

If I am not asked I know what time is; but if I am asked I do not.

St Augustine of Hippo [354-430]



J.W.
Dunne
: An
Experiment
With
Time

John William Dunne FRAeS (1875–1949) was an Anglo-Irish aeronautical engineer and author. In the field of parapsychology, he achieved a pre-eminence through his theories on dreams and authoring books preoccupied with the question of the nature of time. As a pioneering aeronautical engineer in the early years of the 20th century, Dunne worked on many early military aircraft, concentrating on tailless designs, producing inherently stable aircraft. [Wiki]



He is also credited with the first mounting of a working machine gun on an aeroplane, for the Canadian Airforce 1913.

[A] A self-conscious person is one 'who knows that he knows'; a willer is one who after all the motives which determine choice have been taken into account, can choose between those *motives*; and time is – but this book is about that.
[An Experiment With Time 1927 p4 his italics]

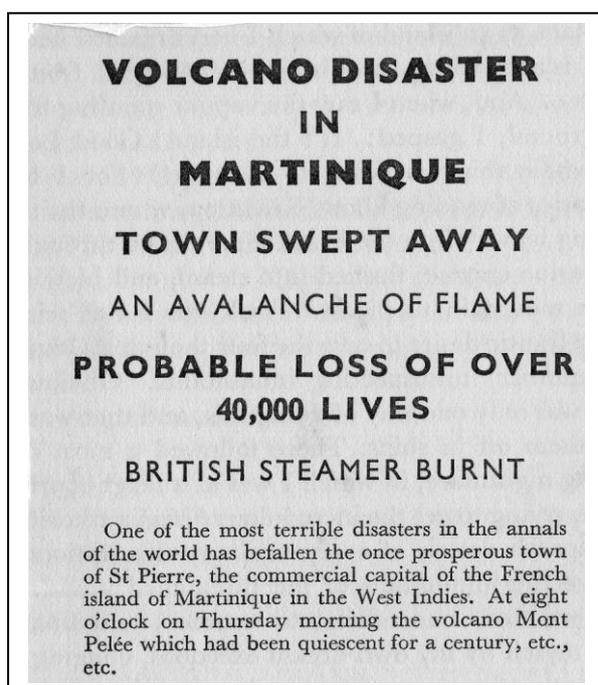
This is – merely the account of an extremely cautious reconnaissance in a rather novel direction – an account presented in the customary form of a narrative of the actual proceedings concerned, coupled with a statement of the theoretical considerations believed to be involved – and the dramatic, seemingly bizarre character of the early part of

the story need occasion the reader no misgivings . . . the task which had to be accomplished at that stage was the 'isolating' [to borrow a term from the chemists] of a single basic fact an accumulation of misleading material. Any account of any such process of separation must contain, of course, some description of the stuff from which the separation was effected. And such stuff very often is, and in this case very largely was - rubbish. [*ibid* p11]

Qualia [see endnote p 14]

The sensation of colour cannot be accounted for by the physicist's objective picture of light-waves. Could the physiologist account for it, if he had fuller knowledge than he has of the processes in the retina and the nervous processes set up by them in the optical nerve bundles and in the brain? I do not think so.'

Erwin Schrödinger, *What is life? : the physical aspects of the living cell*. Cambridge Univ. Press[2001]



On the night of May 8th 1902 Dunne encamped with the 6th Mounted Infantry near Lindley, Orange Free State [Boer War] when he had a vivid dream. He dreamt he was living on an island populated by French-speakers and was approached by many locals who told him that a large town on the other side of the island were about to be destroyed by volcanic eruption. He and they struggled to get the authorities to respond with vessels to evacuate those threatened. 4000 people he dreamt were threatened and this is how he always subsequently described the story for some 15 years.

A few days later the Daily Telegraph arrived and he read with amazement the account of the story on the front page of the

disaster of a few days before.

This lead him to to the discovery of what he calls 'serial time' for as was pointed out to him years later the account is of 40,000 dead. An easy misreading but a consistent one, he kept the newspaper from that day on, and one that was replicated in the dream. He concluded that his dream was based on experiencing the article not on witnessing the disaster in some way.

His book *An Experiment With Time* written some 25 years later is drawn from this experience and many following such experiments of dream analysis. The second half of the book explores how it could be that the future could be perceived before it had taken place.

PART III
THE EXPERIMENT
CHAPTER VIII

No one, I imagine, can derive any considerable pleasure from the supposition that he is a freak; and, personally, I would almost sooner have discovered myself to be a 'medium'. There might have been a chance of company there. Unfortunately it was abundantly clear that there was no 'mediumship' in this matter, no 'sensitiveness', no 'clairvoyance'. I was suffering, seemingly, from some extraordinary fault in my relation to reality, something so uniquely wrong that it compelled me to perceive, at rare intervals, large blocks of otherwise perfectly normal personal experience displaced from their proper positions in Time. That such things could occur at all was a most interesting piece of knowledge. But, unfortunately, in the circumstances it could be knowledge to only one person—myself.

There was, however, a very remote possibility that, by employing this piece of curiously acquired knowledge as a guide, I might be able to discover some hitherto overlooked peculiarity in the structure of Time; and to that task I applied myself.

Progress here was definite, but it was terribly slow. There was no help to be found in the conception of Time as a fourth dimension. For Time has always been treated by men of science as if it were a fourth

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[*dimension.*]

See endnote 2 [p67]

Talking of the-man-in-the -street - *Homo sapiens* – 'His idea was that temporal happenings involved motion in a fourth dimension. . . he did not call it a fourth dimension . . .but he was entirely convinced:

- 1 That Time had length, divisible into 'past' and 'future' .
- 2 That this length was not extended in any Space that he knew of. It stretched neither north and south, nor east and west, nor up and down, but in a direction different from any of those three – that is to say a fourth direction.
- 3 That neither the past or the future was observable. All observable phenomena lay in a field situated at a unique 'instant' in the Time length – an instant dividing the past from the future – which he called the present.
- 4 That this 'present' field of observation **moved** in some queer fashion along the Time length; so that events **were at first** in the future **became** present and **thern** past. The past was then **constantly growing**.

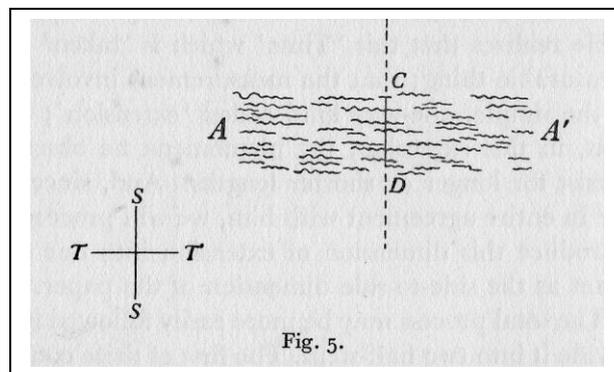
The employment of these references to a sort of Time behind Time is the legitimate consequence of having started with a hypothesis of a *movement* through Time's length. For motion through Time must be timeable.

... He spoke of a long Time and a short Time [never of a broad or a narrow Time]. He said 'when tomorrow comes' and 'when I get to such and such an age'. p139

[He goes on to discuss: Sheet music as a space time continuum; or as a circumference of a circle and adding a pointer [s] to indicate a present moment – records, clocks, circulation of the Earth.]

Time is conceived this way - 'For some very good and imperative reason . . . We all perceive phenomena as being arranged in two sorts of order. There are those which appear to be merely separated in Space, and those which appear to be successive. [that is separated in time - AR]

Dunne concludes that the experience of time passing as a river – passing what exactly as everything is flowing with it- suggests a time 2 that can stand beside or outside it and observe its passage. And since this observation takes a certain time then a possible time 3 so infinite regression



In *Man and Time* J.B. Priestly considers, that we do not here need an infinite regression but only three. Self I who is directly observing time progressing. Self II is our everyday self, observing the actions and thoughts and responses of self one as Dunne describes him

who 'knows that he knows'. That is observes the processes of the Self I as an object and as itself.

Self III he says 'simply observes' and is beyond time as an observer say in a helicopter could observe a train travelling and see its past [track] and its future [track] and its present placement all from its removed vantage point. It may itself by moving in time and distance separate and different to the train, and could itself be further observed – along with the train - from some even higher vantage point. [analogy pinched from Tony Peake's *The Labyrinth of Time* 2012 if he didn't pinch it from me].

Priestly says of Dunne - 'He was a hard headed military engineering type. . . . But something happened to him that he could not explain – this displacement in time – and just as he had worried away at his aeronautical problems he worried away at this Time business. His final theory may have taken him much too far, but it cannot be denied that he began tackling it in a tough realistic spirit, one more genuinely scientific than that of those scientists who had a suspicion that the problem was there, but ignored it. Almost all of them ignored him too . . . he was a nuisance.

[*Man and Time* 1968 p268]

not, as you can, acquire for himself by the ordinary process of personal experiment. In substitution, you have offered him a *description*, framed in the language of physical science. And that substitute has served the purpose of conveying the knowledge in question from yourself to him.

But in 'seeing' there is, of course, a great deal more than mere registration of outline. There is, for example—Colour.

So you continue somewhat on the following lines. That which we call a 'red' flame sets up electromagnetic waves of a certain *length*: a 'blue' flame sets up waves exactly similar save only that they differ slightly in this matter of length. The visual organs are so constituted that they sort out waves showing such disparity in length, and this in such a way that these differences are finally registered by corresponding differences in those physical changes which occur at the brain centres.

From the point of view of your blind guest, this description, also, would be entirely satisfactory. He could now understand perfectly how it is that a physical brain is able to register wave-length difference. And, if you were content to leave it at that, he would depart gratefully convinced that the language of physics had again proved equal to the task, and that your description in physical terms had equipped him with a knowledge of, for instance, what other people call 'red' as complete in every respect as that which they themselves possess.

But this supposition of his would be absurd. For

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concerning the existence of one very remarkable characteristic of red he would still, obviously, know nothing whatsoever. And that characteristic (possibly the most puzzling, and certainly the most obtrusive of them all) is—its *redness*.

Redness? Yes. Without bothering about whether redness be a thing or a quality or an illusion or anything else, there is no escaping the fact (1) that it is a characteristic of red of which you and all seeing people are very strongly aware, nor the further fact (2) that your visitor, so far, would have not the faintest shadow of an idea that you or others experience anything of the kind, or, indeed, that there could exist anything of the kind to be experienced. If, then, you intend to complete your self-imposed task of bringing his knowledge on the subject of 'seeing' up to the same level as your own, there remains yet another step before you.

Realizing this, you mentally glance down your list of physical expressions, and—a moment's inspection is enough to show you that, for the purpose of conveying to your blind guest a description of *redness*, there is not a single one of these expressions which is of the slightest use whatsoever.

You might talk to him of particles (lumps—centres of inertia), and describe these as oscillating, spinning, circling, colliding, and rebounding in any kind of complicated dance you cared to imagine. But in all that there would be nothing to introduce the notion of *redness*. You might speak of waves—big waves, little waves, long waves, and short waves. But the idea of

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final dream incident? Why is it that this closing incident is *always logically led up to by the earlier part of the dream?*

What, finally, of all those cases, collected and tabulated by the Society for Psychological Research, where a dream of a friend's death has been followed by the receipt, next day, of the confirmatory news? Those dreams were, clearly, not 'spirit messages', but instances of *my* 'effect'—simple dreams associated merely with the coming personal experience of *reading the news*.

I had done nothing but suppose, in hopelessly unscientific fashion, for a week or more, and it seemed to me that I might as well complete my sinning. So I took a final wild leap to the wildest supposition of all.

Was it possible that these phenomena were not abnormal, but *normal*?

That dreams—dreams in general, all dreams, everybody's dreams—were composed of *images of past experience and images of future experience blended together in approximately equal proportions*?*

That the universe was, after all, really stretched

* The present reader, doubtless, has grasped the fact that this section of the book is purely historical. On that day in 1917, I was trying to formulate for myself some statement of the possible facts which would serve as a basis for an experimental investigation, and I am describing here the sequence of the ideas which flashed through my mind. The suspicion of an equal distribution of pre-cognitive and retro-specific elements came first, and was followed immediately by the more rational theory set forth in the next paragraph, a theory which made the distribution depend upon associational factors which would vary with each individual and in each dream. As will be seen in the next three pages, even this first approximation to the truth was set aside as 'obviously incomplete'. The theory finally accepted was not developed until 1926, and is described in the last section of the book.

out in Time, and that the lop-sided view we had of it—a view with the 'future' part unaccountably missing, cut off from the growing 'past' part by a travelling 'present moment'—was due to a purely mentally imposed barrier which existed only when we were awake? So that, in reality, the associational network stretched, not merely this way and that way in Space, but also backwards and forwards in Time; and the dreamer's attention, following in natural, unhindered fashion the easiest pathway among the ramifications, would be continually crossing and recrossing that properly non-existent equator which we, waking, ruled quite arbitrarily athwart the whole.

The foregoing supposition was not, be it noted, perceived as a possible *explanation*. The mixture in the order of actual experience—*viz.*, dream, memory of dream, corresponding waking impression, and memory thereof—would still have to be accounted for. But it would put the problem on an entirely different footing. There would be no longer any question as to why a man should be able to observe his own future mental states; that would be normal and habitual. On the contrary, the initial puzzle would be: What was the *barrier* which, in certain circumstances, debarred him from that proper and comprehensive view?

All this was seen in, so to say, a single flash of thought, almost too rapid for analysis.

It was rejected with even greater swiftness. For it was absolutely inconceivable that a thing of this sort, if true, could have managed to escape, through all these centuries, universal perception and recognition.

The Method

The simplest way to avoid this initial failure to notice is to pretend to yourself that the records you are about to read are those of dreams which you are going to have during the coming night; and then to look for events in the past day which might legitimately be regarded as the causes of those dreams. This is not unfair. It is only a device to enable you to notice; not a device to assist you to judge. That you do later, concerning yourself then solely with the corroborative details, and giving no thought to the Time order.

* * * * *

The dodge for recalling the forgotten dreams is quite simple. A notebook and pencil is kept under the pillow, and, *immediately* on waking, before you even open your eyes, you set yourself to remember the rapidly vanishing dream. As a rule, a single incident is all that you can recall, and this appears so dim and small and isolated that you doubt the value of noting it down. Do not, however, attempt to remember anything more, but *fix your attention on that single incident, and try to remember its details*. Like a flash, a large section of the dream in which that incident occurred comes back. What is more important, however, is that, with that section, there usually comes into view an isolated incident from a previous dream. Get hold of as many of these isolated incidents as you can, neglecting temporarily the rest of the dreams of which they formed part. Then jot down these incidents in your notebook as shortly as possible; a word or two for each should suffice.

Now take incident number one. Concentrate upon

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it until you have recovered part of the dream story associated therewith, and write down the briefest possible outline of that story. Do the same in turn with the other incidents you have noted. Finally, take the abbreviated record thus made and write it out in full. Note details, as many as possible. *Be specially careful to do this wherever the incident is one which, if it were to happen in real life, would seem unusual; for it is in connection with events of this kind that your evidence is most likely to be obtained.*

Until you have completed your record, do not allow yourself to think of anything else.

Do not attempt merely to remember. Write the dream down. Waking in the middle of the night, I have several times carefully memorized my preceding dreams. But, no matter how certain I have been that those memories were firmly fixed, I have never found one shred of them remaining in the morning. Even dreams which I have memorized just before getting up, and remembered while dressing, have nearly always vanished by the end of breakfast.

It will be impossible, of course, for you to write down *all* the detail. To describe the appearance of a single dream-character completely would keep you busy for ten minutes. But write down the general detail, and *all uncommon detail*. Memorize the remainder by reading through your final record and attentively revisualizing each picture described therein; so that, should one of these unwritten details subsequently prove important, you can be satisfied that you are not then recalling it for the first time.

P.E.T.

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