

BOOK REVIEW

Time Loops: Precognition, Retrocausation, and the Unconscious
by Eric Wargo. San Antonio, TX: Anomalist Books. 435 pp. \$22.95
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Some nonfiction book reviews are more like CliffsNotes—they provide the reader with a well-packaged synopsis of a book. After reading that kind of a review, I don't feel the need to buy the book. You will be spared that fate. If I don't make you want to buy *Time Loops*, I've failed. This book can hardly be summarized. The whole point of the book seems to be to spark new ideas and challenge old ones.

Wargo's effort recruits the full spectrum of academic disciplines from psychology to physics, providing everything from a lucid argument about the role of emotion in precognition to a discussion about how Philip K. Dick's name may have caused, through the intersection of culture and retrocausality, the very precognitive experiences that the science-fiction writer documented.

With his well-researched magnum opus *Time Loops*, it seems that Wargo hopes to drive forward the field of parapsychology from a scholarly position, but one that is well outside experimental science. His training is in anthropology, and he has held a lifelong interest in the gifts and pitfalls of psychoanalytic thought. For an empiricist like me, the book could have been easy to dismiss. I admit that at first my ego was affronted. I found myself asking, "Who is this guy who wants to tell me how to think about the science of time and precognition?" However, by page 11 I was hooked on the personal nature of Wargo's intellectual exploration of the topic. There he writes,

Although precognition often surfaces to awareness in the context of stress and trauma, even death in many cases, I will argue that it really orients us ultimately to life, and to a renewed, intensified awareness of being alive.

While I've been a student of the scientific aspects of precognition for about a decade and a half, I've been a student of the personal experience of precognition since I was about seven years old. This sentence showed

me that Wargo knows the intimate and mystical pleasure of precognitive experience—the growing sense of connection with oneself over time that is experienced by those of us who take precognition seriously—but not so seriously that we fret about our predictions. Wargo’s insight—that precognition is life-directed—felt intuitively correct, based on my personal experiences and on the scientific idea that any common human experience likely exists because it orients us in some way toward survival.

As with any great work, some elements caused irritation followed by inspiration. I’ll briefly describe my irritations and the resulting inspirations, with the hope that you will have the pleasure of finding your own.

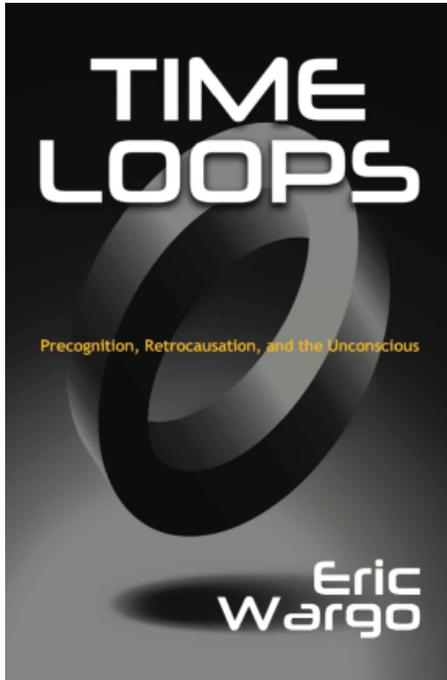
Irritations

Wargo covers so much territory with such an air of mastery that one can lose the thread and become concerned that he is bending every idea to meet his own set of hypotheses (he presents a large but not infinite set of hypotheses). The lack of humility wore thin when it came to the field I know best: experiments in precognition. My sense was that Wargo’s brief discussion of experiments in precognition seemed cursory compared with the bulk of the book, which focused on spontaneous precognitive experiences almost to the exclusion of other forms of precognition. For most of the book, I had to learn to tolerate both a reliance on psychoanalytic case studies and a lack of reliance on empirical results from controlled experiments. This was good exercise for me.

Throughout the book, I wrote in the margins all sorts of annoyed responses to claims about “precognition” when in fact the claims only worked for spontaneous precognitive experiences. For example, in a section in which Wargo discusses his hypothesis that precognition is an unconscious orientation toward a rewarding experience (which, as far as I can tell, is consistent with the idea that every animal behavior is an unconscious orientation toward a predicted rewarding experience), he writes,

Thus an alternative explanation for the link between psi accuracy and entropy is the perverse pleasure—that is *jouissance*—aroused in people by signs of destruction. Some vigilant part of us needs to be constantly scanning the environment for indications of threats to our life and health, which means we need on some level to find that search rewarding. (p. 245)

Familiar with the well-controlled empirical data Wargo is referring to—Edwin May and Sonali Marwaha’s work showing a link between entropy in the target and free-response precognition (for review, see Marwaha and May 2015)—I was frustrated to see these data used to support the apparent



hypothesis that precognition in general (not only spontaneous precognition) is all about survival. It's clear from my own experience and more importantly from the Star Gate work that free-response precognition of the form studied by May and Marwaha is a highly technical skill that seems to involve few emotions on the part of the practitioners (see Volumes 1 and 2 of the archives, May & Marwaha 2018a,b). In fact, emotion can seem to get in the way of the process.

I found myself working hard to take into account that most of Wargo's hypotheses were based on stories of spontaneous precognitive phenomena. I was reminded more than once of a

mentor's advice that when one entertains an idea, one "invites it in, offers it tea, and listens to its stories before commenting." As a result, I mentally substituted "spontaneous precognitive experiences" for "precognition" every time I saw it in the latter chapters of the book, a move that allowed me to make much greater sense of Wargo's arguments. It also turned out that trying to discipline myself in this way generated some new thoughts.

Another major discipline I had to undertake was one that I find necessary when reading almost any book about the physics or philosophy of time. Most scientists seem to believe that thoughts, experiences, and ideas are part of the physical world somehow—even though these things don't behave like any other things in the physical world. I am enamored of philosopher Galen Strawson's arguments that physicalism must include the mental, because we can't deny the existence of the mental, and as scientists we are living in a physicalist paradigm (e.g., Strawson 2006). But Strawson has yet to convince me that there isn't an important difference between everything we already admit into the set of things that we call "physical" and what we call "mental." This difference ends up causing all sorts of problems, when thinkers are not conscious of blending one world with the other, and *Time Loops* is no exception here. However, because dualism is a

minority position, I am used to having to undertake the discipline of making sure I think about what each statement in an argument is considering the physical world to be.

In *Time Loops*, Wargo presents a hypothesis that precognition takes place in a block-world spacetime, and therefore there is no real sense in which the dream of a plane crash can be used to “change” the future. If the plane crash happens (in the block world), then it will happen (in our experience) once we get to that point in spacetime. The problem I have with this hypothesis is that it brings the extra element of human experience into the block-world model of spacetime. One could argue that Minkowski’s block world was at least partially created because human experience *does not* tell us the truth about the nature of reality, in that our experience that two events are simultaneous is only a relative one (Minkowski 1920/2019). A block world is explicitly without motion, cause, or effect. It is non-dynamic. Not only are human experiences not accounted for in a block world, anything that is dynamic (including motion, cause, and effect) does not take place in a block world, whether it is experienced as forward- or backward-moving in time (Kastner 2017). Therefore, one major theme and hypothesis of the book, that spontaneous precognitive experiences are actually the result of closed causal loops in a block-world spacetime and the errors in our predictions of future events are indicators of the predetermined nature of these events, had to be unpacked carefully. I am not complaining, however, because this unpacking led to the second inspiration I happily took away from *Time Loops*.

Inspirations

The book itself is inspiring overall for the obvious time, effort, and scholarship put into its pages, as well as the clear commitment to cross-disciplinary thought. But in terms of specific inspirations, two major ones have come to my consciousness so far. I’m sure there will be others as the book does its work on me.

So much of my work in this field has been spent trying to capture precognition in the laboratory or in controlled online experiments. Prior to reading *Time Loops* I didn’t take spontaneous precognitive experiences that seriously as fodder for scientific thought. I knew they existed, and I was convinced if only by my own experiences that some of them could probably be explained by genuine precognition. But I had thought that the way forward was to capture the essence of precognition in the laboratory and use controlled methods to examine it. While this kind of work remains attractive to me, Wargo’s emphasis on that form of precognition was so opposed to my own orientation that it forced me to think about what spontaneous

experiences can offer that can't be found in a controlled experiment. This was a further personal integration for me, as lately I've been working on my own precognitive experiences in a daily "controlled precognition" practice (a subset of remote viewing in which the target is always only available precognitively—no one on the planet knows what it will be at the time of the session). I've seen profound and difficult-to-explain examples of precognition in these sessions, as I've had with my dreams throughout my life. But until reading *Time Loops*, I've been thinking of them as a relatively uncontrolled way for me to capture and control spontaneous precognitions so I can examine them personally, on a regular basis. Now I see my efforts as a chance to bridge the gap between the empirical and the personal, using empirical results to meet the universal need to understand who we are as humans.

This outcome probably began with Wargo's emphasis on the idea that precognitive experiences reflect not the target itself, but our response to the target. This is one of the ideas he presents that actually matches at least the empirical presentiment data I've analyzed as well as my own experiments (Mossbridge 2017, Mossbridge, Tressoldi, & Utts 2012), which might be why it took hold for me. It had occurred to me in the past that this result suggests that the rules dictating what occurs in our experiences seem to be written differently depending on each person's future response to a target. What hadn't occurred to me previously, because I was thinking only about controlled experiments in which the targets were not traumatic, was Wargo's idea that spontaneous precognitive experiences could be thought of as a neurotic process—a psychologically defensive response to a future event. This kind of process would be largely absent in a laboratory experiment, especially one with repeated trials, and most especially one with a talented precognitive who had done thousands of such trials over their lifetime. But Wargo makes a good argument that it is largely the case that compelling spontaneous precognitive experiences are compelling specifically because they occur in situations in which we or a loved one survives a trauma.

In addition to the detailed documentation Wargo provides in the book, the public response to plane-crash precognitions discussed in the November 2017 bulletin of the Parapsychological Association *Mindfield* (Van Luitelaar 2017) provides another example of this idea. There is a guilty pleasure we take in witnessing disasters that don't kill us; it is a selfish but biologically consistent reward for surviving. This idea is made compelling throughout Wargo's work, and yet this seems to me to not be the case for repetitive laboratory experiments in precognition—especially not those where the participants aren't consciously aware the experiments are testing precognition. I started to toy with the idea that spontaneous precognition,

while being of the same genus as precognitive effects obtained in controlled experiments, is not of the same species. I began to imagine a taxonomy of precognition that very quickly became so complex that I abandoned the project, though it might be of some use in the future.

Returning back to the hypothesis that there is a mechanistic similarity between precognition that occurs in laboratory experiments and that which occurs spontaneously or even in an individual's controlled precognition practice like my own, I settled on an idea with which I think Wargo would agree. The idea is that all precognitive experiences can be explained by causal loops in mental objects. These objects can include, as Wargo argues for spontaneous precognitions, the mental object of a conscious prediction causing and being caused by the mental object of a consciously rewarding survival-related occurrence. But I would argue that precognitive experiences can also include the mental objects of conscious or unconscious behaviors or thoughts causing and being caused by the conscious or unconscious mental object of a simple, unemotional stimulus. It could be that what determines the species of precognition is the type of mental objects involved (conscious versus unconscious, emotional versus nonemotional, behavior versus thought) and the diameter of the causal loop (milliseconds, seconds, minutes, days, months, years). But I still insist that someone more patient than my present self—perhaps my future self?—ought to sort this out.

Following this line of thinking, I began to think that all experiences involving a sense of self—not just precognition—must necessarily be embedded in causal loops. What are these mental objects we call our “selves” if they are not consistent over time? And how could any consistency over time occur without the mental object of a “cause” being conveyed in both directions at once? If causes are only in the forward direction, it would feel that our “selves” don't ever exist except in the present moment—everything has been “building up” to cause a singular present-moment self-experience. But this idea flies in the face of our experience that our selves were once three, and six, and nine years old, and the mental objects of our experience of those selves are inarguably impinged upon by our present experience—the tail and the dog wag each other. This has been a convoluted journey, so I'll repeat this insight: *Time Loops* made me consider that perhaps causal loops are not only responsible for precognition, they are responsible for us having any continuous sense of self at all. While it almost certainly serves a survival function, precognition may also serve to make this contiguous relationship with ourselves over time more apparent to us.

The second inspiration I believe derived from Wargo's work is that the relationship between our own conscious experience and the physical elements related to that experience could be temporal rather than spatial.

Wargo presents the hypothesis that what is in the unconscious mind at the present moment is in fact what consciousness is in the next moment—that the unconscious mind is consciousness displaced backwards in time. This led me to think about a potential rejoinder to an argument that is sometimes voiced in response to the hypothesis that the brain acts like a radio receiver for consciousness. The argument asks, “Well, where’s the transmission coming from?” An excellent point really—we don’t see a consciousness-beaming tower anywhere around. But Wargo’s idea about consciousness displaced in time invited me to revisit an old idea that, for me, was relatively unformed—the idea that consciousness is literally transmitted from the future. The idea is that in a physical but not block-world conception, consciousness is like a physical wave that is transmitted from our future selves to create our present mental objects. This wave may be received by what we call our current experience, or what we call our unconscious mind. But it’s not “where” the control tower is—it’s “when.”

In sum, this book was in no way easy to dismiss, precisely because the author does not actually want to tell anyone how to think. Wargo wants to reveal how he’s thinking as a way of sparking ideas in others. Wargo disarmed me, because for the most part he admits he is speculating throughout. The book offers a compelling series of arguments for some interesting points of view—and in good humanities-writing style offers little proof for any of these speculations. For an empiricist who loves to test ideas, I found that Wargo’s lack of proof makes his arguments that much more compelling to ponder.

You might notice that my minimalist reflection on Wargo’s tremendous work can be seen as a nod to his philosophy that precognition is intimately tied with emotional responses in the future—I only previewed for you those elements of the book that evoked emotional responses in me. Regardless of how precognition relates to emotional experiences, I think we can all admit that science, like every human activity, moves forward largely as a result of strong emotional responses to experiences, even if those experiences result from analyzing data. Because I’m committed to moving the science of precognition and time travel forward, I hope you will be intrigued enough to read *Time Loops* and discover the unique elements that annoy and inspire you, *and* that you’ll be so inspired that you’ll do something about your emotional responses—like run the insightful experiment that created your annoyance and inspiration in the first place.

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