

Ouroboros

“Does the past exist? No. Does the future exist? No. Then only the present exists. Yes. But within the present there is no lapse of time? Quite so. Then time does not exist? Oh, I wish you wouldn't be so tiresome.”

- Jeremy Bentham

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It was in his thirty-eighth year that Duncan Cuff finally received a blow to the head worthy of mention. The event itself was unremarkable; he'd been shoveling snow in his driveway, daydreaming about a self-replenishing beer cooler, when all of a sudden he simply slipped and clocked his noggin.

By the time he got to the hospital it was too late. They placed him in the subterranean wing, sandwiched between the victims of a stroke and a lead pipe to the temple, respectively. The doctors told his wife, Emily, and his son, Arthur, that they could keep him alive indefinitely, but without guarantee as to sentience or quality of life. There was much contemplation. Arthur, who was fourteen, wrote a poem. Is a coma the same as death?

When Duncan finally emerged from his slumber nobody knew what was wrong. Though still seemingly himself, he appeared shocked and puzzled and frightened all at once, all the time. The doctors would ask him questions at which he merely gawked. They'd ask the same questions slower and louder, like some presumptuous tourist, and still they'd receive the same response from Duncan: silence, obvious confusion, and a mess in the bedpan.

Here's what was wrong. Whereas all people, until then, perceived only the past and the present, Duncan Cuff had become only aware of the present and the future. He could

remember what was going to happen. Each moment was lost as soon as it passed, but his future stretched out before him like a lit fuse, running itself down until the inevitable. The sand in the hourglass was falling up, and he could only see the bottom. Against all obvious logic he knew his name and his age and other assorted details of his life, but only because someone at some point was going to tell him. The moment he learned anything it would be lost, unless he learned it again. He knew his family too, but not who they'd been. Rather, he knew who they would be. This, however, is far from remembrance. When Duncan awoke from his coma he could see what was coming, as you can this morning and yesterday and last week. He saw the doctors' future questions, his family's joyful tears and the sullen confusion that followed, coming home from the hospital to the house his father had built with his own two hands (a fact, again, he only knew because Emily would tell him). But after that it got kind of spotty. How well can you remember last month? Last year? Duncan could see his old age the way he used to remember his youth: in brief, sometimes vivid flashes of detail and emotion. His death was well past the horizon; who among us can remember their own birth?

In time, as a testament to both the adaptive capabilities of the human brain and reality's penchant for the surreal Duncan became able to function completely in his unprecedented state of consciousness, navigating his present through a reverse-engineering of the future. He would know that he would feel relieved, and realize how stupid it was to leave the newspaper so close to the burner; that he would extinguish the fire; that he would snatch the extinguisher from its home beside the cupboard; that the sight of the fire would startle him; that he would turn around and see the fire; that the burner was behind him and therefore a fire was about to start, and he should turn around and grab the extinguisher and extinguish it, allowing pause

enough to reflect on the stupidity of the situation. But of course even after such a feat the incident would be lost, and such reflection was brief.

Most of the time, though, Duncan did not think at all. This kind of logical backtracking was difficult for him, and so he had either trained himself not to or his brain, in a subconscious rejection of such constant absurdity, had constructed the void as a coping mechanism. He could not remember which. Duncan simply shuffled like a ghost around the house his father had never built, rarely more than peripherally aware of his own mind or body, unable to reflect on past thoughts or actions. He became as a human shark, constantly moving forward on instinct alone.

It was not only tangible necessity, though, that compelled Duncan to skip forward into his future. He remembered one night, drifting off to sleep, another night a week later, looking at a photograph from his wedding, tracing the frame with his index finger and trying in vain to recall more than that single, flat moment. And Emily comes and sits next to him on the sofa, and she puts her arm around him and he does the same to her, and each looks into the other's eyes and he sees in hers a deep longing. And he knows he still loves her somehow, and he remembers another night still another week or so later, looking into her eyes again as they make love on that same sofa while Arthur is at a friend's house, and he sees that same longing, and he wants so much to make it go away, to change it. But there was something else in Duncan's mind then, too, something else beside that memory of longing. Something painful, inscrutable, a memory he could not find or did not want to. Trying in vain to put his finger on it, finally he slept.

Perhaps now those readers touched by Duncan's wish (perhaps, too, those unburdened by more substantial concerns) will ask themselves many questions: "Are the future's inevitabilities really so inevitable? If Duncan Cuff can see his own future why can't he change it? Can't he shorten Emily's longing? His own? And, in putting out that fire was he merely pantomiming actions he would have performed regardless? Is it only the illusion of dynamic autonomy?" But, perhaps not. Regardless, the question warrants further consideration, in us and in Duncan, here.

Consider the following: Duncan Cuff approaches two roads. If you're of a literary bent imagine they're diverged in a yellow wood. Duncan must then travel either down one road or the other. Obviously he knows which one it will be, let us say Path A. But let us now suppose that upon taking the first step down Path A he sees the imminent mauling of himself by a bear some thirty yards hence. Of course he straight resolves to turn around and go down the other road, perhaps the One Less Traveled By. This is where it gets tricky. If Duncan turned from Path A and took instead the One Less Traveled By, would he not have seen himself taking the latter in the first place, rendering the initial vision of the bear nonexistent and his resolution impossible? Could he even be said to have truly *taken* it? But let us now consider these questions non-hypothetically, for Duncan was as well.

Duncan awoke with a start from the fitful sleep into which he fell full of heartache, struck as if by lightning by each and every of the questions posed above. Perhaps his brain had continued to change and adapt to its new peculiarities, or maybe taken an incongruous step backwards toward normalcy. Maybe there was simply no tail left for the snake to swallow, and it had begun to digest. In any case, Duncan was made suddenly aware of the paradox he had

become; he achieved a new awareness, and could no longer drift the dead man's float down the stream of time. Duncan was thrust finally into perception.

He sat erect in bed, every muscle tense and quaking with a depth in his eyes that would have been terrifying, had anyone been there to see it. The black thought occurred: if he could not change his future by knowing it, then he was doomed to repeat it; that maybe he could only see the chains by which other men were blissfully, ignorantly bound. The mire had been parted as if by Moses, and for a time there was no past or present or future for Duncan, only that thought. Then, suddenly and with force, that ineffable dread from the previous night burst through his mind and, mingling with the acute terror of powerlessness that wrenched him from sleep, filled it.

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He knows he'll wake from sleep to an empty bed and know why it's empty: because of who he is and what he is and because of Arthur's cries. And he wants to stay in bed, forever, but knows he can't, and he falls from it, stumbling onto the floor, on his hands and knees because he can't stop. Because of who and what he is. He flies down the stairs and into the living room where she lies slumped and pale over the sofa, the pills strewn across the floor, and Arthur heaving with grief beside her. There's a note that he doesn't need to read but does and that he doesn't want to read but does and all it says is goodbye. And in that future he doesn't know the past that lead to that moment, can't know it, and so he can't comprehend. But in the present that tossed him that moment like a grenade he saw the future that was that past. Duncan saw the gulf between him and his wife, the distance that was his doing, saw its power and how it would approach them both until one had to fall in and good god why couldn't he before?

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Duncan had seen a lot that morning: a future that he couldn't bear and so refused to see until it revealed itself to him, and the fact that he may be unable to change it. But he turned and looked at Emily beside him, and thought of the longing in her eyes and of Arthur, how he claws at the shag on the carpet and tries to hold on because there's nothing else left, and knew he had to try. For the first time he navigated his immediate future and actively altered it. Instead of getting up and going downstairs (a reminder of what mustn't come), he turned and put his arms around her and rested his head on her shoulder by hers. It was to be the first step towards narrowing the chasm into which he saw her fall, a step down the One Less Traveled By, and he meant to relish it. But here something odd happened. He was in that moment, by her side, as her eyelids fluttered and she reciprocated his embrace, but he was also in the other moment as well; walking down the steps and past the sofa he would come to rue and then not. With even just that one minute gesture the one fuse became two, parallel, sparks both lit and keeping pace; he was as one traveler on two paths. Both futures reeled out in front of Duncan, the spool, and that bane eventuality was in each; his wife was to die twice, and he did not know why.

Duncan did not know because the past was lost to him, and could not therefore remember having consciously altered the future; he'd just become two men at once, all at once. It was confusing for him, and as jarring at least as his emergence from the coma that started this mess. So then Duncan (the plural here may or may not be necessary, but for the ease of narration we'll stick to the singular) regressed back to a state of semi-consciousness, acting without comprehension or intent. He lived two lives literally, each really only slightly

different from the other, and each, like the first, pretty much empty. And like the first, lost, time too he repressed that memory, both of them, that thrust him into the awareness that then abandoned him.

But what the hell happened? Astute, invested readers are wondering, perhaps aloud, but then again perhaps not at all, “But he changed the future, or took the first step at least! What gives, man?” Let us return to the two roads (still diverged etcetera if you like). Duncan approaches Path A, knows he is to be mauled by a bear¹, and switches then to the One Less Traveled By. The paradox inherent: if Duncan can only see the future then ultimately he would only see himself taking the One Less Traveled By, and the memory-vision of the bear would be one that he would never see, and therefore he would not really have chosen anything. But there must have been that memory of the mauling, for there it is², and if there weren't Duncan would never take the OLTB in the first place, ultimately. It must exist, and cannot.

This paradox, though, is dependent on the assumption that time is linear. Which it is not, at least since Duncan came around. The future cannot be changed, but new ones can be created; Duncan cannot alter the flow of time, but he can create tributaries, dam it up and branch it out, seeing it all as if from above. And like before it was after a fitful night, one with sleep and one without (a single night in each stream), that he came in a single moment to realize all of this.

Once again it happened again and Duncan became aware again. His brain moved a few steps forward after having taken a couple back; on that morning Duncan could again see the

1 Please refer to the second footnote.

2 Right there, preceding the first footnote.

future he'd twice, three times repressed, could see the two paths on which he walked from up above and knew how to navigate them; on that morning Duncan once again looked to his left, heaving and drenched in a cold sweat and saw his wife, saw Emily, and knew the depth and longing that was to engulf her before it engulfed him. But he also knew that he could not stop it. He could see those paths and knew how they worked, and knew that here, here, in these two worlds he could never avoid seeing what he wanted more than anything else not to have to, that he would always see it until he did.

If he tried enough, though, maybe he could create even just one world where he stopped it. Not just a world where he did not have to see her dead, but one where she did not die. But the fuse, remember, dwindles, and Duncan knew that each moment brought him closer to that moment, and that once it passed there would be no going back, for him or for her, and he would never even know that he had failed.

And so Duncan Cuff made each path into many. He dammed the flow of time, and made tributaries out of tributaries. Each Duncan was the same Duncan living many times all at once, one mind with a million eyes and a million hands in a half-million worlds, worlds existing only to be seen by him. Duncan knew each one, their numbers growing exponentially, knew their present and their futures. He tried everything, tried to create as many as possible. But still in every world, every single one, Duncan found at that one moment in time Emily dead. By suicide, heart attack, murder, accidents, enemies, cars, animals, even once by his own hand, somehow somehow in every branch of the universe he had created, at that one singular point in time he either found her dead or saw her die. His single mind could see it countless times with countless eyes, he could remember that future, those futures, and see the fuses running

down. He could see the space between now and then waning, looking just for that one world where it didn't have to happen that way. He saw so many futile futures, but still searched.

Until he found it, finally creating a present in which the future promised no sorrow. The fuse had run far by then, and it was not long before the dread instant. Duncan, of one mind, during every second of every day remembered nigh-infinite wives dying their own deaths, each one the end of a life he'd created only to protect. But amidst the cacophony there stood out that one gorgeous, trilling note, that one world in which Emily lived, for as far forward as he could remember. He focused on it, singled it out, and when the climax swelled and he was finally doomed to make those fatal stumbles down the stairs, when then became now, he focused even harder, to look into the living eyes of his wife even as he saw her dead more times than any mortal could count.

Duncan in that moment stretched time so much and so far that it snapped back and melted back into itself. His tributary streams became too shallow, too thin, and so was forced back to its source, to become a river once more. And so the moment after so many had died so that one of the same might live, in the very next instant, Duncan Cuff, in his thirty-eighth year, fell in his driveway and hit his head.