

JW Dunne

JW Dunne (1875-1949) was an Anglo-Irish soldier and aeronautical engineer who became well-known as the author of books about time and dream precognition.

Life and Career

John William Dunne was born on 2 December 1875 in County Kildare, Ireland, the eldest son of army general Sir John Hart Dunne and Julia Elizabeth Dunne.^[1] He grew up in England, and while very young suffered an accident which confined him to bed for many years. At that time he began to read philosophy and to reflect on the nature of time.

Following the family military tradition, he fought in the Boer War at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1902 he was acting as infantry officer for the Imperial Yeomanry when illness forced him to return home. He began a systematic study of flight with a view to create flying machines and by 1907 his aeronautical engineering abilities had become evident through his swept-wing, tail-less stable aircraft designs (monoplane and biplane). His work in this area continued until 1913.

Dunne was a keen angler and in 1924 wrote a book about fly fishing. Three years later he published *An Experiment with Time*, which became a best seller. In 1928 he married Cicely Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes.

During the 1930s Dunne concentrated mainly on researches about time, elaborating a theory that he called 'serialism'. He gave public lectures and radio talks and wrote a further two books on the subject. His views on time and immortality attracted the attention of prominent writers, notably JB Priestley. There were also attacks on his ideas and attempts at refutation.^[2]

Dreams and Precognition

Early on, Dunne began to keep a written record his dreams, and came to believe that some of them anticipated real life occurrences. He described these experiences in his best-selling book *An Experiment With Time* (1927), then encouraged other people to experiment in a similar fashion and compared their records with his.^[3] He became convinced that, although rare, dream precognition is a normal faculty. He believed that it was not necessary to have recourse to occult ideas but that it could be explained in terms of conventional philosophy and science, which need only to make clear the nature of 'the temporal machinery which is bound to exist if we observe events in succession'.^[4]

Dunne argued that we perceive phenomena in two ways: 1) separated in Space, and 2) in apparent succession. For this succession to be more than an appearance, Time must have length and 'should be regarded as a length-moved-over, a dimension in which we travelled from second to second, from hour to hour, from year to year,

thus coming upon the Time-separated events one after the other, just as we come upon objects in our mundane journeys'.[\[5\]](#)

There is, then, a fourth dimension, an idea put forward earlier by the British mathematician and writer Charles Hinton, among others. This accounts for Time displacements in so-called precognitive dreams. There is movement through Time's length, and this motion must, in turn, be timeable. But, Dunne writes, 'the Time which times that movement is another Time. And the 'passage' of that Time must be timeable by a third Time. And so on *ad infinitum*'.[\[6\]](#)

Thus, Time can be conceived as a series of overlapping layers formed of Time 1, Time 2, ... Time n , moving in several directions. Whatever happens in these Times enter into the field of consciousness of an Observer 1, Observer 2, ...Observer n , and gets registered by each at given moments. The Time, the field, and the observer at every stage (1, 2, ... n) should not be held as the ultimate in a link, for there is always a 'larger-dimensioned lot of ultimates which ... will only retain that status until the next stage is reached'. And so on to infinity.[\[7\]](#)

When, for example, an Observer 1 is dreaming and his experiences are registered by an Observer 2, this second Observer can range freely between past and future, bringing out precognitive dreams in some occasions. This means that Time displacements are not exceptional, and so precognition through dreams, however rare, can be considered normal among humans.

In 1932 Theodore Besterman, a researcher at the Society for Psychical Research, coordinated an experiment of precognition along Dunne's lines. Dozens of dream-registers were examined, and Dunne contributed with five instances. The process was beset with problems, however, and Besterman's final report was not in strict accordance with Dunne's views (Dunne himself was not altogether satisfied with the results).[\[8\]](#)

Serialism

The fundamental result of Dunne's dream experiments was his theory of serialism. Reality, he says, appears to human science in such a way, that it must be conceived as infinite regress if we are to treat it 'as the reality upon which we can rely'.[\[9\]](#) This view involves a basic view of quantum theory. There are not numerous atoms just moving in space, but objects persisting in space. Their apparent movements are replaced by the single movement of the present (for example, of Time 1 in Time 2, see above). This in fact leads to an infinite regress. At each stage in the regress the preceding time-dimension will be found to have 'turned into space'; the reigning time-dimension itself, however, takes time' over its movement, and is consequently superseded.

The conception of 'turning into space' may be illustrated by representing time as a man walking along a road: every minute he has gone a bit farther than the preceding minute. In the end he looks back and forwards and regards the traversed *distance* as a whole divided into a past and a future in a single line of time. In Dunne's theory the distinction between past and future is merely subjective and epistemological: both have the same ontological status.

Still, although past and future are objective, a person informed by a dream of a certain course of events can interfere in such a way as to alter the course of events in the substratum time.[\[10\]](#) Self-consciousness is also subject to infinite regression. In this sense, serialism is not only concerned with quantum events, but also with the human soul as a perceptive and active organ.[\[11\]](#)

Immortality

An embodied observer, says Dunne, may cease to exist upon physical death; however, ‘nonphysical parts of his mind associated with other time dimensions will live on’.[\[12\]](#) The ultimate, highest time dimension presiding over and encompassing all other time dimensions is also the seat of the ‘dream observer’, subtle body, soul, spirit, essence, or however else one chooses to identify this unquantifiable vital life force. Dunne writes:

In the first term of a series, the relation which links the terms is absent on one side: and this lopsidedness may have a very practical significance. Thus the first swing of a pendulum has no previous swing to determine it: it must be started by an external agency. [...] the forces acting on the end members of our cantilever girder are balanced at the outer ends, not by pushes and pulls in similar members, as elsewhere in the series, but by the externally applied end-load.[\[13\]](#)

From this Dunne deduces that the observer and the time-series have no end except at Time 1, and from here derives an argument in favour of human immortality. Death in Time 1 does not involve death at Time 2;[\[14\]](#) ‘everything that has established its existence remains in existence. A rose which has bloomed once blooms forever. As for Man, he is not accorded distinctive treatment; he merely remains with the rest.’[\[15\]](#)

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Endnotes

[1] This section is based mainly on Harvey (2024) and Science Museum Group (n/d). A webpage with many links regarding Dunne's life and work can be found here: <https://steelpillow.com/dunne/index.html>.

[2] Notably Nagel (1927) at an early stage. Flew (2013).

[3] The set of instructions in Dunne (1969), 69-70.

[4] Dunne (1969), 160.

[5] Dunne (1969), 112.

[6] Dunne (1969), 110. Galavotti, (2006), 159.

[7] Dunne (1969), 155. Kiritsis (2020), 38.

[8] Besterman (1932-33). Inglis (1984), 235-6. Tyrrell (1938), 72-74.

[9] Dunne (1939), 28.

[10] Cleugh (2019), 169-170.

[11] Cf. Kiritsis (2020), 40.

[12] Dunne (1969), 235-37.

[13] Dunne (1969), 158.

[14] Dunne (1969), 159-60, 170.

[15] Dunne (1939), 17.