suggested in his 1948 book *Kinematic Relativity*, that with general relativity it is conceivable to have both a single Big Bang a finite time ago *and* an infinite past. Pointing out that to talk meaningfully of time implies that we have a clock to measure it by, Milne looked for a Universal Clock that would be far more durable than our heartbeats, or anything else that exists only transiently. He suggested the expansion rate of the universe itself as the ideal clock. As we go back in time to the Big Bang, the expansion rate rises towards infinity and, as another analyst put it, "We see the Universe ticking away quite actively. *The Universe is meaningfully infinitely old because infinitely many things have happened since the beginning*."[33]

The debate over the length of the past in modern times can be just as contentious as it was in medieval times. For example, in his editorial ("Down with the Big Bang") of August 10, 1989, the then editor of *Nature* (John Maddox) declared the standard explosive model of the universe to be "philosophically unacceptable," because "the implication is that there was one instant at which time literally began and so, by extension, an instant before which there was no time." For Maddox, this meant that the Big Bang "is an *effect* [my emphasis] whose *cause* [my emphasis] cannot be identified or even discussed." The usual (non-time travel) use of the words *cause* and *effect* is that the cause happens first and then the effect occurs—but if the Big Bang (the effect) is the origin of time, then how (asked Maddox) could there be a cause of the Big Bang *before* that beginning?[34]

[33]C. W. Misner, "Absolute Zero of Time," *Physical Review*, October 1969, pp. 1328–1333. In this view cosmic time is taken as proportional to the negative of the logarithm of the normalized volume of the universe ($V = 1$ represents maximum volume, and so time 'stops' at the end of the universe's expansion). Thus, because V goes to zero as we go backward in time, time runs ever faster as we travel ever further into the past. This puts the Big Bang (with $V = 0$) infinitely long ago.

[34]This was not a new insight, of course, as Aristotle had long ago (in his *Physics*) declared an instant in time with no predecessor to be an absurdity.

The answer is obvious *for creationists*, of course—God did it. Creationists avoid the question of God's cause, however, saying only that 'He needs no cause,' or even that 'He made Himself'! It is these standard (ridiculous) responses from creationists that Maddox said had prompted his editorial against the Big Bang, because creationists *embrace* the Big Bang as it seems to endorse their position of 'science by imagination.' Whatever the truth of that, I think juxtapositioning the *scientific* Big Bang model of the universe with theological metaphysics and the pseudo-science nonsense of creationism to be terribly unfair.

When will the philosophical debates on the age of the past end? Not until the end of the (infinite?) future, is my wager!

2.3 Cause and Effect

> "There are few paradoxes which have been resolved so often as the time-asymmetry paradox."[35]

The philosophical literature is full of discussions about potential causal relationships between events. One of the most famous of these discussions, illustrating that cause and effect can be pretty slippery concepts, asks what at first appears to be an almost trivial question: Did the death of Socrates cause the widowhood of Xanthippe? The quick and easy answer is "Of *course*—she was his wife and it was his death that causes us to say she was then a widow. What could be more obvious?" One philosopher has provided some interesting commentary, however, that might make you reconsider, or to at least become aware of how different are the questions concerning time that are of interest to physicists and philosophers.[36]

Suppose we agree that there are two events to be considered; Socrates ceasing to live, and Xanthippe becoming a widow. Those events occurred at different places (in prison, and wherever Xanthippe happened to be). Then, as Kim asserted, "the two events occur with absolute simultaneity . . . [and so] we would have to accept this case as one in which causal action is propagated instantaneously through spatial space." (As we'll discuss in Chap. 3, the *relativity* of distant simultaneity weakens this assertion, but we'll take that up later.) For now, it is the conclusion that Kim draws from the assertion that interests us here: just *what* is propagating instantly? If it isn't mass-energy (as 'widowhood' would appear not to be!) then special relativity isn't bothered and physicists are happy. But those same physicists might also scratch their heads over *why* philosophers even wonder about such a question, because isn't becoming a widow just another way of saying that Socrates died and so we really don't have *two* events, but just one? In other words, for physicists this really isn't a question about cause and effect at all!

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[35]J. Hurley, "The Time-Asymmetry Paradox," *American Journal of Physics*, January 1986, pp. 25–28.

[36]J. Kim, "Noncausal Connections," *Nous*, March 1974, pp. 41–52.

The central puzzle of time travel to the past is its apparent denial of causality—that is, its denial of the belief that we live in a world where every effect has a cause and that the cause happens first. *First* we flip the switch and *then* the kitchen light comes on. It is *never* the other way around. So deeply embedded is the temporal ordering of cause and effect in our feelings about how the world—and all the rest of the cosmos—works, that the Australian philosopher John Mackie (1917–1981) called causation the "cement of the universe" (and used that wonderful phrase as the title of a 1980 book). Without causality, said Mackie, everything would come unglued and fall apart. For example, when electrical engineers design an electronic system that they intend to actually construct (as opposed to doing a mere theoretical 'paper design') they insist that the design be a *causal* one. By that they mean the system must have no output before an input is applied. That is, the system must not be able to anticipate (foresee) the application of an input. To put it bluntly, our engineers are insisting that they are *not* building a time machine!

Now all that might seem to be self-evident, but there *are* some subtle problems. For example, it has become almost a cliché to say that nothing can go faster than light; that's what physicists mean by *relativistic causality*. In other words, no cause can produce an effect at a distant location sooner than the time lapse required for a light pulse to make the trip. Classical mechanics, however, the science of Newton's laws that engineers use all the time, is *not* relativistically causal. Push the left end of a rigid rod, for example, and the right end moves *instantly*. Most of the time the lack of this form of causality causes no problems, but the fact remains that the mechanics all engineers (and physicists, too!) learn first in school is flawed on a fundamental level. A rigid rod is an impossibility in Einstein's mechanics.

Indeed, it is interesting to speculate about how, after a discussion of causality, a traditional engineering professor would respond if challenged on this issue by a bright student. Causality might not look so obvious, after all, if such a student stuck up her hand in class and said "Professor, you've told us that everything that happens in nature is due to a cause. That what we see happening all around us, as the world unfolds, is the domino-process of cause-effect-cause-effect, and so on, into the future. But suppose, Professor, that at some instant, somehow, every particle in the world suddenly reversed its velocity vector. Wouldn't that mean, given the time-reversible nature of the classical equations of motion, the world would then run backward in time along the same path it had followed up until the instant of reversal? Wouldn't that mean what was effect is now cause, and that what was cause is now effect? And if cause and effect can change roles like that . . . well, Professor, just what do our words *mean*?"

An amusing, and instructive, cartoon illustration of the student's idea of reversing all the velocity vectors in a system appeared on the cover of the November 1953 issue of *Physics Today*. That issue contains an article on the 1949 nuclear magnetic resonance experiments performed by the American physicist Erwin Hahn, which in a certain sense dealt with just such reversed systems. In that illustration a group of runners on a multi-lane circular race track begin at the starting line in a coherent state, that is, all lined up together. Then, as they run around the track at various speeds, they gradually spread out into what appears to be an incoherent state.

But that incoherence is an illusion because if, at some instant (signaled in the cartoon by a pistol shot), they all turn around and run in reverse, they will all arrive back at the starting line *together, at the same instant*. The initial coherence of the runners was actually never lost, despite the superficial appearance of disorder, and the coherent state can be recovered at any time by a reversal of velocity vectors.

This isn't mere theoretical speculation, as an almost magical application of velocity vector reversal is actually used in what is called *optical phase conjugation*, a process to 'time-reverse' the severe distortion suffered by light beams during atmospheric propagation. For example, by effectively reversing the velocity vectors of photons, one can remove the turbulence blurring in satellite pictures of the Earth's surface as seen from space.[37]

Let me immediately short-circuit one possible answer our beleaguered professor might give in desperation, a response based on the fact that equations of physics are *not* all time reversible. Indeed, it was discovered decades ago that, in certain very rare, fundamental particle decay processes involving neutral K-mesons, there is the hint that perhaps nature *can* indeed distinguish between the past and the future. In particular, K-mesons should violate what is called *CP-symmetry*, and the so-called TCP theorem[38] says that then *T-symmetry* must also fail. In 1968/69 direct, experimental observation of the failure of T-symmetry in K-meson decays was reported. In an astonishing example of science fiction prescience, the use of K-mesons in a machine for affecting the past had appeared years earlier in a 1955 (!) story.[39]

So, could K-mesons account for the physical processes that we see evolve in time in one direction (past to future) but not in the other? As Hurley (note 35) put it so nicely, "The decay of the neutral K-meson is not time-reversal invariant; perhaps it is this ubiquitous meson which is responsible for the cream diffusing uniformly throughout our coffee in the morning. Possibly, but again this conjecture cannot account for the computer models [of diffusion processes that, like cream in coffee, also display a bias for one temporal direction over the other—in Chap. 3 I'll show you such a computer model] which have no neutral K-mesons." Still, the tiny chink that K-mesons appear to have made in the once-solid rock of time direction indistinguishability is an active area of research and speculation.

Even with that chink the fact that the classical laws appear to be insensitive to a direction of time, whereas the real world—which seems in no way dependent on the arcane properties of K-mesons—seems distinctly asymmetric, is a puzzle of the first rank. As one philosopher wrote, "The Universe seems asymmetric with respect to

[37] C. R. Giuliano, "Applications of Optical Phase Conjugation," *Physics Today*, April 1981, pp. 27–35.

[38] The TCP-theorem says that the 'mirror-image' of a physical process is a legitimate process, too, *if* the 'mirror' reverses time (T), electric charge (C)—so that particle and anti-particle are interchanged, and parity (P)—which is the measure of left and right. There is strong reason to believe in the validity of the TCP theorem because quantum field theory is compatible with special relativity only if the TCP theorem holds.

[39] F. Pohl, "Target One," *Galaxy Science Fiction*, April 1955.

the past and future in a very deep and non-accidental way, and yet all the laws of nature are purely time symmetric. So where can the asymmetry come from?"[40]

There have of course been attempts to answer that question. For example, one philosopher[41] discusses some curious mathematical examples he interprets as meaning, in the context of classical mechanics, that there are physical systems that are temporally irreversible *in principle*. A reply[42] from a fellow philosopher, however, argues that Hutchinson has, at most, shown only that classical mechanics is perhaps not deterministic. And that, Savitt argues, is not equivalent to showing a failure of time reversibility. There is, in fact, powerful experimental evidence that, with the rare exceptions of K-mesons, the classical laws of physics (including general relativity and quantum mechanics) *are* time-reversible.

Perhaps the most compelling of such evidence comes from the *reciprocity theorem* that electrical engineers routinely use when designing radio antennas. The theorem is easy to illustrate. Suppose two electrical engineers, Bob in Boston and Lois in Los Angeles, send radio signals to each other. Bob sends his messages by exciting his antenna with a time-varying current, which thus launches electromagnetic radiation into space. Lois' distant antenna intercepts some of that radiation, which then creates a (very tiny) signal current in her antenna.

The reciprocity theorem states the following: Suppose Bob makes a tape recording of his excitation signal and mails it to Lois, who then plays Bob's tape back into her transmitter as the excitation to *her* antenna. Then the signal current induced in Bob's antenna, as it intercepts Lois' launched radiation, will be the very same (very tiny) signal that Lois measured in her antenna as a result of Bob's transmission. This result is completely independent of the details of the two antennas, which can be utterly different in design, as well as independent of the details of the propagation path between Boston and Los Angeles (as long as those details don't change with time). The reciprocity theorem *is* true—it can be *measured* to be true as accurately as one wishes to perform this experiment—because of the reversibility of physics right down to the electronic level. In fact, the answer to the professor's problem of explaining why we don't see velocity vectors suddenly reverse, and then everything 'run backwards,' has not yet been found in any law of physics.

Now, to make things even more interesting, consider the problem of *mutual* or *simultaneous* causation, which can quickly lead to several interesting questions. When two leaning dominoes, A and B, hold each other up, is A nearly upright because of B, or is it B that is nearly upright because of A? When two children bob up and down on a see-saw, whose motion is the cause and whose is the effect? There are other puzzles, too, that involve mutual causation.

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[40] J. Earman, "The Anisotropy of Time," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, December 1969, pp. 273–295.

[41] K. Hutchinson, "Is Classical Mechanics Really Time-Reversible and Deterministic?" *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, June 1993, pp. 307–323.

[42] S. F. Savitt, "Is Classical Mechanics Time-Reversal Invariant?" *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, September 1994, pp. 907–913.

For example, causation is usually thought to be transitive: if A causes B, and if B causes C, then A causes C. But if A and B are mutually causative, then ‘A causes B’ coupled with ‘B causes A’ leads to ‘A causes A’ (and to ‘B causes B’). That is, mutual causation, together with transitivity, seems to imply *self*-causation! Except for those theologians who like this sort of result (it lets them answer the question ‘Who made God?’ with ‘He made Himself’), hardly anyone likes self-causation. But how do we avoid the conclusion that perhaps the mutual causation of two leaning dominoes, coupled with transitivity, represents experimental proof that God could have made himself? Well, of course this is certainly outrageous stuff, but don’t you wonder how our poor professor would respond if asked?

This last example is actually a far more esoteric one than we need to illustrate how our ordinary, everyday concept of cause and effect can be turned inside out by going only a little bit beyond the routine. Consider, for example, the problem of the data processing of recorded time signals, such as the information written onto magnetic tapes, hard drives, or disks. Typical applications that produce such recordings include the strata-probing seismic echoes from dynamite explosions set by oil exploration geologists; arms control compliance monitoring stations that listen for the acoustic rumbles generated by both earthquakes and underground nuclear tests—and then try to tell one from the other; and the gathering by various military intelligence agencies of turbine shaft/propeller noise signatures emitted by different types of submarines. In each of those situations, the raw information is recorded and then later processed with a certain degree of unhurried calm and leisure. That pool of oil, after all, has been underground for several hundred million years, and waiting a few more days or weeks for a computer analysis of the explosion echo isn’t going to make much difference.

Such after-the-fact processing of recorded data is said to be done ‘off-line, in non-real time.’ When we play a disk back in the lab, however, we can do all sorts of neat things, like speed up the playback (make time ‘run fast’), or slow it down (make time ‘run slow’), or even play it *backwards* (make time ‘run in reverse’). For various technical reasons, generically called *spectrum shifting*, such tricks are often quite useful. Now, the way we retrieve magnetically recorded information from (for example) a magnetic tape, is to run it through a playback machine with a ‘read-head’ that senses the magnetic flux variations. The electrical signal produced by the read-head is just like the original signal and, in fact, we can pretend we don’t know it is really coming off a tape, but rather that it *is* the original signal. For high-quality digitally recorded tapes and disks, in fact, it is virtually impossible to distinguish the original from a playback.

Now, suppose we construct our playback machine with *two* read-heads, with the new head sensing the recording slightly *before* the old head does. The two heads produce the same electric signal, of course, but the signal from the new head is *ahead* in time compared to the signal from the old head. The new head is, in a certain sense, ‘seeing the future’ of the old head! We can use these two signals, the old head representing ‘now’ time and the new head representing ‘future’ time, to build real systems that are *not* causal. The causality violation occurs in non-real time, of course, not *our* time, but no matter; some absolutely astonishing signal processing can be achieved this way. The universe is about fifteen billion years old, and pretending that time has shifted a few milliseconds or so doesn't seem to be too much violence to reality.

Two heads are often used on radio call-in talk shows to catch inappropriate remarks from intemperate callers and prevent them from being broadcast. A short time delay is introduced by first recording remarks 'live' on tape with a write head and, then a few seconds 'up-stream,' a read head regenerates the remarks for broadcast. A 5 s delay is generally sufficient, so what is heard on a radio receiver *now* actually occurred 5 s ago in the *past*. A caller can get terribly confused if she doesn't turn her own receiver off, because one ear hears the present on the telephone while the other ear listens to the past over the radio.[43] The 1956 British film *Timeslip* incorporates a similar situation, with an atomic scientist's perception advanced 7 s into the future as the result of an accidental radiation exposure. His resulting confusion and disorientation is the center of the film.[44]

2.4 Backward Causation

> "Causation as a topic of philosophical discussion refuses to die. Each year, books and articles on causation continue to pour forth. Of course, all this activity may simply be a symptom of the necrophilia that infests so much of philosophy."[45]

All of the previous discussion has fueled countless arguments about what is called *backward*, *reverse*, or even *retro* causation. What is generally meant by forward causation is, of course, that any event that occurs at time t is caused by events that all occurred at some earlier time(s). Backward causation says that at least one of the causing events occurs after time t—this should make it clear that backward causation is a close relative of time travel. Indeed, one philosopher uses the terms *time traveler* and *retro-causal engineer* interchangeably.[46] The topic, understandably, is at the root of many hot philosophical debates, though not everybody (as this section's opening quote makes clear) thinks those debates are illuminating.

Just *why* does Professor Earman take his harsh position? He offers, as one reason, his disdain for the common philosophical 'proof' of the impossibility of

[43] A science fiction use of this idea is in B. W. Aldiss, "Man In His Time," *Science Fantasy*, April 1965, the story of an astronaut who returns from a trip to Mars and finds himself 3.3077 min ahead of everybody else.

[44] Science fiction had used a twist on this idea long before the film; see E. Binder, "The Man Who Saw Too Late," *Fantastic Adventures*, September 1939, a tale of what it might be like to have a 3 min *delay* in your vision.

[45] J. Earman, "Causation: A Matter of Life and Death," *Journal of Philosophy*, January 1976, pp. 5–25.

[46] B. Brown, "Defending Backwards Causation," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, December 1992, pp. 429–443.

backward causation: By definition, a cause is always before its effect. Yes, that's the entire 'proof.' One can, of course, win *any* argument by *defining* the answer to be what it is you wish to believe. More interesting, and certainly more pertinent to time travel, is the argument that if backward causation were possible then one could change the past—but that cannot be done because the past is dead and gone and thus unchangeable. That does seem to be a pretty solid argument against backward causation,[47] but Earman rebuts it by pointing out that the very same logic could be applied to the future, and so the usual, uncontested forward causation would also be denied. That is, one could argue that whatever the future will be, *will be* (literally 'by definition'), so one cannot change the future. A similar argument was presented even earlier,[48] in which we find "suppose that someone says 'I can change the future. I can do *this* or I can do *that*.' Well, then, suppose that he does *that*. Has he changed the future? No, because doing *that* was the future."

The reversal of the 'usual' causal order of events by backward time travel has been a mainstay of science fiction almost from the start of the genre. Consider, for example, this tale.[49] A man on vacation by himself, without his wife along, meets a young lady—and they fall in love. The man loves his wife, too, though, and he realizes (as the young lady leaves him for the last time), never to return, that it is all for the best. But she really hasn't gone that far away from him, as the reader soon discovers. She is a time traveler from the future, and after leaving him she goes even further back in time, back an additional 20 years. She does this because she has learned that he met his wife 20 years ago, and so she goes back to be *that* woman! Thus, the usual causal order of the two events 'a long marriage' and the 'pre-marriage courtship' has been reversed (if we accept the fact that the man doesn't remember what his wife looked like when they married).

Actually, even our everyday uses of cause and effect are not nearly so straightforward as one might think, even when they are under far less stress than backward causation and time travel inflict. Consider, for example, the endless problems that are easy to imagine in the legal world. If a man falls off the roof of a ten-story building and is electrocuted as he plunges through power lines while still twenty feet above ground, was gravity or electricity the cause of death? Or was it both? As this example and others demonstrate,[50] one clearly does not have to discuss time travel to get into a serious argument about cause and effect. But with time travel, and the resultant backward causation, things can become even more perplexing. For example, we normally think it foolish to prepare, now, for an event that has already

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[47] See, for example, D. H. Mellor, "Fixed Past, Unfixed Future," in *Michael Dummett: Contributions to Philosophy* (B. M. Taylor, editor), Martinus Nijhoff 1987.

[48] J. J. C. Smart, "A Review of *The Direction of Time*," *Philosophical Quarterly*, January 1958, pp. 72–77.

[49] R. F. Young, "The Dandelion Girl," *The Saturday Evening Post*, April 1, 1961.

[50] See also P. Mackie, "Causing, Delaying, and Hastening: Do Rains Cause Fires?" *Mind*, July 1992, pp. 483–500.

happened, but the prudent time traveler about to visit an ice age in the distant past would be wise to pack a fur coat before getting into his time machine!

One philosopher provides, I think, a good start at explaining why so many other philosophers (and not just a few physicists) have adopted the 'common sense' position of rejecting backward causation. As he writes, "Part of the answer, no doubt, is a confusion between affecting and altering [the past—a distinction we'll discuss at length later in this book]. We cannot alter the past. But then we cannot alter the future either, although we can affect it. However, I take the common-sense rejection of backward causation to be, for the most part, quasi-empirical. It is based on a thought experiment. Think how you would set about affecting the past. By building a time-machine, perhaps? But how would you build one? We have no idea how to start. Yet, by contrast, we can work out how to affect the future . . . we just move our bodies."[51] But, as he goes on to argue, if we accept that we can't *change* the past (which means there is no way we could actually observe backward causation), then there still exists the possibility that past events were as they were because of events in the future.

Are there actual phenomena that justify a belief in the possibility of effect before cause in real time (not just in tape recorder time)? The only example I know of, and a controversial one at that, is a theoretical result from a reformulation of electrodynamics by the great English physicist Paul Dirac (1902–1984). Classical theory models electric charges as point objects of zero size, which causes problems when one tries to calculate certain details, such as the total field energy of a single electron. The answer comes out as infinity. In an attempt to find more reasonable (that is, finite) answers to such questions, Dirac modified the zero size of a charge to one taking them to be extended objects (while retaining the validity of Maxwell's equations for electrodynamics right down to a point). To calculate how such extended objects will behave mechanically, however, one has to include what are called the *self-interaction* forces, such as the force one side of an electron exerts on the other side.

When it was all worked through, Dirac arrived at a third-order differential equation of motion, an equation that involves a force term proportional not to the usual first time derivative of the velocity (that is, to the acceleration), but rather to the second derivative.[52] This force is proportional to the first derivative of the acceleration, and is a quantity of direct interest mostly to the designers of automobile suspensions, who call it the *jerk*. There is no force in physics, at least not in Newtonian physics, that shows that sort of dependence, and there are some curious consequences. For example, in Dirac's theory an electron experiencing no external force can still continually accelerate, exhibiting what is called a 'runaway solution.'

Dirac showed how the runaway solution can be eliminated by picking a particular value for what up to then was an arbitrary constant of integration in the

[51] P. Forrest, "Backward Causation in Defense of Free Will," *Mind*, April 1985, pp. 210–217.

[52] P. A. M. Dirac, "Classical Theory of Radiating Electrons," *Proceedings of the Royal Society A*, August 1938, pp. 148–168.

analysis, but that trick causes, in turn, a new problem called ‘pre-acceleration.’ That is, if an electron experiences an external disturbance (Dirac considered a passing pulse of electromagnetic radiation), then the electron will start to move *before* the pulse reaches it! Now that does seem to be a pretty clear example of backward causation. The time interval during which the pre-acceleration occurs is very short, on the order of the time it takes light to travel across the spatially extended electron (about 10^{-24} s), but no matter. The apparent crack in the door of causality may be slight, but it was enough to satisfy some philosophers seeking scientific support for backward causation.

Not everybody liked this, however. One physicist was clearly uneasy about it, calling pre-acceleration “unpleasant” acausal behavior.[53] On the other hand, one can find believers, too.[54] Others have argued that the whole business is simply a non-problem. One philosopher, in fact, raised a very interesting technical point, arguing that Dirac’s equation is non-Newtonian (remember the *jerk* force) and so we have no reason for coupling force and acceleration together as a cause-and-effect pair.[55] In Newtonian mechanics we do use that particular coupling, yet we do not think of force and velocity as a cause-and-effect pair because there is an integration operation involved in getting from to the other. Similarly, in Dirac’s theory we have an integration operation separating force and acceleration.

One curious aspect to the debate on pre-acceleration is that many commentators seem not to have paid much attention to what Dirac himself had to say about it. As a Nobel laureate, it hardly seems likely that he would let such a result pass unnoticed and, indeed, his paper contains the following physical explanation: “It would appear that we have a contradiction with elementary ideas of causality. The electron seems to know about the pulse before it arrives, and to get up an acceleration . . . The behavior of our electron can be interpreted in a natural way, however, if we suppose the electron to have a finite size. There is then no need for the pulse to reach the center of the electron before it starts to accelerate. It starts to accelerate . . . as soon as the pulse meets its outside. Mathematically, the electron has no sharp boundary.”

Two physicists suggested a fascinating connection between travel backward in time and Dirac’s relativistically correct, quantum mechanical description of an electron.[56] They showed that in flat, two-dimensional spacetime the assumption of time travel to the past leads in a natural way to Dirac’s equation. If, on the other hand, time travel only into the future is assumed, then additional assumptions are required to derive Dirac’s equation. This connection between Dirac’s equation and

[53] P. C. W. Davies, *The Physics of Time Asymmetry*, University of California Press 1977.

[54] J. Earman, “An Attempt to Add a Little Direction to ‘The Problem of the Direction of Time’,” *Philosophy of Science*, March 1974, pp. 15–47.

[55] A. Grunbaum, “Is Preacceleration of Particles in Dirac’s Electrodynamics a Case of Backward Causation? The Myth of Retrocausation in Classical Electrodynamics,” *Philosophy of Science*, June 1976, pp. 165–201.

[56] D. G. McKeon and G. N. Ord, “Time Reversal in Stochastic Processes and Dirac’s Equation,” *Physical Review Letters*, July 6, 1992, pp. 3–4.

time travel to the past makes some philosophers and physicists nervous, but it didn't seem to bother Dirac. In fact, he went on in his paper to show how the pre-acceleration implies the possibility of building a device for sending a faster-than-light signal backward in time. Science fiction writers were, of course, quick to grasp that idea and such gadgets were dubbed "Dirac radios."[57]

One of the more perplexing aspects of backward causation is that it seems to allow for the possibility of *causal loops*, and for the breaking of such loops, a central feature in many of the very best time travel stories. For example, suppose there is a gadget such that if I push its control button *now*, then today's lecture notes will have appeared in the gadget's output tray *yesterday*. Indeed, yesterday I found today's notes there and, in fact, I am about to go to class to deliver that lecture. A mighty good one it is, too, so I think I think I'll send it back to yesterday in just a few minutes with the help of the gadget. But I haven't yet pushed the button. What if I now decide *not* to push the button? Why did the notes appear so I could use them today? Philosophers call this potential breaking of a causal loop a *bilking paradox*. Later in the book I'll discuss how such paradoxes have regularly appeared in the physics and philosophy literature since the 1940s.

By contrast, such paradoxes had been discussed in the science fiction magazines long before World War II. For example, in a letter to the editor at *Astounding Stories* (June 1932) a fan clearly stated his objection to time travel with the aid of a bilking paradox. He suggested the following experiment: Immediately publish an open offer to the inventor of time travel (who will be born, presumably, at some future date) to travel back to one week before the offer is published. But of course (argued the fan) we'd have a pretty problem if we then decided not to publish the offer after the inventor showed up! As that fan wrote, "Paradoxical? I'll say so, if time travel is possible." That fan didn't know about what seems to be a generic limitation on time machines, however: that one can't travel back to a date before the date of the time machine's creation. Thus, that fan's particular bilking paradox actually has no force.[58]

For another fictional example of a bilking paradox, consider the story[59] of time travelers who, just before they begin a trip into the future, see Earth invaded by Martians. At first the invaders are unbeatable, but then the defending military forces of Earth suddenly and mysteriously acquire a fantastically powerful new weapon. It isn't long before the time travelers realize where it came from—they themselves will go into the far future, obtain the weapon, and then return with it to what is now their own past (when the weapon first appeared). But then they wonder what might happen if they don't go, if instead they 'cheat time.' After all, they reason, why

[57]See, for example, J. Blish, "Beep," *Galaxy Science Fiction*, February 1954.

[58]A similar bilking paradox had actually appeared the year before in the 1931 novel *Many Dimensions* by the English writer Charles Williams (1886–1945), which reads like a suitable script for an Indiana Jones movie.

[59]E. Binder, "The Time Cheaters," *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, March 1940. There is an amusing reference in this tale to Orson Welles' famous radio-drama-hoax, from just 2 years earlier, of just such an alien invasion based on H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*.

bother now to hunt for the weapon when the invasion has already been defeated? We are told that this potential bilking paradox is a "sinister conception, crawling evilly within their brains, like an unanswerable enigma."

Some philosophers, and practically all physicists, agree with that last assessment about bilking paradoxes, and so they believe there is simply nothing more to say. That is, bilking puzzles like the one in "The Time Cheaters" show that causal loops (and backward causation) must be impossible. Many feel this way about time loops, and backward causation, because (as is well known) time travel to the past can create all sorts of paradoxes. But such paradoxes are offensive only to human, culturally-biased intuitions on 'how things ought to work,' and not to the laws of physics which are indifferent to a reversal in the direction of time—which of course underlies what time travel is all about.

As the great American chemist G. N. Lewis expressed it, "Our common idea of time is notably unidirectional, *but this is largely due to the phenomena of consciousness and memory* [my emphasis]."[60] Lewis' words caught the eye of the editor at one science fiction magazine, who summed it up for his readers in a half-page essay that contained dramatic words hinting at backward causation: "A new theory of time . . . reveals the possibility that events now occurring are among the factors that decided Caesar nearly 2,000 years ago to cross the Rubicon."[61]

Lewis' willingness to accept causality violations is not a universally popular view today. For example, one physicist has written[62] that "It is fair to say that most conservative physicists have very serious reservations about the admissibility and reality of causality-violating processes. Causality violation (i.e., the existence of a 'time machine') is such an extreme violation of our understanding of the cosmos that it behooves us to be as conservative as possible about introducing such unpleasant effects into our models." He then goes on to declare closed timelike loops to be verboten because "the existence of closed timelike loops leads us to such unpleasant situations as meeting oneself 5 min ago." He sums up his philosophical position nicely with "any theory that is 'just a little bit causality violating' is 'just a little bit inconsistent.'"

Agreeing with this physicist is at least one philosopher who believes that the "association of causality with a particular temporal direction is not merely a matter of the way we speak of causes, but has a genuine basis in the way things happen" and that there is indeed an asymmetry with respect to past and future that is bound up with our concept of intentional action.[63] He then goes even further when he continues with the claim that being an agent of cause is not a necessary condition for seeing the asymmetry; being an observer is enough, as even an immobile yet

[60]G. N. Lewis, "The Symmetry of Time in Physics," *Science*, June 6, 1930, pp. 569–577.

[61]Editorial essay, "Two-Way Time," *Astounding Stories*, September 1931.

[62]M. Visser, "Wormholes, Baby Universes, and Causality," *Physical Review D*, February 15, 1990, pp. 1116–1124.

[63]M. Dummett, "Bringing About the Past," *Philosophical Review*, July 1964, pp. 338–359.

intelligent tree (!) could detect the difference between past and future. (How he knows this about certain trees is left unexplained.)

The everyday views of causality that we have formed through our limited experiences when living in a world in which time travel is 'uncommon' may actually be incomplete. As the British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) said with some humor long ago, in his 1912 Presidential Address ("On the Notion of Cause") to the Aristotelian Society, "The law of causality, I believe, like much that passes muster among philosophers, is a relic of a by-gone age, surviving, like the monarchy, only because it is erroneously supposed to do no harm." And I do agree with his fellow philosopher who, decades later, declared "The concept of cause is powerless to solve the problems posed by the concept of time. The fundamental laws of physics present our most careful, best established and most sophisticated understanding of time. Notoriously, nothing in these laws endorses the idea of a *flow of time nor of the direction* [my emphasis: we'll return to both of these issues later in this chapter] which is basic to our conception of it. Nor are these laws causal (in the sense of singling out causes) even when they are deterministic. The concept of cause is not a fundamental one and cannot illuminate the darker corners in our understanding of the fundamental concept of time."[64]

2.5 The Fourth Dimension

> "We are facing an invasion of fourth dimensional creatures . . . We are being attacked by life which is one dimension above us in evolution. We are fighting, I tell you, a tribe of hellhounds out of the cosmos. They are unthinkably above us in the matter of intelligence. There is a chasm of knowledge between us so wide and deep that it staggers the imagination."[65]
>
> "Fourth dimension. Time factor. *You* know . . ."[66]

The idea of a fourth dimension to *space* has long been a staple of science fiction, but it has also long been viewed with suspicion. Indeed, many quite sophisticated scientists have thought it to be quite mysterious. For example, in his 1897 Presidential Address to the American Mathematical Society, the Canadian/American

[64]G. Nerlich, "How to Make Things Have Happened," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, March 1979, pp. 1–22.

[65]From "Hellhounds of the Cosmos," *Astounding Stories*, June 1932, by Clifford Simak (1904–1988). Simak went on to write a number of much better tales, but this passage lends credence to the editorial introduction to the 1957 anthology *Famous Science-Fiction Stories* (Random House) that declared so much in the early pulp science fiction was "science that was claptrap and fiction that was graceless."

[66]Uninformative 'explanation' given to a befuddled, inadvertent time traveler who emerges miles away and one hour backward in time after a wild ride through the fourth dimension in a gadget (constructed from a bicycle tire!) in the shape of a three-dimensional Möbius strip (see note 99 in Chap. 1). From the story by H. Nearing, Jr., "The Maladjusted Classroom," *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, June 1953.

astronomer-mathematician Simon Newcomb (1835–1909) declared "The introduction of what is now very generally called hyperspace, especially space of more than three dimensions, into mathematics has proved a stumbling block to more than one able philosopher." Einstein stated Newcomb's view in blunter terms when he wrote "The non-mathematician is seized by a mysterious shuddering when he hears of 'four-dimensional' things, by a feeling not unlike that awakened by thoughts of the occult."[67]

To see just how right Einstein was with this observation, consider the reaction one Egyptian philosopher had (in 1929) to Einstein's own writings: "We have no doubt in our mind that nobody can understand it (the fourth dimension), including Einstein himself. The incomprehensibility of these assumptions [of general relativity] is due to their nature. They deal with the fourth dimension . . . and the reality of time and space. They can only be described by a mathematician's hypothesis or by religious faith."[68] This reaction is easy to understand—after all, anybody can 'see' that there are exactly three spatial dimensions, and that is that!

The 1901 novel *The Inheritors*, by the English writer Ford Madox Ford (1873–1939), like Simak's, is the tale of an insidious hyperspace invasion of our world. It illustrates Einstein's assertion about how many people react to the fourth dimension with an example from the time before the science fiction magazines. When the novel's narrator is bluntly told by an invader that she (the invader) is from the fourth dimension—an idea inspired by Ford's appreciation of how much success his acquaintance H. G. Wells had enjoyed with it—he recoils from that claim with the words "If you expect me to believe you inhabit a mathematical monstrosity, you are mistaken." And who can really blame that skeptical narrator? How can there be *four* spatial dimensions? No less an authority than Aristotle, writing in 350 B.C., had declared in his essay "On the Heavens" that "the three dimensions are all that there are."

Others were not so sure. In 1873, for example, we find an essay in *Nature* that refers to well-known mathematicians who even earlier had shown that they had an inner assurance of the reality of transcendental space (hyperspace).[69] The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) was also an early advocate for the four-dimensionality of space. Just what he thought the nature of the fourth dimension to be is somewhat unclear, but the context of what he said suggests he took it to be spatial. He thought three-dimensional space to be "perverse" because of the existence of incongruous counterparts (such as left- and right-handed gloves), and this was apparently strong evidence for him that space could not be three-dimensional. Now, incongruous counterparts exist in all n-dimensional spaces, but Peirce preserved the special purity of the fourth dimension by suggesting that all physical objects, although capable of motion in the fourth direction, could

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[67] A. Einstein, *Relativity: the Special and General Theory*, Crown 1961, p. 33.

[68] From A. A. Ziadat, "Early Reception to Einstein's Relativity in the Arab Periodical Press," *Annals of Science*, January 1994, pp. 17–35.

[69] G. F. Rodwell, "On Space of Four Dimensions," *Nature*, May 1, 1873, pp. 8–9.

themselves have no extent in that direction (remember, Peirce was a philosopher, not a physicist, and he offered no experimental support for any of this).[70]

But is it *really* possible that there could be *four* spatial dimensions? We experience three independent directions, each lying at a right angle to the other two—but why just *three*, and not ten or fifteen? Indeed, in an 1888 talk to the Philosophical Society of Washington, Simon Newcomb dismissed the view that space must necessarily be three-dimensional as an "old metaphysical superstition." Yet, despite Newcomb's open-mindedness, it has been shown that in the framework of classical physics there are, in fact, several powerful reasons for why there must be *exactly three* spatial dimensions.

The beginning of a scientific explanation for the dimensionality of space appears in Kant, who believed the *three* dimensions of space and Newton's inverse-square law for gravity are intertwined (but he offered nothing beyond philosophical speculation). The origin of Kant's view is actually quite old, dating back to the ancient Greeks, who had already begun to suspect that there was something special about *three* dimensions, at least as far as geometry was concerned. They knew of the infinity of regular two-dimensional polygons, but that there were just five regular polyhedrons in three dimensions (the so-called *Platonic solids*). This early observation was trapped in mystical speculations, however, and it wasn't until the development of physics as a science that non-mystical discussions on the dimensionality of space began to appear.

Beginning with the work of Einstein's friend, the Austrian/Dutch physicist Paul Ehrenfest (1880–1933) in 1917, we can find the idea that the Poisson-Laplace equation, a second-order partial differential equation that describes the potential functions for both Newtonian gravity and electrostatics, does not allow for stable planetary or electronic orbits in *any* space with dimensionality greater than three. Further, the distortionless, reverberation-free propagation of both electromagnetic and sound waves is possible only in spaces of dimensions one and three. These conclusions have been shown to hold even when we go beyond nineteenth century physics into general relativity and quantum mechanics.[71]

Using a slightly different approach, a biological-topological argument for why space cannot have fewer than three dimensions exists. In all of our common experience, complex intelligent life is always found to occur as an aggregate of a vast number of elementary cells, interconnected via electrical nerve fibers. Each cell is connected to several others, *not all immediate neighbors*, by these fibers. If space had only one or two dimensions, then such highly interconnected nets of cells would be impossible because the overlapping nerve fibers would have to intersect, which would result in their mutually short-circuiting one another.

[70]R. R. Dipert, "Peirce's Theory of the Dimensionality of Physical Space," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, January 1978, pp. 61–70.

[71]See, for example, I. M. Freeman, "Why Is Space Three-Dimensional?" *American Journal of Physics*, December 1969, pp. 1222–1224, and L. Gurevich and V. Mostepanenko, "On the Existence of Atoms in n-Dimensional Space," *Physics Letters A*, May 31, 1971, pp. 201–202.

It wasn't long before these views on the dimensionality of space found their way into science fiction. An early use of space as four-dimensional occurs in an awkward rewrite of Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*, in which a professor and his crew fly into hyperspace and around the world and to the moon and back, in less than a day.[72] They do this with a plane equipped with a four-dimensional rudder! More interesting is the tragic story (originally published in 1926) of a math professor who learns how to move into hyperspace and back.[73] A colleague catches him at it and, once over his astonishment, asks what is behind it all. The professor replies, "My assumption is that the fourth dimension is just another dimension—no more different in kind from length, say, than length is from breadth and thickness, but perpendicular to all three. Now suppose that a being in two dimensions—a flat creature, like [a moving shadow on a surface]—were suddenly to grasp the concept of a third dimension and so step out of the [surface]. He might move only an inch, but he would vanish completely from the sight of the world."

The professor has similarly learned how to step out of 3-space and into 4-space but, when asked to explain *how*, all he can say is "How can I explain? It's just the *other* direction. It's *there*!" His colleague can't see it, but nonetheless is quick to grasp the practical implications: "This is power! Think of it! A step, and you are invisible! No prison cells can hold you, for there is a side to you on which they are as open as a wedding ring! No ring is secure from you: you can put your hand *round the corner* and draw out what you like. And, of course, if you looked back on the Universe you had left, you would see us in sections, open to you! You could place a stone or a tablet of poison right in the bowels of your enemies!"

What the professor's colleague is getting at involves a comparison with a prison in planar 2-space, which would merely be a circle around the captive. Knowledge of the third dimension would make it possible to escape, however, by simply moving along that new direction, over the circle, and then back into the plane. To a 2-space guard it would seem that the prisoner had suddenly vanished from view *inside* the circle and then just as suddenly materialized again *outside* the circle. Similarly, to escape from a 3-space prison, one would merely move along the fourth dimension, and in the same way one could remove the yolk from an egg without damaging the shell; indeed, one could remove the yolk directly from the chicken without damaging the chicken![74]

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[72]B. Olsen, "Four Dimensional Transit," *Amazing Stories Quarterly*, Fall 1928.

[73]R. Hughes, "The Vanishing Man," reprinted in *The Mathematical Magpie* (C. Fadiman, editor), Simon and Schuster 1962.

[74]This astounding insight appeared in early pulp science fiction in, for example, M. J. Breuer, "The Appendix and the Spectacles," *Amazing Stories*, December 1928. The concept appeared even earlier in Bob Olsen, "The Four-Dimensional Roller-Press," *Amazing Stories*, June 1927, and then later in Olsen's "The Great Four Dimensional Robberies," *Amazing Stories*, May 1928 to rob locked safe deposit boxes, and "The Four Dimensional Escape," *Amazing Stories*, December 1933, in which a man sentenced to die by hanging at San Quentin Prison is rescued, while standing on the gallows' trap, by an inventor who pulls him through the fourth dimension.

In a later tale[75] we meet another professor who dramatically uses this very feature of the fourth dimension. His right hand has been modified through an accident to exist in four-dimensional hyperspace and so, to finance his research, he uses his ‘talent’ to become the perfect pickpocket, able to reach into any wallet no matter how well secured. He also can, indeed, reach right into the very bowels of his fellow man. And he *does*. When he demonstrates his hand to the policeman who has arrested him for being a thief, the astonished officer chokes on a lemon drop. Dr. Fuddles then, of course, does the right thing and removes the drop from the poor fellow with ease. There is one additional aspect to Dr. Fuddles’ hand, however, that the story missed. If he had turned his right hand over in the fourth dimension, then he would have had *two* left hands!

It was discovered in 1827 by Möbius (of the strip) that any three dimensional object can be converted into its mirror image by flipping it over through the fourth dimension. Thus, a left-handed glove can be made by pure geometry (no scissors, thread, or needle required) into a precise copy of its right-handed mate. If a living organism is so flipped, however, there may be a problem, as everything in the body would be reversed, including the optically active organic molecules discovered by Pasteur in 1848, which are involved in vital biological processes. These molecules, called *stereoisomers*, exist in two versions in nature (the left-handed and the right-handed versions, if you will), but our bodies have developed the ability to use only one version. To be flipped through the fourth dimension would make some reversed stereoisomers unable to participate in the digestion of food and we would starve to death.

For modern science fiction writers the fourth dimension (and hyperspace, in general), is still a major concept. One physicist, writing in *Analog* (today’s premier ‘hard science’ fiction magazine), summed up nicely what was so fascinating in early pulp, and still is today, about the idea of an extra dimension or two, or perhaps even more, at least from a fictional point of view: “Are there hidden dimensions not accessible to us, dimensions in which we could go adventuring, dimensions within which malevolent hyper-dimensional aliens may be lurking, ready to pierce our flimsy paper-thin three-space bodies with their terrible hyper-sharp claws?”[76] The early pulp science fiction magazines encouraged this lurid imagery. Witness the editorial blurb that opened one many-dimensional monster story as follows: “It was a strange world in which Lester and Florence found themselves. A world of sudden

[75] N. Bond, “Dr. Fuddle’s Fingers,” in *Mr. Mergenthwirker’s Lobblies and Other Fantastic Tales*, Coward-McCann 1946.

[76] J. Cramer, “The Other Forty Dimensions,” *Analog*, April 1985. ‘Monsters in hyperspace’ stories were numerous in pulp science fiction. Three examples (in no particular order of literary merit!) are: M. J. Breuer, “The Einstein See-Saw,” *Astounding Stories*, April 1932; P. Ernst, “The 32nd of May,” *Astounding Stories*, April 1935; “The Monster from Nowhere,” *Fantastic Adventures*, July 1939.

Fig. 2.1 An experiment in hyperspace goes astray. The young man is pulling on "hyper-forceps" in an attempt to retrieve a surgeon who has fallen out of 3-space (along with his patient, a professor of non-Euclidean geometry, who suffers from gallstones). The hyper-forceps allow the removal of the gallstones without cutting into the body. Illustration by Frank R. Paul, ©1928 by Experimenter Publishing Co. for "Four Dimensional Surgery" (*Amazing Stories*, February 1928) by Bob Olsen, reprinted by permission of the Ackerman Science Fiction Agency, 2495 Glendower Ave., Hollywood, CA 90027 for the Estate

death and strange science, ruled by inhuman beasts."[77] But as outrageous as that might sound, the real physics of hyperspace is even more amazing.

Hyperspace is, in general, simply any space with more dimensions than the one we obviously seem to live in. In particular, our universe appears to be a four-dimensional (three spatial and one temporal) hyperspace called *spacetime*. This four dimensional world can, at least mathematically, be thought of as the boundary surface of a five dimensional hyperspace. This is analogous to the way the two-dimensional space of the surface of a sphere bounds the three-dimensional space of the sphere itself. This interesting imagery appeared quite early in pulp science fiction. For example, in one remarkably sophisticated story, an eccentric scientist at one point exclaims "A mathematical physicist lives in vast spaces . . . where space unrolls along a fourth dimension on a surface distended from a fifth."[78]

There are some interesting geometrical implications to hyperspace which play big roles in time travel considerations. For example, for beings in the two-dimensional world of a sphere's surface there are *two* ways to travel from

[77] M. Duclos, "Into Another Dimension," *Fantastic Adventures*, November 1939. See the illustration for this story in "Some First Words."

[78] M. J. Breuer, "The Gostak and the Doshes," *Amazing Stories*, March 1930.

pole to pole. There is the usual way, *on* the surface of the sphere, and the hyperspace way which takes them *through* the sphere along the polar diameter. In imagery motivated by thinking of the sphere as an apple, and of the hyperspace path as a tunnel bored by a worm through the apple, it has become popular to call all such shortcuts, through any hyperspace of any dimension, *wormholes* (a word coined in the 1950s by the Princeton physicist-wordsmith John Wheeler). Wheeler used wormholes to show how electric charge could be thought of as lines of force trapped in the changing topology of a multiply connected space (indeed, Wheeler claimed that the observation of what we call electricity is experimental evidence that space is *not* simply connected).[79]

The general theory of relativity predicts the existence of wormholes in spacetime and, in fact, they were first 'discovered' theoretically in the mathematics of relativity as early as 1916 by the Viennese physicist Ludwig Flamm (1885–1964). Later analyses were done by Einstein, himself.[80] Wormholes have been discussed as a possible model for pulsars (as opposed to the more usual model as rotating neutron stars).[81] It has also been suggested that the interior of a charged black hole may be the entrance to a wormhole.[82] All of these various solutions to the gravitational field equations are generically called "Einstein-Rosen bridges" in the physics literature (see note 81, for example), and the term soon appeared in fiction, too.[83]

The use of hyperspace wormhole portals for explaining some observed physical phenomenon appeared in the scientific literature long before Wheeler's electricity example. In his 1928 book *Astronomy and Cosmogony*, for example, the British theoretician Sir James Jeans devoted a chapter to what were then called nebulae, the island-universes we now call galaxies. At the end of his discussion on the arms of spiral galaxies, Jeans offered the following speculation: "Each failure to explain the spiral arms makes it more and more difficult to resist a suspicion that the spiral nebulae are the seats of types of forces entirely unknown to us, forces which may possibly express novel and unsuspected *metric properties of space* [my emphasis]. The type of conjecture which presents itself, somewhat insistently, is that the centers of the nebulae are of the nature of 'singular points,' at which matter is poured into our universe from some other, and entirely extraneous, special

[79] A space is simply connected if *all* the points on the straight line that joins *any* two points in the space are also in the space. The interior of a sphere is simply connected. The interior of a sphere with a hole in it is *not* simply connected.

[80] A. Einstein, "The Particle Problem in the General Theory of Relativity," *Physical Review*, July 1, 1935, pp. 73–77.

[81] J. M. Cohen, "The Rotating Einstein-Rosen Bridge," in *Relativity and Gravitation* (C. G. Kuper and A. Peres, editors), Gordon and Breach Science Publishers 1971.

[82] A. Ori, "Inner Structure of a Charged Black Hole: An Exact Mass-Inflation Solution," *Physical Review Letters*, August 12, 1991, pp. 789–792.

[83] See, for example, J. G. Cramer, *Einstein's Bridge*, Avon 1997 (this is the same Cramer cited in note 76). The *Rosen* comes from the American-Israeli physicist Nathan Rosen (1909–1995), who was a collaborator of Einstein's.

dimension, so that, to a denizen of our universe, they appear as points at which matter is being continually created." This, in everything but name, is a wormhole.

What would hyperspace be like? It is intuitively obvious that in the case of the 2-D surface of a 3-space sphere, the 'hyperspace' wormhole path is shorter than the surface path. Even if this 'shorter path' view holds for wormholes in our 4-D spacetime, however, getting around in science fiction hyperspace may not be a simple task. One tale, for example, tells the story[84] of how one of the first spaceships to explore hyperspace gets lost. The trouble with hyperspace travel is that "You go in at one point, you rocket around until you think it's time to come out, and there you are. Where is 'there'? Why, that's the surprise that's in store for you, because you never know until you get there. And sometimes not even then." The same idea plays a central role in Robert Heinlein's 1957 novel *Tunnel in the Sky*, in which a 'hyperspace gate' is discovered by accident during failed time travel experiments.

Another story[85] asks the same question about hyperspace, and arrives at the same answer: "When you took the Jump ... how sure were you *where* you would emerge? The timing and quantity of the energy input might be as tightly controlled as you liked ... but the uncertainty principle reigned supreme and there was always the chance, even the inevitability of a random miss ... a paper-thin miss might be a thousand light-years."

A common way to visualize hyperspace wormhole shortcuts is to imagine the beginning and the end of a journey as points A and B on the 2-D surface of a piece of paper. Then imagine that the paper is folded so as to position A over B, perhaps with A almost touching B. The distance from A to B *through hyperspace* (the 3-D space in which the folding took place) can clearly be much less than is the distance through 'normal' space (the distance covered by a trip that always remains in the 2-D surface). This is the specific example used in one tale to explain the instantaneous "space-warp" (wormhole) device invented by the story's hero.[86] Such imagery actually appeared quite early in science fiction, as in one story in which a gadget is used to "bend space" so that Earth and Venus touch![87]

The idea of hyperspace folding has broken free from science fiction and can now be found in modern stories in other genres. For example, in one Stephen King story ("Mrs. Todd's Shortcut") a woman keeps finding ever shorter ways to drive from Castle Rock, Maine to Bangor. As the crow flies it is 79 miles, but she gets the journey down to 67 miles, and later to 31.6 miles. When doubted, she replies: "Fold the map and see how many miles it is then ... it can be a little less than a straight line if you fold it a little, or it can be a lot less if you fold it a lot." The doubter remains unconvinced: "You can fold a map on paper, but you can't fold *land*."

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[84] F. Pohl, "The Mapmakers," *Galaxy Science Fiction*, July 1965.

[85] I. Asimov, "Take a Match," in *New Dimensions II: Eleven Original Science Fiction Stories* (R. Silverberg, editor), Doubleday 1972.

[86] G. O. Smith, "The Möbius Trail," *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, December 1948.

[87] E. L. Rementer, "The Space Bender," *Amazing Stories*, December 1928.

For the purpose of wormhole creation in spacetime, we actually have to imagine much more: the folding of four-dimensional spacetime through a five dimensional hyperspace. The folding imagery has even appeared in the movies: spacetime folding is demonstrated with a piece of paper in both *Event Horizon* (perhaps the worst movie of 1997) and the 2014 *Interstellar*.

Another feature of hyperspace that science fiction has taken a liking to is its vastness. An interesting fictional treatment of this idea was given by a writer who, in real life, was an academic psychologist at the University of Michigan. He put himself in a story[88] of a starship captain who is explaining to the crew psychologist how he feels about hyperspace (or *subspace*, as it is called in the story): "God forsaken. That's just what it is. Completely black, completely empty. It frightens me every time we make the jump through it . . . it frightens me because—well, because a man seems to get lost out there. In normal space there are always stars around, no matter how distant they may be, and you feel that you've got direction and location. In subspace, all you've got is nothing—and one hell of a lot of that. It's incredible when you stop to think about it. An area—an opening as big as the whole of our Universe, big enough to pack every galaxy we've ever seen in it—and not a single atom of matter in it . . . until we came barging in to use it as a shortcut across our own Universe."

The vastness of hyperspace got a more humorous treatment from the early pulp science fiction writer Bob Olsen (1884–1956), who wrote the following verses[89] in the introduction to one of his many stories of the fourth dimension:

I read a yarn the other day—
A crazy concept, I must say.
It states that objects have extension
In what is called the "Fourth Dimension."
In hyperspace one could, no doubt,
Make tennis balls turn inside out;
And from a nut remove the kernel
And not disturb the shell external.
A crook could pilfer bonds and stocks,
Then laugh at prison bars and locks,
One step in this direction queer,
And presto! He would disappear!
Let's hope, in planning new inventions,
They'll give us cars with four dimensions.
When searching for a parking place
We sure could use some hyperspace!

It is not just science fiction that takes hyperspace seriously. We find a mathematician, for example, writing that "most science fiction addicts are familiar with

[88] J. V. McConnell, "Avoidance Situation," *If*, February 1956.

[89] B. Olsen, "The Four-Dimensional Auto-Parker," *Amazing Stories*, July 1934. "Bob Olsen" was the pen-name for Alfred Johannes Olsen.

the notion of 'hyperspace,' a higher dimensional space-time bounded by Space-Time through which, in the far distant future, interstellar voyages shortcut the (otherwise unsurmountable) distances between the stars. The purpose of this article[90] is to demonstrate that any . . . relativistic space-time model is the boundary of some . . . five-dimensional hyperspace." That is just what Breuer's magazine character (see note 78) said—in 1930!

The concept of *time* as a fourth dimension has long been a popular concept, and science fiction in particular has embraced it with enthusiasm. We find a little joke on the idea in a story where a young couple, visited by time travelers from 500 years in the future, are said to live in Apartment 4-D.[91] One physicist[92] traced the idea back to the late eighteenth century, finding references to the idea in pre-1800 works of the great French mathematical physicists Jean le Rond d'Alembert (1717–1783) and Joseph-Louis Lagrange (1736–1813). In fact, a philosopher[93] has found a 1751 passage written by d'Alembert that appears to indicate that it is some unknown, earlier person to whom the credit should really go: "I have said [that it is] not possible to imagine more than three dimensions. A clever acquaintance of mine believes, however, that duration could be regarded as a fourth dimension and that the product of time and solidity would be in some way a product of four dimensions; that idea can be contested, but it seems to me that it has some merit, if only that of novelty."

Still, it wasn't until a curious letter appeared in *Nature* in 1885 that the concept of time as the fourth dimension was mentioned seriously in an English-language scientific journal. The author, mysteriously signing himself only as "S.," began by asking "What is the fourth dimension? . . . I [propose] to consider Time as a fourth dimension . . . Since this fourth dimension cannot be introduced into space, as commonly understood, we require a new kind of space for its existence, which we may call time-space."[94] Who was this prophetic writer that, if he had just made a simple swap, would have been the first to use space-time as a word? Nobody knows. Bork speculates that it was an acquaintance of H. G. Wells, but Wells himself is on record that it certainly wasn't him.

In his 1934 *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells wrote "In the universe in which my brain was living in 1879 there was no nonsense about time being space or anything of that sort. There were three dimensions, up and down, fore and aft and right and left, and I never heard of a fourth dimension until 1884 [when Wells was

[90]G. S. Whiston, "'Hyperspace' (The Cobordism Theory of Space-Time)," *International Journal of Theoretical Physics*, December 1974, pp. 285–288.

[91]L. Padgett, "When the Bough Breaks," *Astounding Science Fiction*, November 1944.

[92]A. M. Bork, "The Fourth Dimension in Nineteenth-Century Physics," *Isis*, October 1964, pp. 326–338.

[93]E. Meyerson, *The Relativistic Deduction*, volume 83 of *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, D. Reidel 1985, p. 78.

[94]S., "Four-Dimensional Space," *Nature*, March 26, 1885, p. 481. The editorial staff at *Nature* has informed me that, more than a century-and-a-quarter later, there is no longer any record of the identity of S. in the journal's archives.

eighteen] or thereabout. Then I thought it was a witticism." He had, in fact, said this before. In a 1931 edition of *The Time Machine* (Random House), for example, he wrote in the Preface that the idea for the novel "was begotten in the writer's mind by students' discussions in the laboratories and debating society of the Royal College of Science in the eighties and already it had been tried over in various forms by him before he made this particular application of it."

The idea of time as the fourth dimension entered the popular mind around 1894–95, with the publication of the first of Wells' so-called "scientific romances," *The Time Machine*. Then, after that pioneering use of time as the fourth dimension, science fiction quickly adopted the idea as the basis for one of its most popular subgenres. One of the great "golden age of science fiction" writers, 'Murray Leinster' (1896–1975)—the pen-name for William Jenkins—used it as the basis for his first published story.[95] It is the incredible tale of a Manhattan skyscraper (and its 2000 occupants) sent backward in time several 1000 years because its foundation slips (in an unexplained way) along the fourth dimension. The scientific sophistication of the story is primitive, with just one of the many logical flaws being a vivid description of the time travelers living forward-in-time even as their wrist watches run backward. Indeed, when pulp pioneering editor Hugo Gernsback reprinted the tale in one of the early issues of *Amazing Stories*, a reader complained about that very point. Gernsback felt compelled to defend the story, but could muster only a weak rebuttal based on an author's right to "poetic license."[96]

More technical is the discussion in the story of a clerk who transforms the main entrance to a department store into a time machine by building a tesseract (a four-dimensional cube).[97] The claim is made there that the fourth dimension of the cube/doorway is time. That tale appeared just 5 months after a classic of science fiction by Robert Heinlein (1907–1988) had appeared, also using a tesseract, in which the fourth dimension is taken as *spatial*.[98]

Some writers wanted to have the fourth dimension both ways, as space *and* time in the same story. One wonderful example of this is a classic,[99] written by one of the giants of science fiction. In that tale an electrical engineer named Nelson is caught in the middle of an enormous electromagnetic field surge produced by a short circuit in a power plant. As a physicist explains to the shocked board of directors of the utility, "It now appears that the unheard-of-current, amounting to millions of amperes . . . must have produced a certain extension into four dimensions . . . I have been making some calculations and have been able to satisfy myself that a

[95]M. Leinster, "The Runaway Skyscraper," *Argosy*, February 1919.

[96]H. Gernsback, "Plausability in Scientifiction," *Amazing Stories*, November 1926.

[97]W. P. McGivern, "Doorway of Vanishing Men," *Fantastic Adventures*, July 1941.

[98]R. Heinlein, "—And He Built a Crooked House," *Astounding Science Fiction*, February 1941. Here we read of a Los Angeles architect who builds a house in the shape of a tesseract as it would appear if collapsed into normal three-dimensional space. It isn't stable in 3-space (we are told), however, and so a California earthquake is sufficient to topple the house into a stable 4-D configuration, along with its occupants.

[99]A. C. Clarke, "Technical Error," *Fantasy No. 1*, December 1946.

'hyperspace' about ten feet on a side was, in fact, generated: a matter of some ten thousand quartic—not cubic!—feet. Nelson was occupying that space. The sudden collapse of the field [when the overload breakers finally broke the circuit] caused the rotation of that space."

Being rotated through 4-space has inverted the unlucky Nelson [see *For Further Discussion* at the end of this chapter for more on this point], and to bring him back to normal he must be flipped again. The physicist brushes aside a question about the fourth dimension as time, asserting that the only issue is one of space. Poor Nelson is, therefore, again subjected to a stupendous power overload—only now he disappears! Too late, the physicist realizes that the fourth dimension is both space *and* time and that Nelson has been spatially flipped *and* temporally displaced into the future. To understand the particularly monstrous fate of Nelson, just ask yourself what the result would be if he should materialize *inside* matter sometime in the future!

The interpretation of the fourth dimension as time is, of course, the one of interest to prospective time travelers, to physicists studying time travel, and to philosophers of time, and so for us, too. The sort of science fiction that is of greatest interest to us is like the one in which one of the characters, displaced in time, asks for an explanation from a higher-dimensional being who appears on the scene: "'Just where is Tuesday?' he asked. 'Over there [and when the being extends its hand, the hand disappears].' 'Do that again.' 'What? Oh—Point toward Tuesday? Certainly.'" The being explains the physics of the situation to the astonished time traveler thus: "It is a direction like any other direction. You know yourself there are four directions—forward, sideward, upward, and—*that* way! ... It is the fourth dimension—it is duration."[100]

And how about stories like the one in which a mad inventor discovers how to make a substance whose atoms resist being pushed by "pushing back at right angles to all the other [spatial] directions." That is, to push on this exotic stuff is to risk experiencing a back reaction, of being pushed "off into the fourth dimension [which we are told is time] ... into the middle of the week after next."[101] Now wouldn't *that* really be something?!

But of course it was H. G. Wells who, in fiction, pioneered time travel and its connection to the fourth dimension as it is popularly thought of today (with the caveats about Wellsian time machines kept firmly in mind). We are therefore quite interested, as *The Time Machine* opens, to listening-in as the Time Traveller expounds to a group of friends at a dinner party in his London home. He starts with the assertion "There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it." When asked to say more about the fourth dimension, he replies, "It is simply this. That Space, as our mathematicians have it, is spoken of as having three dimensions, which one may call Length, Breadth, and Thickness, and it is always definable by reference to

[100]T. Sturgeon, "Yesterday Was Monday," *Unknown Fantasy Fiction*, June 1941.

[101]M. Leinster, "The Middle of the Week After Next," *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, August 1952.

three planes, each at right angles to the others. But some philosophical people have been asking why *three* dimensions particularly—why not another direction at right angles to the other three?—and have even tried to construct a Four-Dimensional geometry. Professor Simon Newcomb was expounding this to the New York Mathematical Society only a month or so ago."[102]

2.6 Spacetime and the Block Universe

> "And now he has preceded me briefly in bidding farewell to this strange world. This signifies nothing. For us believing physicists, the distinction between past, present, and future is only an illusion, even if a stubborn one."
>
> —Albert Einstein[103]

The poet Henry Van Dyke wrote, in his 1904 "The Sun-Dial at Wells College," words that echo the spirit of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* from nine centuries before:

The shadow by my finger cast
Divides the future from the past:
Before it, sleeps the unborn hour,
In darkness, and beyond thy power:
Behind its unreturning line,
The vanished hour, no longer thine:
One hour alone is in thy hands,—
The NOW on which the shadow stands.

The very next year Einstein's theory of special relativity appeared and, 3 years later, came Minkowski's spacetime interpretation of special relativity. Van Dyke's beautiful poetry was dealt a mighty blow by those developments in mathematical physics, and in the rest of this chapter we'll see how that came to pass.

The modern view of reality, that the past, present, and future are joined together into a four-dimensional entity called *spacetime*, is due to Hermann Minkowski (1864–1909), Einstein's mathematics teacher when he was a student in Zurich. Minkowski gave spacetime (the visual imagery of Einstein's mathematics) to the world during a famous address at the 80th Assembly of German Natural Scientists and Physicians in Cologne, on September 21, 1908. Entitled "Space and Time," his

[102]And so Newcomb actually was. Wells, it is certain, routinely read *Nature* (one of his college friends, Richard Gregory, eventually became the journal's editor), and Wells must have read Newcomb's address of December 28, 1893 to the New York Mathematical Society when reprinted in the February 1, 1893 issue (on pp. 325–329), where he called hyperspace "the fairyland of geometry." From the Time Traveller's own words, then, that wonderful Victorian dinner party must have taken place in January or February of 1894.

[103]From a letter written by Einstein on March 21, 1955, to the children of Michele Besso, his dearest friend, who had just died. Einstein's use of the word *briefly* was due to his knowledge that he was nearly out of time, too (he died just a month later).

remarks were electrifying then and still are today.[104] He began dramatically: "Gentlemen! The views of space and time which I wish to lay before you have sprung from the soil of experimental physics, and therein lies their strength. They are radical." Then came the famous line, quoted in so many freshman physics texts and philosophy papers, concerning the nature of spacetime: "Henceforth space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve independence." Minkowski explained what spacetime is in these words to his audience:

> "A point of space at a point of time ... I will call a *world point*. The multiplicity of all thinkable x, y, z, t systems of values we will christen the *world*. With this most valiant piece of chalk I might project upon the blackboard four world axes ... Not to leave a yawning void anywhere, we will imagine that everywhere and everywhen there is something perceptible. To avoid saying 'matter' or 'electricity' I will use for this something the word 'substance.' We fix our attention on the substantial point which is at the world point x, y, z, t, and imagine that we are able to recognize this substantial point at any other time. Let the variations dx, dy, dz, of the space coordinates of this substantial point correspond to the time element dt. Then we obtain, as an image, so to speak, of the everlasting career of the substantial point, a curve in the world, a *world-line*. ... The whole Universe is seen to resolve itself into similar world-lines, and I would fain anticipate myself by saying that in my opinion physical laws might find their most perfect expressions as relations between these world-lines ... *Thus also three-dimensional geometry becomes a chapter in four-dimensional physics* [my emphasis]."

With those words Minkowski gave mathematical expression to the philosophical exposition of Wells' Time Traveller to his dinner party friends. Taking the Minkowskian view of the primacy of spacetime as the ultimate building block stuff of reality was Princeton professor of physics John Wheeler, who wrote[105] "There is nothing in the world except empty curved space. Matter, charge , electromagnetism ... are only manifestations of the bending of space. *Physics is Geometry*." This idea was echoed in fiction, in the 1987 novel Moscow 2042 by Vladimir Voinovich, where we find a time traveler who declares "Anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with the theory of relativity knows that nothing is a variety of something and so you can always make a little something out of nothing."

But not everybody understood Minkowski. In a little-known yet quite erudite essay, published just after a stunning experimental verification of general relativity (the bending of starlight passing through the Sun's gravitational field[106]), an anonymous author presented an optical analogy to help those who thought relativity

[104]For a study that includes the original German text, careful English translations, and photographs of Minkowski's agonized corrections to his pre-address manuscript, see P. L. Galison, "Minkowski's Space-Time: From Visual Thinking to the Absolute World," *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences* (volume 10), 1979, pp. 85–121.

[105]C. W. Misner and J. Wheeler, "Gravitation, Electromagnetism, Unquantized Charge, and Mass as Properties of Curved Empty Space," *Annals of Physics*, December 1957, pp. 525–603.

[106]General relativity had already explained the long-puzzling excess precession of the perihelion (point of closest approach to the Sun) of Mercury's orbit. The excess was an observational (and so experimental) fact which Newton's gravity *cannot* completely explain.

simply "a mathematical joke." Signing himself only as "W.G.," he included the following passage[107]:

> "Some thirty or more years ago [it was forty] a *jeu d'esprit* was written by Dr. Edwin Abbott entitled *Flatland* . . . Dr. Abbott pictures intelligent beings whose whole experience is confined to a plane, or other space of two dimensions, who have no faculties by which they can become conscious of anything outside that space and no means of moving off the surface on which they live. He then asks the reader, who has consciousness of the third dimension, to imagine a sphere descending upon the plane of Flatland and passing through it. How will the inhabitants regard this phenomenon? They will not see the approaching sphere and will have no conception of its solidity. They will only be conscious of the circle in which it cuts their plane. This circle, at first a point, will gradually increase in diameter, driving the inhabitants of Flatland outward from its circumference, and this will go on until half the sphere has passed through the plane, when the circle will gradually contract to a point and then vanish, leaving the Flatlanders in undisturbed possession of their country . . . Their experience will be that of a circular obstacle gradually expanding or growing, and then contracting, and they will attribute to *growth in time* what the external observer in three dimensions assigns to a movement in the third dimension. Transfer this analogy to a movement of the fourth dimension through three-dimensional space. Assume the past and future of the Universe to be all depicted in four-dimensional space, and visible to any being who has consciousness of the fourth dimension. If there is motion of our three-dimensional space relative to the fourth dimension, all the changes we experience and assign to the flow of time will be due simply to this movement, *the whole of the future as well as the past existing in the fourth dimension* [my emphasis]."

W.G.'s words are a clear and unequivocal statement of the so-called *block universe* concept of four-dimensional spacetime. One can find the block universe concept in the writings of the ancients, too. Consider, for example, the fifth-century B.C. Greek philosopher Parmenides' view of reality: "It is uncreated and indestructible; for it is complete, immovable, and without end. Nor was it ever, nor will it be; for now it *is*, all at once, a continuous *one*." And in Thomas Aquinas' *Compendium Theologiae*, written in the thirteenth century, we find "We may fancy that God knows the flight of time in His eternity, in the way that a person standing on top of a watchtower embraces in a single glance a whole caravan of passing travelers." This is the block universe idea, too, but whereas for Parmenides it was metaphysics and for Aquinas it was theology, for Einstein and Minkowski it was physics.[108]

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[107]W. G., "Euclid, Newton, and Einstein," *Nature*, February 12, 1920, pp. 627–630. As with the mysterious S. (note 94), the editorial staff at *Nature* has informed me that, nearly a century later, there is no longer any record of the identity of W. G. in the journal's archives.

[108]And for some it was all nonsense. The British philosopher Peter Geach (1916–2013), for example, declared the Minkowskian view to be "very popular with philosophers who try to understand physics and physicists who try to do philosophy." See P. T. Geach, "Some Problems About Time," in *Studies in the Philosophy of Thought and Action* (P. F. Strawson, editor), Oxford University Press, 1968. In his introduction to Geach's essay, editor Strawson put in his two cents by stating the four-dimensional view of reality to be nothing but "fanciful philosophical theorizing."

The block universe concept may explain the enigmatic statement made by Einstein at the death of Michele Besso (note 103). As interpreted[109] decades later:

> "It seems that Einstein's view of the life of an individual was as follows. If the difference between past, present, and future is an illusion, i.e., the four-dimensional spacetime is a 'block Universe' without motion or change, then each individual is a collection of myriad of selves, distributed along his history, each occurrence *persisting on the world line, experiencing indefinitely the particular event of that moment* [my emphasis]. Each of these momentary persons, according to our experience would possess memory of the previous ones, and would therefore believe himself identical with them; yet they would all exist separately, as single pictures in a film. Placing the past, present and future on the same footing this way, destroys the notion of the unity of the self, rendering it a mere illusion as well."

It appears by his words that Einstein was indeed in agreement with the block universe concept, and that he was attempting to give his friend's family some reason to believe that their father still lives 'somewhen.' The makers of the 2002 film *Minority Report* made use of the block universe concept, even if not intentionally; there we see police stopping crime *before* it happens because they can 'see the future.'

Not everybody believed that this view of spacetime was Einstein's, however. Karl Popper (1902–1994), an Austrian philosopher of science, wrote 28 years after the scientist's death that "Einstein was a strict determinist when I first visited him in 1950: he believed in a 4-dimensional Block-Universe. But he gave this up."[110] Shortly before he wrote those words, however, Popper must have learned something new to convince himself of his final comment, because just 2 years earlier he had declared[111] Einstein to (still) be a determinist. Popper presents no evidence to support his claim of Einstein's philosophical conversion, however, and it would seem that the Besso letter still offers the best insight into his actual view of spacetime shortly before his death. I say this because I think Popper's labeling of Einstein as a determinist is wrong. Determinism says 'If you do A, then B will happen, and if you do not do A then (perhaps) something other than B will happen.' A deterministic universe has plenty of room for free will, because you can *choose* to do A or not to do A, and what you decide makes a difference. A fatalistic universe, however, as is the block universe, simply says 'You will do A and B will happen.' To accept the block universe, as did Einstein, is to be a fatalist, not a determinist.

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[109]L. P. Horwitz, R. I. Arshansky, and A. C. Elitzur, "On the Two Aspects of Time: The Distinction and Its Implications," *Foundations of Physics*, December 1988, pp. 1159–1193. See also Einstein's own book (note 67) where he wrote "From a 'happening' in three-dimensional space, physics becomes, as it were, an 'existence' in the four-dimensional 'world'."

[110]See the *Seventh International Congress of Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*, volume 4 (Salzburg, Austria, 1983), p. 176. Popper describes his early discussions with Einstein on the reality of time and the four-dimensional Parmenidean block universe in some detail in his autobiography: see volume 1 of *The Philosophy of Karl Popper* (P. A. Schilpp, editor), The Library of Living Philosophers, Open Court 1974, pp. 102–103.

[111]In the Foreword to the book by B. Gal-Or, *Cosmology, Physics and Philosophy*, Springer-Verlag 1981.

Einstein's final position on this, then, *might* have been like that of the fictional time traveler who takes a little girl 25,000 years back into the past, where she sees an ancient ancestor of humanity.[112] She then asks if the ancestor is really alive. The time traveler replies, "Every man who ever lived is still alive, child. In time there is no real death. When a man dies he's still alive 10 min ago, 10 years ago. He's always alive to those who travel back through time to meet him face to face."

Did Einstein *really* believe this? Not everybody thinks so. At the 1922 meeting of the French Philosophical Society, for example, the philosopher of science Emile Meyerson asked Einstein whether the spatialization of time (the idea that time is a dimension on the same footing as the spatial ones) is a legitimate interpretation of Minkowski's spacetime. Einstein's terse answer was that "it is certain that in the four-dimensional continuum all dimensions are *not* [my emphasis] equivalent."[113]

Use of the term *block universe* is generally thought to have originated with the Oxford philosopher Francis Herbert Bradley (1846–1924) who, in his 1883 book *Principles of Logic*, wrote "We seem to think that we sit in a boat, and are carried down the stream of time, and that on the bank there is a row of houses with numbers on the doors. And we get out of the boat, and knock at the door with number 19, and, re-entering the boat, then suddenly find ourselves opposite 20, and having then done the same, we go on to 21. And, all this while, the firm fixed row of the past and future stretches in a *block* [my emphasis] behind us, and before us." The house numbers would seem to be Bradley's way of referring to the centuries. Note that he wrote these words 12 years before *The Time Machine*, and that they preceded Minkowski's famous address by a quarter-century.

But this origin of *block universe* may not be as clear-cut as I have made it appear. Bradley, who was frequently criticized by the Harvard psychologist William James (1842–1910)—a man who argued for free will[114] and indeterminism, concepts disallowed in a block universe—may have been mocked on the idea by James during an address to the students of the Harvard Divinity School in March 1884 ("The Dilemma of Determinism"), the year after Bradley's book had been published. In his address James spoke of a deterministic world as being a "solid" or "iron block" (this are *not* characteristics of determinism, but rather of fatalism, and so James makes the same mistake as did Popper). However, writing the year before Bradley's book, in the April 1882 issue of *Mind*, James wrote (with obvious disdain) of "the universe of Hegel [the German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831)]—the *absolute block* [my emphasis] whose parts have no loose play," as having "the oxygen of possibility all suffocated out of its lungs" and as being a universe in which "there can be neither good nor bad, but [only] one dead level of

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[112]F. B. Long, "Throwback in Time," *Science Fiction Plus*, April 1953.

[113]A. Einstein, "La Théorie de la Relativité," *Bullentin de la Société Francaise de Philosophia* (volume 17), 1922, pp. 91–113.

[114]A famous line from James, one that perhaps illustrates his sort of reasoning about free will, is "My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will." If only proving theorems in math and physics were that easy.

mere fate." So, perhaps, the chain of evolution of the term block universe is actually from Hegel to James and *then*, finally, to Bradley.

We can actually find the block universe in fiction *before* Minkowski (and so certainly before pulp science fiction) came on the scene. In an 1875 (!) story[115] we read of a man who sees, years in advance, his own death in the American Civil War. In the following extract, this man speaks to an unnamed friend (who is the narrator):

> "Do you know," said Bernard, presently, "I sometimes think prophecy isn't so strange a thing . . . I really see no reason why any earnest man may not be able to foresee the future, now and then . . ."
>
> "There is reason enough to my mind," I replied, "in the fact that future events do not exist, as yet, and we cannot know that which is not, though we may shrewdly guess it sometimes . . ."
>
> "Your argument is good, but your premises are bad, I think," replied my friend, . . . his great, sad eyes looking solemnly into mine.
>
> "How so?" I asked.
>
> "Why, I doubt the truth of your assumption, that future events do not exist as yet . . . Past and future are only divisions of time, and do not belong to eternity . . . To us it must be past or future with reference to other occurrences. But is there, in reality, any such thing as a past or a future? If there is an eternity, it is and always has been and always must be. But time is a mere delusion . . . To a being thus in eternity, all things are, and must be present. *All things that have been, or shall be, are* [my emphasis]."

When the block universe concept did eventually appear in science fiction, it did so early. In a 1927 story, for example, a time traveler from the future and a man in the present (who is the narrator) have the following exchange:

> "I have just been five years into your future."
> "My future!" I exclaimed. "How can that be when I have not lived it yet?"
> "But of course you have lived it."
> I stared, bewildered.
> "Could I visit my past if you had not lived your future?"[116]

So, while the block universe has a bit of a history to it, the history of the concept of *mathematical* spacetime in physics has a much clearer origin: it derives from Minkowski, not from Hegel, Bradley, James, or even Einstein (who often gets credit for it even though he didn't use the concept in special relativity in 1905, 3 years before Minkowski's address.). Eventually, of course, Einstein did come to appreciate the power and conceptual beauty of four-dimensional spacetime, and it came to play a central role in his ideas about gravity. Indeed, in Einstein's general theory of relativity gravity *is* (curved) spacetime. The starting point for general relativity (and so a *scientifically plausible* theory of time travel) was Minkowski's creation of spacetime, and he is truly deserving of the title 'father of the fourth dimension.'

[115] G. C. Eggleston, "The True Story of Bernard Poland's Prophecy," *American Homes*, June 1875. George Cary Eggleston (1839–1911) had served as a soldier in the Confederate Army.

[116] F. Flagg, "The Machine Man of Ardathia," *Amazing Stories*, November 1927.

Of course, it is true that Newton's physics also talks about an analytical (as opposed to merely philosophical) space and time long before either Minkowski or Einstein, but 'Newtonian spacetime' is something very different from Minkowski's self-described "radical" view.[117] In the Newtonian view there is a universal time, a *cosmic* time, which is the same time for everyone, everywhere, in the universe. At every instant, a cosmic simultaneity exists for Newton. Newton's space is Euclidean; that is, through any point exterior to a line exactly one parallel line can be constructed and those two lines will never meet, all triangles (no matter their size) have an interior angle sum of 180°, and so on. For Newton, space and time were absolutely and uniquely separable. They were, as philosophers like to say, "distinct individuals."

Minkowski changed all that. For him space and time are only relatively separable, and the separation is different for observers in relative motion. For Newton, space and time are the *background* in which physical processes in the world evolve. For Minkowski, spacetime *is* the world.

In a famous philosophical paper[118] by an advocate of the block universe view of reality, we find the words "I . . . defend the view of the world . . . which treats the totality of being, of facts, or of events as spread out eternally in the dimension of time as well as the dimensions of space. Future events and past events are by no means present events, but in a clear and important sense they do exist, now and forever, as rounded and definite articles in the world's furniture." The title of Williams' paper comes from an ancient dilemma stated by Aristotle in his *De Interpretatione*, where he asked a question now classic in philosophy: "Will there be a sea fight tomorrow?"

Aristotle began his famous answer by first posing the following premise: If a statement about some future event is, eventually, shown to be true (or false), then that statement was true (or false) from the moment it was made. Consider, then, the following two assertions: (A) "It is true that there will be a sea fight tomorrow" and (B) "It is true that there will *not* be a sea fight tomorrow." Surely, argued Aristotle, (A) and (B) cannot both be true, but equally surely, one of them must be true. Suppose it is (A) that is true. Then there is nothing that can be done to prevent the sea fight, and so the future is fated. Suppose, however, it is (B) that is true. Then there is nothing that can be done to cause the sea fight, and so the future is fated. The conclusion is the same no matter which assertion is the true one; thus, the future is fated.

[117]See, for example, H. Stein, "Newtonian Space-Time," *Texas Quarterly*, Autumn 1967, pp. 174–200; G. Berger, "Elementary Causal Structures in Newtonian and Minkowskian Space-Time," *Theoria* (volume 40), 1974, pp. 191–201; J. Earman and M. Friedman, "The Meaning and Status of Newton's Laws of Inertia and the Nature of Gravitational Forces," *Philosophy of Science*, September 1973, pp. 329–359.

[118]D. C. Williams, "The Sea Fight Tomorrow," in *Structure, Method and Meaning*, The Liberal Arts Press 1951. Donald Williams (1899–1983) was a professor of philosophy at Harvard.

As might be expected, those who like the fatalistic block universe like this conclusion, but, ironically, Aristotle wasn't one of them—he disliked it so much that he struggled to find a way around it. On the other hand, there are philosophers, like Professor Williams (who believed in a fatalistic universe), who reject Aristotle's rejection of his own logic! Professor Williams went so far, in fact, to calling Aristotle's reasoning "a tissue of error" and "swaggeringly invalid." Possibly so, but the philosophical debates over the sea fight question, and the fatalistic (or not) nature of the world, have not ceased to this day.

In an even more famous paper, Professor Williams makes clear his belief that the passage of time is a myth; he poetically declared "the total of world history is a spatio-temporal volume, of somewhat uncertain magnitude, chockablock with things and events."[119] Professor Williams did, indeed, embrace four-dimensional spacetime, and this is demonstrated by the following incredible passage, perhaps his best-remembered words: "It is then conceivable, though doubtless physically impossible, that one four-dimensional area of the time part of the manifold be slewed around at right angles to the rest, so that the time order of that area, as composed by its interior lines of strain and structure, run parallel with a spatial order in its environment. It is conceivable, indeed, that a single whole human life should lie thwartwise of the manifold, with its belly plump in time, its birth at the east and its death in the west, and its conscious stream running alongside somebody's garden path."

Good Lord!

Now, I am willing to admit that Professor Williams probably wrote that wonderful passage mostly for effect,[120] but I ask you—what, if anything, does it *mean*? It is marvelous to read and yet it remains (for me) mysterious.[121] It should come as no surprise that Professor Williams originally presented his papers to the Metaphysical Society of America, rather than to the American Physical Society. But this passage was perhaps not without impact in areas far removed from metaphysics; some years later there appeared a science fiction story[122] that reads as though it had been inspired by Williams. In it, a scientist discovers how to bend his perception of the four dimensions so as to view verticality as duration and duration as verticality. Thus, he is in October while sitting, but when he stands up he is in November! As bizarre as this may seem, such coordinate interchanges actually do occur in the

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[119] D. C. Williams, "The Myth of Passage," *Journal of Philosophy*, July 1951, pp. 457–472.

[120] In a footnote, Williams sort of admits this when he writes "I should expect the impact of the environment on such a being to be so wildly queer and out of step with the way he is put together, that his mental life must be a dragged-out monstrous delirium." I think this a great understatement.

[121] As it was for some of Williams' fellow philosophers, one of whom bluntly called the 'myth-of-passage' paper "an interesting piece of science fiction": see M. Capek, "The Myth of Frozen Passage: The Status of Becoming in the Physical World," in *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science* (volume 2), Humanities Press 1965. Capek's title reflects his view of the block universe as simply a giant refrigerator and so, turning the tables on Williams, we have 'passage' changed to 'frozen passage.' See also note 136.

[122] G. Wolfe, "The Rubber Bend," *Universe 5* (T. Carr, editor), Random House 1974.

mathematical theory of time machines; we'll see this later, for example, when we discuss Tipler's rotating cylinder time machine.

By the 1930s the block universe had found a home in pulp science fiction. The block universe view that past and present coexist with the present got dramatic treatment in one story of a high school teacher who invents a "spacetime warp" theory, and who is then tricked by an evil industrialist into implementing it in the form of a gun. The weapon produces incredible effects when it is tested; for example, an allosaurus appears, which we are told is "a carnivorous dinosaur of the Jurassic Age, the most frightful engine of destruction that ever walked the Earth!"[123] At the story's end, the teacher explains what has happened to a crowd of breathless newspaper reporters:

> "Spacetime was warped slightly ... The Einsteinian spacetime continuum buckled ... Because it was superficial, only a little of the past, a little of the future broke through. The folds of the warp distorted spacetime evanescently, erratically skirting the vast gulf where the past lies buried and lightly tapping the vast stores of the future. It is a truism of modern speculative physics that the past and the future exist simultaneously and coextensively in higher dimensions of space. De Sitter has speculated as to the possibility of seeing an event before it happens. It is quite possible, gentlemen. Events of the far future already exist in spacetime."

That 'explains' the dinosaur. In the teacher's words, "You tell me that two men saw an incredible beast. ... They swear it looked like a dinosaur. I think it was a dinosaur, gentlemen. It broke through when the warp tapped the past."

And just 2 years later, Robert Heinlein made world lines the central concept in the first of his many classic tales.[124] The story draws an analogy between a world line and a telephone cable: the beginning and end points in spacetime for the world line of a person (birth and death) are associated with breaks (faults) in a telephone cable. By sending a signal up and down the cable, and measuring the time delay until the arrival of the echo produced by such discontinuities, a technician can both detect and locate the faults. In the same manner, Heinlein's story-gadget sends a signal of unspecified nature up and down a world line and thus locates the birth and death 'discontinuities.' Knowledge of the death date, in particular, causes financial stress among life insurance companies, and an examination of *that* tension (not strange physics) is the fictional point of the story.

And then, 2 years after Heinlein's tale with its serious tone, a far less serious story[125] (featuring an Attila the Hun character who roams up and down the corridors of time kidnapping beautiful women for his harem!), we find an 'editorial' footnote telling its young readers that "scientists—especially the new order of meta-physical scientists—are agreed on the principles of Space-Time. The future is not a thing which *will exist*. Rather it is a thing which *does exist*—all events from

[123] F. B. Long, "Temporary Warp," *Astounding Stories*, August 1937.

[124] R. Heinlein, "Life-Line," *Astounding Science Fiction*, August 1939.

[125] R. Cummings, "Bandits of Time," *Amazing Stories*, December 1941.

the Beginning to the End, exist in a record upon the scroll of Time." This story, itself, was silly, but the block universe metaphysics was up-to-date.

Somewhat surprisingly, I think, is that even before pulp science fiction embraced the block universe, the concept had already made a deep impression on a broader audience. For example, in a 1928 New York stage play[126] the action alternately takes place in the years 1784 and 1928 and, to explain how that can be, one character (a time traveler) tells another:

> "Suppose you are in a boat, sailing down a winding stream. You watch the banks as they pass you. You went by a grove of maple trees, upstream. But you can't see them now, so you saw them in the *past*, didn't you? You're watching a field of clover now; it's before your eyes at this moment, in the *present*. But you don't know yet what's around the bend in the stream ahead of you; there may be wonderful things, but you can't see them until you get around the bend, in the *future*, can you?"

Then, after this prologue about the stream of time, comes the block universe idea:

> "Now remember, *you're* in the boat. But *I'm* up in the sky above you; in a plane. I'm looking down on it all. I can see *all at once* the trees you saw upstream, the field of clover that you see now, and what's waiting for you around the bend ahead! *All at once!* So the past, present, and future of the man in the boat are all *one* to the man in the plane."

Then, finally, the obvious theological conclusion: "Doesn't that show how all Time must really be one? Real Time—real Time is nothing but an idea in the mind of God!"

To end this section, the block universe conception was cleverly used by one science fiction fan who argued in support of time travel, in reply to another fan how had claimed that a failure of mass/energy conservation was fatal to the plausibility of time travel. Their exchange began with a letter to the editor at *Astounding Stories* in November 1937, written in response to a recent story[127]:

> "Let us say that there is, at a certain time, 'x' amount of matter in the Universe, and 'e' amount of energy. Then if a man of 'a' mass travels backward in time to this particular instant aforementioned, the total amount of matter is thus 'x' plus 'a', while if no other such mass changing occurrences take place, the amount of matter in the future is 'x' minus 'a'. Only a corresponding loss and gain respectively in the amount of energy could explain this conservation of energy, advocates [of time travel] say what they may. But you can't rob or add energy to a Universe nilly-willy! Or perhaps time doesn't enter in on the matter. Perhaps you can add matter in a Universe provided you take it away on some future date."

This fan's concern clearly made an impression on science fiction writers, and the case for conservation of energy is stated in many of the time travel stories that appeared after the publication of this letter.[128]

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[126] "Berkeley Square" by J. L. Balderson. This play was made into a 1933 movie of the same name, and again in 1951 as the film *I'll Never Forget You*.

[127] O. Saari, "The Time Bender," *Astounding Stories*, August 1937 (see also note 137 in Chap. 1).

[128] Examples include the novels *Lest Darkness Fall* (Henry Holt 1941) by L. Sprague de Camp, and *The Time Hoppers* (Doubleday 1967) by Robert Silverberg.

A reply was soon received by the magazine in a letter (January 1938) from another fan:

> "[A recent letter] implies that the idea of time travel is incompatible with the law of conservation of mass and energy. I believe [the] reasoning is wrong [and that the] difficulty lies primarily in the assumption that a body moved in time is transported into a different Universe. According to Einstein, time and the three normal dimensions are so related as to form a continuous, inseparable medium we call the spacetime continuum. Time is in no way independent of the other components of our Universe. Hence a fixed mass [a time traveler and his machine] moved in time is by no means lost from the Universe, the action being analogous to a shift along any other dimension."

The block, or frozen, universe of Minkowski is clearly reflected in those words.[129]

2.7 Philosophical Implications of the Block Universe

> "Is the future all settled beforehand, and only waiting to be 'pushed through' into our three-dimensional ken? Is there no element of contingency? No free will? I am talking geometry, not theology."[130]

I should tell you now that, despite the enthusiastic embrace of the block universe by Williams and others (including Einstein), there are those who have been harsh in their criticism of Minkowski's spacetime. The major philosophical problem with the block universe interpretation of four-dimensional spacetime is that it looks like fatalism disguised as physics. It seems to be little more than a mathematician's proof of a denial of free will dressed up in geometry. One philosopher illuminated this concern with the following story, one that vividly illustrates the compelling need many humans have to deny a fatalistic world:

> "In a moving picture version of *Romeo and Juliet*, the dramatic scene was shown in which Juliet, seemingly dead, is lying in the tomb, and Romeo, believing she is dead, raises a cup containing poison. At this moment an outcry from the audience was heard: 'Don't do it!' We laugh at the person who . . . forgets that the time flow of a movie is unreal, is merely the unwinding of a pattern imprinted on a strip of film. Are we more intelligent than this man when we believe that the time flow of our actual life is different? Is the present more than our cognizance of a predetermined pattern of events unfolding itself like an unwinding film?"[131]

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[129]In the context of mathematical physics (*not* science fiction) it has been shown that time travel does *not* imply any fatal violation of conservation of energy. See, for example, J. L. Friedman *et al*., "Cauchy Problem in Spacetimes with Closed Timelike Curves," *Physical Review D*, September 15, 1990, pp. 1915–1930, and D. Deutsch, "Quantum Mechanics Near Closed Timelike Lines," *Physical Review D*, November 15, 1991, pp. 3197–3217.

[130]The lament of Victorian physicist Oliver Lodge (1850–1940) in his essay "The New World of Space and Time," *Living Age*, January 1920.

[131]H. Reichenbach, *The Direction of Time*, University of California Press 1956, p. 11.

Most people in the Western world would answer *yes* to Reichenbach's question. Most people do find Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* to be a beautiful poem, yes, but still they reject its fatalistic message: "And the first Morning of Creation wrote/What the Last Dawn of Reckoning shall read." Indeed, William James quoted these very words in his 1884 address to the students of the Harvard Divinity School when he argued against fatalism and the block universe.

Besides fatalism, another reason for the stinging words by critics of Minkowski's spacetime is that, in it, events don't *happen*—they just *are*. That is, there seems to be no temporal process of *becoming* in Minkowski's spacetime. Everything is already there and, as what we perceive to be the passing of time occurs, we simply become conscious of ever more of Minkowski's "world points," or events, that lie on our individual world lines. Hermann Weyl (1885–1955), a German mathematical physicist who in his last years was a colleague of Einstein and Gödel at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, expressed this very interpretation in words that have become famous, words that sound very much like those of Wells' Time Traveller: "The objective world simply *is*, it does not *happen*. Only to the gaze of my consciousness, crawling upward along the life line of my body [Minkowski's world line], does a section of the world [spacetime] come to life as a fleeting image in space which continuously changes in time [creating what we call the *now* or the *present*]."[132]

Weyl was skillful in finding poetic ways to express the world line view of reality, but not everybody is convinced by the poetry because it seems to deny the common sense idea of time 'flowing,' of temporal passage; it effectively says time is mind-dependent, a mere *illusion*, as the time traveler in "Berkeley Square" declared (note 126). One philosopher who was particularly opposed to Weyl's view was the British-American academic Max Black (1909–1989), and he expressed his opinion in no uncertain terms: "The picture of a 'block Universe,' composed of a timeless web of 'world-lines' in four-dimensional space, however strongly suggested by the theory of relativity, is a piece of gratuitous metaphysics."[133] Another philosopher who was unhappy with Weyl's view of the block universe was just as blunt: "While philosophers may be forgiven intellectual extravagances of this kind, I think it is a pity when they receive encouragement from theoretical physicists."[134]

Weyl's views had supporters, too, however. Consider, for example, the Time Traveller's speech to his friends at the fateful dinner party that opens *The Time*

[132]H. Weyl, *Philosophy of Mathematics and Natural Science*, Princeton University Press 1949, p. 116. Sir James Jeans had already said the same, somewhat less elegantly, in his 1935 Sir Halley Stewart Lecture: "The tapestry of spacetime is already woven throughout its full extent, both in space and time, so that the whole picture exists, although we only become conscious of it bit by bit—like separate flies crawling over a tapestry . . . A human life is reduced to a mere thread in the tapestry." Jeans then immediately *rejected* this fatalistic view: see his *Scientific Progress*, Macmillan 1936, p. 20.

[133]From a book review in *Scientific American*, April 1962, pp. 179–185.

[134]H. A. C. Dobbs, "The 'Present' in Physics," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, February 1969, pp. 317–324.

Machine: "There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it . . . here is a portrait of a man at 8 years old, another at fifteen, another at seventeen, another at twenty-three, and so on. All these are evidently sections, as it were, Three-Dimensional representations of his Four-Dimensional being, *which is a fixed and unalterable thing* [my emphasis]." Remember, these words were written in 1895, 13 years before Minkowski and his world lines, and of course decades before Weyl's famous words.

Wells' passage made a considerable impression on at least one well-known physicist of the time, who references it in his early book on relativity.[135] And in another book on relativity, published the same year, we find the same interpretation of Minkowski's spacetime as a block universe: "With Minkowski, space and time become particular aspects of a single four-dimensional continuum . . . All motional phenomena . . . become timeless phenomena in four-dimensional space. The whole history of a physical system is laid out as a changeless whole."[136]

The claim that time is an illusion has some thought-provoking implications concerning the concepts of omniscience and free will, concepts that occur in any discussion of time travel. Some old theology on God's omniscience, as discussed in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, is seemingly lent at least some support by Minkowski's spacetime: "Now although contingent events come into actual existence successively, God does not, as we do, know them in their actual existence successively, but all at once; because his knowledge is measured by eternity, as is also his existence; and eternity which exists as a simultaneous whole, takes in the whole of time . . . Hence all that takes place in time is eternally present to God." Somewhat paradoxically, however, Aquinas did make a distinction between past and future. In that same work he declares that "God can cause an angel not to exist in the future, even if he cannot cause it not to exist while it exists, or not to have existed when it already has." For Aquinas, then, whereas the past is rigid and unchangeable, the future is plastic, which is *not* the block universe view of spacetime.

As one theologian has observed,[137] this does not mean that Aquinas thought God had to view all events simultaneous with all others.[138] Rather, our theologian says that Aquinas could have thought of the relationship between God and events as being similar to that between the center of a circle and all the points on the circumference. That is, each point on the circumference has its own identity, coming before and/or after any other point, but the center is related to each and

[135] L. Silberstein, *The Theory of Relativity*, Macmillan 1914, p. 134.

[136] E. Cunningham, *The Principle of Relativity*, Cambridge University Press 1914, p. 191. The use of the words *timeless* and *changeless* explain the characterization of the block universe as being *frozen* (in note 121).

[137] W. L. Craig, "Was Thomas Aquinas a B-Theorist of Time?" *New Scholasticism*, Autumn 1985, pp. 475–483. For the B-theory of time, look back at the discussion in the first section of this chapter.

[138] A science fiction story by Norman Spinrad, "The Weed of Time" (*Alchemy and Academe*, Doubleday 1970) graphically describes what a nightmare that could be!

every point on the circumference in precisely the same way. The center, then, is 'eternity' and the circumference is the temporal series ('one thing after another') of reality. Saying that God is *eternal* is thus very different from saying he is *everlasting*. The first means outside of time, whereas the second means he is a temporal entity but has neither beginning nor end.

Our theologian supports the first interpretation, invoking Aquinas' own words from *Summa Contra Gentiles*: "The divine intellect, therefore, sees in the whole of its eternity, as being present to it, whatever takes place through the whole course of time. And yet what takes place in a certain part of time was not always existent. It remains, therefore, that God has a knowledge of these things that according to the march of time do not yet exist."

The issue of God's eternity and his place in spacetime has long been a hot topic among theologians with a scientific inclination. Practically every issue of the learned journal *Religious Studies*, for example, carries an article on the subject, often invoking relativity theory to support some argument. The Bible, itself, can be a confusing guide on this matter. For example, consider the Old Testament story of King Ahab (First Kings 21). Ahab, King of Sumeria, coveted Naboth's vineyard, but Naboth would not sell. The King retreated, but his wife Jezebel arranged for Naboth's downfall and judicial murder and thus caused the arrival of all his property into her husband's hands. This angered God, who commanded Elijah to prophesy disaster on Ahab's house. Ahab responded with sackcloth, and at that God shifted the disaster to the house of Ahab's son. The point, here, is that God, declared to be omniscient, seems to have been *surprised* at Ahab's penitence. God is aware of everything in this tale, but only as it happens. That is, God's knowledge is subject to growth. This Hebrew concept of God as a participant in history is at odds with the contemporary Christian conception of divine knowledge of all that has been, all that is, and all that will be, a view which has its own Biblical support (for divine eternality). For example, Malachi 3:61 ("For I am the Lord, I change not"), and James 1:17 ("the Father ... with whom is no variableness").

When *The Time Machine* was serialized in the *New Review*, it included a passage that does not appear in the now classic version of the story in which the Time Traveller explains his view of the connection between omniscience and the block universe to his dinner guests:

> "I'm sorry to drag in predestination and free-will, but I'm afraid those ideas will have to help ... Suppose you knew fully the position and properties of every particle of matter, of everything existing in the Universe at any particular moment of time: suppose, that is, that you were omniscient. Well, that knowledge would involve the knowledge of the condition of things at the previous moment, and at the moment before that, and so on. If you knew and perceived the present perfectly, you would perceive therein the whole of the past. If you understood all the natural laws the present would be a complete and vivid record of the past. Similarly, if you grasped the whole of the present, knew all its tendencies and laws, you would see clearly all the future. To an omniscient observer there would be no forgotten past—no piece of time as it were that had dropped out of existence—and no blank future of things yet to be revealed ... Present and past and future would be without meaning to such an observer ... He would see, as it were, a Rigid Universe filling space and time ... If 'past' meant anything, it would mean looking in a certain direction, while 'future' meant looking the opposite way."

Wells' "Rigid Universe" certainly sounds like the block universe, and he (or least, the Time Traveller) seems to have believed that it held important implications for the concept of free will.

The 'Rigid Universe' got an interesting science fiction treatment in a story[139] that imagined an event in the present that occurs 'before it should' (a heart patient learns that her obituary notice will be in next week's *New York Times* when that paper arrives 'early'). As one character explains to the sister of the lady who is soon to die, "The future mustn't be changed . . . For us the events of . . . the future are as permanent as any event in the past. We don't dare play around with changing the future, not when it's already signed, sealed and delivered in that newspaper. For all we know the future's like a house of cards. If we pull one card out, say your sister's life, we might bring the whole house tumbling down. You've got to accept the decree of fate . . . You've got to."

With Einstein's discovery of the *relativity of simultaneity*,[140] we run into the question of 'How can there be any sense to the concept of divine, universe-wide knowledge in a four-dimensional spacetime?' That's because in some frames of reference it is possible for event A to be observed before event B, whereas in other frames the temporal order could be reversed, and so some theological questions prompted by spacetime physics are: 'What is God's frame of reference if he is to be actively involved in human affairs? Could God have a special frame of reference in which he is exempt from the relativity of simultaneity, a frame in which he imposes an absolute order on the sequence of becoming of events? Does it make any sense, that is, to say God enjoys what might be called 'divine immediacy'? And if so, what should we think of a God who follows rules of nature different from those that govern all he is supposed to have made?'

Theologians have debated questions like these for decades, and surely will continue to do so for many more decades to come. Alas, I suspect that physicists who study time travel have either been unaware, unimpressed, or just plain uninterested. That's too bad, because one doesn't have to be religious to appreciate the pure intellectual challenges presented by such questions. For example, consider the following debate between two philosophers, one who believes free will and divine foreknowledge are not compatible, and another who thinks the first has made a fundamental error in blurring the distinction between changing and affecting the past. (This distinction is of *great* importance

[139] R. Silverberg, "What We Learned From This Morning's Newspaper," *Infinity Four*, November 1972.

[140] This refers to the discovery that two events, which occur simultaneously for one observer in a spacetime, may not be simultaneous for another observer in the same spacetime. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

in any discussion of time travel.) This second philosopher presented some of his arguments in terms of a time traveler to the past[141]:

> "Consider the following. Parsons (P) has invented a special machine which allows him to go back in time. He enters the machine in 1986 and finds himself in the presence of or, perhaps better, observing, Quigly (Q) in 1876. P is an authority on Q, and knows immediately the situation Q is in. Not only that, but he remembers reading about the particular decision or act which Q made in that situation. Thus one might argue that from P's perspective what Q decides is as if already done. It is not already done, since P is standing there waiting for Q to do it. He has gone back in time. Yet from P's perspective, which is of one come back from the future, it is as if already done, since he knows what Q does decide. Since P strongly believes in the unalterability of the past, it is not within Q's power to do something other than what Q in fact does in that situation. From Q's perspective his decision is not already made nor is the action taken, so that it is in his power at that time to do either x or y. From his perspective, that he will do x rather than y is indeterminate; it is not yet done, though at the same time he can grant that P knows what he will do because for him it is as if he has already done it."

The first philosopher doesn't buy any of this, and dismisses it with "It should be abundantly clear . . . that the fact that such stories are in some way imaginable and intuitively graspable says nothing about their logical coherence." Given the interest among modern physicists in time travel, however, I think the first philosopher wouldn't write that today.

One possible reply to all of these theological issues that spacetime physics prompts can perhaps be found in a paper[142] (written by a philosopher and two mathematicians) that describes a five-dimensional spacetime in which the fifth dimension is initially given the provocative label of the 'eternity' axis. But then the authors lost their nerve and elected to rename it 'anti-time.' It is interesting to note that pulp science fiction anticipated that terminology by decades, as in one story[143] we read "Beyond the fourth there is a fifth dimension . . . Eternity, I think you would call it. It is the line, the direction perpendicular to time." For some, the eternity axis would appear to be perfect to serve as the temporal dimension for God, an axis distinct from the time axis of mere mortals.

The idea of supernatural beings existing outside of mortal time is an old one in theology, and it can also be found in secular literature long before science fiction got hold of it. For example, in the first act of Lord Byron's 1821 poem *Cain*, the fallen angel Lucifer tells Cain and his wife that

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[141]For the complete exchange between these two philosophers, see W. Hasker, "Foreknowledge and Necessity," April 1985, pp. 121–157, B. Reichenbach, "Hasker and Omniscience," January 1987, pp. 86–92, and W. Hasker, "The Hardness of the Past: A Reply to Reichenbach," July 1987, pp. 337–342, all in the journal *Faith and Philosophy*. Hasker is the 'first' philosopher, and Reichenbach is the 'second' one. See also D. P. Lackey, "A New Disproof of the Compatibility of Foreknowledge and Free Choice," *Religious Studies*, September 1974, pp. 313–318.

[142]J. G. Bennett *et al*., "Unified Field Theory in a Curvature-Free Five-Dimensional manifold," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London A*, July 1949, pp. 39–61. A theological interpretation is given in G. Stromberg, "Space, Time, and Eternity," *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, August 1961, pp. 134–144.

[143]L. A. Eshbach, "The Time Conqueror," *Wonder Stories*, July 1932.

With us acts are exempt from time, and we
Can crowd eternity into an hour,
Or stretch an hour into eternity.
We breathe not by a mortal measurement,
But that's a myst'ry.

Before Minkowski, the debates over fatalism (as in Silverberg's story in note 139) and free will had been the exclusive province of philosophers, theologians, and lawyers (if a person has no control over his or her actions, then can we morally and ethically punish that person if those actions happen to be criminal?[144]). After Minkowski, the physicists (at least a few of them) joined the debates. According to one philosopher (note 118) the major motivation driving these debates is "the age-old dread that God's foreknowledge of our destiny can in itself impose the destiny upon us." The implication is, of course, that God is 'outside of time' and so can take in the entire Minkowskian block universe at a glance (hence his foreknowledge).

The relativistic view of the universe as a timeless four-dimensional spacetime seems to provide scientific, mathematical support for the conclusion that not only is the past fixed, but so is the future. Does that mean the future is what it will be—and if so, then why bother agonizing over the many apparent decisions each of us faces every day? If the future will be what it will be, then Christian theologians are left with the puzzling task of explaining what could possibly be meant by the Biblical exhortation (Deuteronomy 30:19) "I call Heaven and Earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore *choose* [my emphasis] life, that both thou and thy seed may live."

This issue has bothered philosophers for a very long time. The so-called Master Argument (the name reflects its supposed invulnerability to rebuttal), for example, comes down to us from its origins in ancient times, in the *Discourses* of the first century A.D. Roman Stoic philosopher Epictetus. That argument can be summarized[145] as follows:

1. The future follows from the past;
2. The past is unchangeable;
3. What follows from the unchangeable is unchangeable;

Therefore,

4. The future is unchangeable.

This certainly does seem to be fatalistic, in effect arguing that all events in a block universe spacetime are recorded in a 'Book of Destiny.' Since ancient times many great works of literature have adopted that view, recounting tales of the foretold

[144]For more on this, in the context of time travel, see the penultimate question in the *For Future Discussion* questions at the end of this chapter.

[145]See, for example, the two papers by R. L. Purtill, "The Master Argument," *Apeiron*, May 1973, pp. 31–36, and "Foreknowledge and Fatalism," *Religious Studies*, September 1974, pp. 319–324.

fates of men, such as Sophocles' *Oedipus*. It is, in a block universe, as though our conscious experience of the world is no different from that of the man watching the projected film images of *Romeo and Juliet*.

That view is the central issue in the early sixth century A.D. Roman philosopher Boethius' influential *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (circa A.D. 500) which was written during a year of imprisonment before his execution for treason; perhaps he wondered during that year if his fate could have been anything different. Certainly he must have taken some consolation in fatalism, but in fact he tried to argue that God's vision of *all* temporal reality does not limit the freedom to act. According to Boethius, "The expression 'God is ever' denotes a single Present, summing up His continual presence in all the past, in all the present . . . and in all the future." That is, God sees in one timeless and eternal moment all that has been and will be freely chosen.[146]

When the fourteenth century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer prepared a translation of *Consolatione* he was obviously inspired by it when he wrote his very long, famous poem (*Troilus and Criseyde*) on the nature of love (Book IV.140):

Some say "If God sees everything before
It happens—and deceived He cannot be—
Then everything must happen, though you swore
The contrary, for He has seen it, He."
And so I say, if from eternity
God has foreknowledge of our thoughts and deed,
We've no free choice, whatever books we read.

Two modern, purely philosophical rebuttals[147] to Chaucer, however, argue that his poetry misstates Boethius' philosophy when Troilus declares that divine foreknowledge is incompatible with free will. That is, in their view God's omniscience (a fundamental teaching in the theistic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) *is* compatible with free will (also a fundamental belief in those same religions). Both of these scholarly papers, though, depend much more on the nuances of grammar than most physicists will like.

The connection between spacetime physics and free will was made explicitly by the philosopher who wrote "For philosophers in either field, philosophy of science and philosophy of religion are too often viewed as mutually irrelevant . . . This is unfortunate, because sometimes the problems can be quite parallel and a consistent resolution is required. One especially intriguing case in point concerns, in

[146]In his *The Sirens of Titan*, a 1959 novel meant to be a parody of God's omniscience, Kurt Vonnegut gave the curious name of *chrono-synclastic infundibulated vision* to God's power to see the past and future.

[147]G. I. Mavrodes, "Is the Past Unpreventable?" April 1984, pp. 131–146, and A. Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way Out," July 1986, pp. 235–269, both in *Faith and Philosophy*.

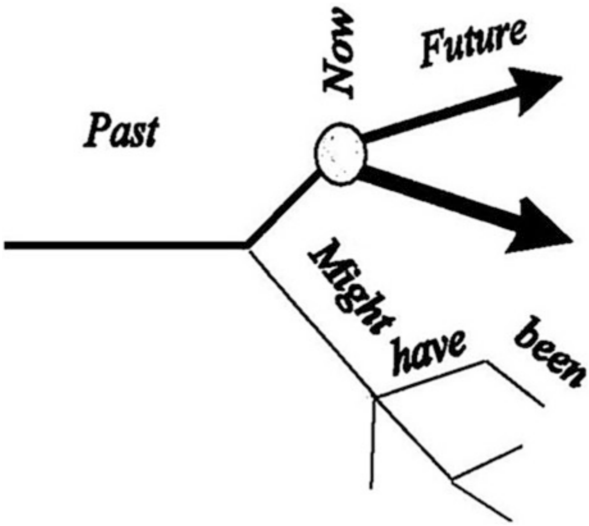

Fig. 2.2 The common view of time

philosophy of science, the possibility of . . . time travel and, in philosophy of religion, the relationship between divine foreknowledge and human freedom."[148]

That philosopher could well have included science fiction writers in his group of people interested in both spacetime physics and free will. In one story,[149] for example, a man in the twenty-fifth century is about to travel back into the past to escape criminal prosecution. He is aked where he'd like to go, and he replies "I do not understand the paradoxes—what if I choose to build gravity-deflectors in Ancient Rome?" When he is told (correctly) that he couldn't do that because it didn't happen, he persists: "But if I can choose any period, it means I can alter history at will—which presumes that the present can also be changed." Then, at last, he gets the explicit answer that bothers nearly everyone: "The real answer is that in the final analysis your decision to choose a certain time period is already made, and the things you will do [in the time traveler's personal time] are already determined. Free will is an illusion; it is synonymous with incomplete perception." The same idea appears in another tale (note 57); when one character says, "What you are saying is that the future is fixed, and that you can read it, in every essential detail," the response is "Quite right . . . both those things are true."

However, no matter how hard we try—and by *we* I include even those physicists and philosophers who embrace the block universe with its support of time travel to the past—it is very difficult to break free of the view of time as shown in Fig. 2.2. That is, as the passage of time up to the present or *now* (with all to the left of that

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[148]W. L. Craig, "Tachyons, Time Travel, and Divine Omniscience," *Journal of Philosophy*, March 1988, pp. 135–150. Tachyons are hypothetical faster-than-light particles that theoretically travel backwards through time. They will be discussed in Chap. 5.

[149]W. Kubilius, "Turn Backward, O Time," *Science Fiction Quarterly*, May 1951.

instant as the past), while to the right of the *now* we have multiple possible futures (depending on our free will choices). Lying to the side of all that (in our thoughts and imaginations) are all that 'might have been' if we had made different choices than we did at earlier times in the past.[150]

With all that said, even if events are really laid out in the spatial and temporal web that constitutes the four-dimensional block universe, there still remains the great mystery of why we see them unfold in the particular sequence that we do. Why not in reverse order? Why, indeed, do we see what we call *time* run from what we call the past to what we call the future and, indeed, what do we really mean by *past* and *future*? As you'll see in the next chapter, these are not easy questions, and nearly everybody who has thought about them believes we are not yet even close to knowing the answers.

On that perhaps gloomy note, it seems appropriate to end here with a few more words from St. Augustine's *Confessions*, with words that follow those that helped open this chapter: "I confess to you, Lord, that I still do not know what time is. Yet I confess too that I do know that I am saying this in time, that I have been talking about time for a long time, and that this long time would not be a long time if it were not for the fact that time has been passing all the while. How can I know this, when I do not know what time is? Is it that I do know what time is, but do not know how to put what I know into words? I am in a sorry state, for I do not even know what I do not know!"[151]

2.8 For Further Discussion

In the comics one of Superman's more interesting adversaries is Mr. Mxyzptlk (pronounced *mix-yez-pitle-ick*), a being with seemingly magical powers from the Land of Zrfff in the fifth dimension. Mr. Mxyzptlk's powers are not really because of magic, however, but are 'merely' the result of his hyperspace world with its extra dimension. Mr. Mxyzptlk, for example, in one of his misadventures with Superman in 1954, begins selling a

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[150]Figure 2.2 is based on a similar one in C. K. Raju, "Time Travel and the Reality of Spontaneity," *Foundations of Physics*, July 2006, pp. 1099–1113.

[151]There is another view of time even darker than St. Augustine's, which denies the existence of both future and past, and doesn't offer us much either for that special moment we call the present (or *now*). This view, called *presentism*, was hauntingly expressed in some lyrics I heard in the final episode of the second season (2015) of the HBO series *True Detective*: "There is no future/There is no past/In the present nothing lasts." Now *that* is depressing! Still, there are philosophers who believe even this view can support time travel: see S. Keller and M. Nelson, "Presentists Should Believe in Time-Travel," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, September 2001, pp. 333–345.

newspaper called the *Daily Mpftrz* in competition with the *Daily Planet*. Unlike a traditional newspaper that reports what *has* happened, the *Daily Mpftrz* (your guess is as good as mine!) prints what *will* happen. As Mr. Mxyzptlk says, "You see, as a resident of the fifth dimension, I can get all the news I want from the *fourth* dimension!" The science editor at the *Daily Planet* explains the meaning of that to his boss, Perry White: "That's right, Mr. White . . . many physicists consider *time* the fourth dimension . . . so if Mr. Mxyzptlk can travel from the fifth dimension to our three-dimensional world, he most likely *is* able to see the future!" (This leaves unanswered the question of *why* he continues to challenge Superman when he knows he will always be defeated—*as he always is*!) Presumably a five dimensional world would have our three spatial and one temporal dimension (for a total of four), and so the question now is: what is the nature of the additional (fifth) dimension? Is it spatial or is it temporal? (There is a brief appearance of the fifth dimension in the 2014 movie *Interstellar*, but we aren't told much of anything about its possible structure.) Discuss and compare the world of four space dimensions and one time dimension, with the world of three space and *two* time dimensions. (In Chap. 5 we'll discuss a possible connection between two-dimensional time and time travel.)

In the text it is stated that "If A and B are mutually causative, then 'A causes B' coupled with 'B causes A' seems to lead to 'A causes A.'" Suppose, however, that we imagine two adjacent sunken pools of water, **a** and **b**, on the same horizontal surface, with each pool filled to the brim. An overflow from one pool will flow into the other pool. Now, define the events A and B as 'A is the overflow of pool **a**' and 'B is the overflow of pool **b**.' Thus, A causes B and B causes A. Does the conclusion 'A causes A' make physical sense in this specific case? Discuss at length.

When reading A. C. Clarke's story "Technical Error" (see note 99), we learn that a rotation through 4-space *inverts* "the unlucky Nelson." The 'solution' to this awkward situation is to flip Nelson through 4-space a second time and so back to 'normal.' (When *Thrilling Wonder Stories* reprinted this tale in June 1950, after its original publication in 1946, the title was changed to the more appropriate "The Reversed Man.") Clarke may have missed an

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important technical 'detail,' however, in that when first flipped through 4-space *everything* inverts, and so matter becomes anti-matter and Nelson would have instantly been annihilated in a 100 % conversion of matter to energy (that is, the flipped Nelson would have initiated a very large explosion). Compare this to Alice's concern in her flipped world (Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*) when she wonders "Perhaps Looking-glass milk isn't good to drink." Explain why Lewis Carroll certainly was *not* thinking of matter/anti-matter explosions when he wrote his novel. What *do* you think he might have had in mind?

A time travel story, even earlier than Clarke's, that uses spacetime 'rotations,' was authored by Edmond Hamilton (1904–1977), one of the pioneering pulp fiction writers. In his "The Man Who Saw the Future" (*Amazing Stories*, October 1930), a man is hauled before the Inquisitor Extraordinary of the King of France to explain his mysterious disappearance, and subsequent reappearance, in an open field, amid thunderclaps and in plain sight of many onlookers. As the story unfolds, we learn that the man was transported five centuries into the future, from A.D. 1444 to 1944, by scientists working in twentieth-century Paris. The thunderclaps were produced by spacetime 'rotations,' as the atmospheres of 1944 and 1444 were reversed. A skeptical Inquisition naturally finds this tale preposterous and the first time traveler is burned at the stake as a sorcerer. Can you think of *why* such 'atmospheric swaps' might produce thunderclaps?

A trip around a Möbius strip reverses the 'handedness' of a plane figure (left and right are swapped). You can see this for yourself by making a Möbius strip, and then sliding an arrow (pointing *across the width* of the strip) around the strip. (Cut a notch in the side of the strip to mark the starting point, with the arrow pointing at the notch.) When you get back to the notch, the arrow will point *away* from the notch. Notice that the arrow never left the surface of the strip, or crossed any 'weird' boundary. Then, read H. G. Wells' short story "The Plattner Story" and comment on its use of 'handedness.'

The *autoinfanticide paradox*, which results when a time traveler tries to kill his younger self, continues to fascinate both physicists and philosophers, and papers regularly appear in the scholarly literature on the topic: see, for example, Kadri Vihvelin, “What Time Travelers Cannot Do,” March 1996, pp. 315–330 (which introduces Suzy the time traveler); Ira Kiourti, “Killing Baby Suzy,” June 2008, pp. 343–352; Peter B. M. Vranas, “What Time Travelers May Be Able to Do,” August 2010, pp. 115–121; and Joshua Spencer, “What Time Travelers Cannot *Not* Do (but are responsible for anyway),” October 2013, pp. 149–162, all in *Philosophical Studies*. All deal with an issue that is psychologically fascinating: *moral responsibility*. Spencer, in particular, opens with this definition: Someone is morally responsible for an action *only* if she could have done otherwise. As he goes on to write, “If I have been attacked and both of my legs have been broken, then it seems illegitimate to criticize me for failing to run away; I could not have done otherwise.” And yet all of these papers are on a point that (I think) physicists would soon lose interest in: is the question ‘If Suzy is a time traveler, can Suzy kill baby Suzy, given that Suzy doesn’t kill baby Suzy?’ the same question as ‘If Suzy is a time traveler, can Suzy kill baby Suzy, given that Suzy is now alive?’ The answer to the first question is, from pure logic, NO, while the answer to the second question is just bit squishier: it all depends on what the word *can* means. For the second question, Suzy *can* kill baby Suzy if she has a weapon (knife, gun, poison, etc.) and she is in the past next to baby Suzy, but it is just that she doesn’t because otherwise Suzy wouldn’t be alive now (which is a given). Such debates seem unlikely to produce any insights into the physics of time travel. Compare this situation to the old schoolboy conundrum “What happens when an irresistible force meets an unmovable object?’, which is a *self-inflicted* ‘paradox.’ That is, the words *irresistible* and *unmovable* are mutually exclusive and so, used this way, it should be no surprise that we have a conflict. Are the two time travel questions above, concerning Suzy, confusing through a similar mushy use of grammar? Or are they deeper than that? Vigorously defend your position.

In addition to H. G. Wells, another nineteenth-century writer who was highly influential in bringing the fourth-dimension out of academia and into public consciousness was the mathematician Charles Howard Hinton (1853–1907). Hinton was no angle-trisecting crank, having earned an M.A. at Oxford, an appointment in the mathematics department at Princeton, and then another at the University of Minnesota. Later, with the help of the eminent astronomer

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Simon Newcomb, he obtained a position at the Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C., and was on the staff of the United States Patent Office at the time of his sudden death. Hinton was a man to be taken seriously. His first published essay "What Is the Fourth Dimension?" appeared in 1880, and then in book form in 1884 as part of his *Scientific Romances* (a phrase used by Hinton before it became associated with Wells' science fiction many years later). That book received a generally favorable review in *Nature* (March 12, 1885, p. 431). At one point he wrote "We might then suppose that the matter we know extending in three dimensions has also a small thickness in the fourth dimension," an idea that was used a few years later by the well-known British mathematician W. W. Rouse Ball (1850–1925) in an attempt to explain gravity. Hinton was extremely inventive, and he also proposed four-dimensional-space models for static electricity. Find out more about Hinton's life and work: a good source to start with is *Speculations on the Fourth Dimension: Selected Writings of Charles H. Hinton* (R. Rucker, editor), Dover 1980. Take a look, too, at J. E. Beichler, "Ether/Or: Hyper-space Models of the Ether in America," in *The Michelson Era in American Science 1870—1930* (S. Goldberg and R. H. Stuewer, editors), American Institute of Physics 1988.

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