Ineffable

Ryan Spooner

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0. A point

I remember the strange feeling of fascination that gripped me when I first learned there are ten dimensions. A feeling like being drawn to the warmth of a fire, but at the same time made uncomfortable by its heat, an itch under the skin. A weight all around me. Fascination like Rudolf Otto spoke of as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: attraction to, but at the same time repulsion from, the ineffable otherness of the unknown and the unknowable. Otto pondered God, or gods; he described the human experience of the holy as one of terror and wonder triggered by the overwhelming mystery of the divine.

Everything starts with a point. A point, such as one graphed on a coordinate plane, has no dimension. It has neither length nor width. It cannot be measured.

There's mystery there, in the immeasurable.

1. Two points connected.

A line has no width or depth, only length. It is one-dimensional. Lines are named for the points they comprise. A line spanning the gap between points A and B is given the name Line AB. Essentially, points give a line purpose—after all, what is a line but the points it connects?

I feel that there are two of me, linked but held separate by the line that connects them. One goes about his business, understands that there are things he needs to do to keep things running smoothly. He accomplishes short-term goals, makes and plans to make long-term ones. He gets lost in books, in television shows, in the eyes of a woman. He plays video games and browses the Web, laughing at photos of cats with slapstick captions.
The other thinks only of dying.
These two strangers—one immortal in his inability to comprehend death, the other in a prolonged state of dying—occasionally meet. They brush against one another in my mind. Each becomes aware of what is known by the other, if only briefly. There is a rending kind of collision; I panic.

2. Divergence
A second line branching out from the first toward a third point creates a figure in the second dimension. The second dimension is governed by length and width.

In his 1884 novella, Flatland, Edwin Abbott imagines a world existing on a single plane, like a sheet of paper. Its inhabitants—lines, triangles, squares, and circles—are divided and ranked by shape in a mockery of Victorian social hierarchy. They “move freely about, on or in the surface” of the world, Abbott says, “but without the power of rising above or sinking below it, very much like shadows.”

Abbott’s protagonist, a square, is goaded into a metaphysical mind-fuck by a curious three-dimensional visitor: a sphere. The sphere is visible to the square only as a circle that appears from thin air and can grow and shrink in size. This is because those living in Flatland can only see three-dimensional objects as a series of two-dimensional cross-sections—what the square is actually seeing is the sphere passing through his world. To a Flatlander, a person passing through Flatland would resemble more closely slices of lunch meat than a human being.

3. Folding a crucifix into a cube
There’s a hefty paperback on my bookshelf called A Beginner’s Guide to Constructing the Universe that I’ve never read. It was given to me eight years ago by the man my mother was dating: a blue-
blooded, born-again, Rastafarian architect named Ian Rutherford. Inside the book's front cover is his inscription, taken from The First Epistle to the Thessalonians:

PROVE ALL THINGS
HOLD FAST THAT
WHICH IS GOOD.

He was convinced God was an architect—The Architect—and tried to concretize a trinity of Jesus, Haile Selassie, and himself into my life for the five years or so he and my mother were involved. He wanted to adopt me, wanted to be my father.

I page through the book, written by Michael S. Schneider. Chapter three: “Three-Part Harmony.” In the margin, illustrations of cross-sectioned fruits and vegetables show “internal three-corner structure.” On the page opposite are diagrams of butterflies, flowers, and cucumber slices. The book is full of references to religion, philosophy, and pop-culture. Schneider quotes Carl Jung: “There is an unfolding of the One to a condition where it can be known—unity becomes recognizable.” He quotes Homer: “All was divided into three.” He compares Shinto symbols to the Citgo logo, a piano's keyboard to the cathedral of Notre Dame.

The third dimension, which Abbott’s square calls Spaceland, is measured by length, width, and height. The square becomes aware of it when he is able to lift himself from the plane of Flatland, transforming himself into a cube. His notions of the universe are torn apart. “Behold, I am become as a God,” he says. “For the wise men in our country say that to see all things, or as they express it, omnividence, is the attribute of God alone.”

The third dimension is a way of touching to points on a line together: simply fold the page. The third dimension gives us the leeway to turn paper crosses into cubes, to cover them in dots and
make dice like we did in grade school.

In 2004, Ian Rutherford, under the omnivident guidance of his own God, changed his name to John Ru The Ford and traveled to Indonesia to marry a woman he'd met in a Yahoo! chat room.

4. Time

Draw a line between who you are now and who you were five years ago. Suddenly you become an object defined not only by length, width, and height, but also by duration. That line, time, exists in the fourth dimension. "If you were to see your body in the fourth dimension," Rob Bryanton, author of *Imagining the Tenth Dimension*, writes, "you would be like a long undulating snake, with your embryonic self at one end and your deceased self at the other."

"Just like that Flatlander who could only see two-dimensional cross-sections of objects from the dimension above," Bryanton continues, borrowing from Abbott, "we as three-dimensional creatures only see three-dimensional cross-sections of our fourth-dimensional self."

The cross-sections are like the pages of a flip book. Thumb the edge and watch the little man dance.

At this stage, time is linear. In fact, it exists as a ghostlike streak behind you, like motion blur in a photograph. You can interact with it only via retrospect, which is about as useful as chasing your own tail. Nevertheless, you indulge yourself; everyone's guilty. For instance, regarding his role in the emergence of nuclear weaponry, Einstein said "If only I had known, I should have become a watchmaker."

But Einstein didn't become a watchmaker—nothing can change that. Since we observe only the now, or an endless series of nows strung together, perhaps it's better to comment solely on the moment, the current cross-section of time. Even so, isn't that just a type of premature nostalgia—of preemptive retrospect, so to speak?

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When the father of the atomic bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer, famously said “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds,” was he not merely projecting himself into the future and trying to reflect on the present? What does it take to keep ourselves from looking back?

5. Roads not taken

They’ll soon begin building black holes beneath the mountains along the Franco-Swiss border. Early in September of 2008, CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, fired up the machine that will change the way we think about the universe: the Large Hadron Collider. Over sixteen hundred superconducting magnets, most weighing over twenty-seven metric tons, project and stabilize opposing proton beams and send them on a collision course in a subterranean cryogenic facility near Geneva, Switzerland. The subatomic particles crash into one another at just below the speed of light.

The fifth dimension is one of choice. Every second of every day, a new you is created in the fifth dimension. Every time you make a choice, a thousand lines splinter off in the direction of different possible yous that could result from your decision. Time in the fifth dimension moves forward and backward. Sideways. Diagonally.

Over the phone I tell my uncle what they’re doing in Switzerland.

“Is shit gonna blow up?” he says.

“No,” I say. “I don’t know.”

“Are they gonna blow a hole into the side of the earth and suck a bunch of people into another dimension and make contact with aliens?” he says.

“That happened in a video game,” I say.

“Whatever, man. I just want shit to blow up,” he says.
Three months earlier he and I had sat up all night brewing coffee and watching my grandfather sleep. We hung in the pauses between the old man's breaths as the hospice nurse snoozed beneath a crocheted blanket in a chair across the room.

The next night we'd stood on the porch of my grandfather's double-wide, smoking cigarettes and staring across the highway at a tobacco field. "Oh my god," someone was saying, "what the fuck!" Only my grandfather's wife remained inside. The rest of the family drifted back and forth across the yard like ghosts. My uncle and I muttered clichés about it being his time to go.

"It's a good thing," I told him, performing. "All that pain—it needed to happen."

"Fuck," he said.

6. Moving

If we were able to move about the fifth dimension, we could jump backwards, forwards, and sideways through time, creating and observing lives we could be living had we done something differently.

The Large Hadron Collider is encased in a seventeen-mile-long circular concrete tube. According to CERN, a single proton moving at full speed around this circle can complete about eleven thousand revolutions per second. Presently, collisions have been postponed; explosions and coolant leaks have CERN physicists bogged-down in repairs and recalibration. There are some who feel these roadblocks are not accidental. In an essay published October 12, 2009 in The New York Times, Dennis Overbye examines "the notion that the troubled collider is being sabotaged by its own future." He explains that

a pair of otherwise distinguished physicists have suggested that the
hypothesized Higgs boson, which physicists hope to produce with the collider, might be so abhorrent to nature that its creation would ripple backward through time and stop the collider before it could make one, like a time traveler who goes back in time to kill his grandfather.

Two years before I spoke with him about CERN, my uncle tried to take his own life. He decided he didn’t want to be who he was anymore and ate handfuls of pills.

A month or so before that, he’d sold the Mossberg shotgun he kept in his closet.

Imagine lines in time drawn from the pharmacy to my uncle’s home in South Carolina. From the pill bottle to the palm of his hand. Or, imagine lines drawn from the barrel of the shotgun to the soft spot under his chin, from his toe to the trigger. From my uncle to his grave, or to the place where, instead, he sat with me by the bed of his dying father.

All of these lines could exist, have existed, and do exist—somewhere.

7. Infinity

We tend to think of infinity as a circle or a figure eight because it has no end, no beginning. This is only a foothold into understanding the nature of the all-inclusive. Infinity is the representation of every possible instance of choice and every resulting outcome across all of time, from the Big Bang onward and outward. Infinity represents, as Bryanton puts it, “all possible timelines which could have or will have occurred from our big bang.”
The seventh dimension is infinite because it cannot be measured. It is, for all intents and purposes, a point.

8. A line between two everythings

My uncle was six when I was born. I grew up alongside him in my grandfather’s house. My mother was sixteen. I spent the first eight years of my life calling my grandfather “Dad.” Not because I thought he was my father, but in imitation of my uncle. We lived as brothers until my grandmother died. My mother, finally financially stable enough, took me into her home. My grandfather remarried within a year.

My life and the life of my uncle drifted apart. The space between us grew until the months after his attempted suicide. Then, gradually, we began drifted back toward one another.

With each collision within the Large Hadron Collider, the Big Bang will be recreated in miniature. Six detectors sit at the points in the Collider where the proton beams cross and the collisions occur. They’re geared toward measuring the presence of anti-matter, dark matter, quarks, gluons, and the elusive Higgs boson—which physicists call the God particle, as it’s said to be the reason matter has mass. Regarding the Higgs, Overbye quotes Physicist Holger Bech Nielsen, who, along with his colleagues, brought forth the claim that the mysterious particle may be the source of CERN’s woes. Nielsen “said of the theory, ‘Well, one could even almost say that we have a model for God.’ It is their guess, he went on, ‘that He rather hates Higgs particles, and attempts to avoid them.’”

If infinity is conceivable as a point, then there must be other points—other infinities—for lines to be drawn to, each with its own Big Bang occurring under its own conditions, each infinitely different from ours.

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9. Folding reality into what you will

A two-dimensional plane folded through the third dimension enables two points on different lines to touch. An eight-dimensional plane folded through the ninth dimension enables different realities to touch.

We picture doors that pass through space and the spaces between, and open onto vistas of glassy mountains framed by purple, rippling skies streaked with upward-falling snow. We picture streets of gold, rivers that flow with milk and honey. We picture a place where our dead relatives live on happily and wait for our arrival. We picture the stuff of dreams because who would dare hope to find, on the other side of all that's possible, something the same as what we'd left behind?

10. A point

Take enough steps back from anything and it becomes nothing more than a point on the horizon. Imagine the web-work of lines crisscrossing back and forth between all possible infinities as a single point containing everything that could ever possibly be—under any and all circumstances.

Every once in a while, after a period of mentally distancing myself from it, I try to re-approach the idea of death. I snap awake in bed, my face hot. I pace. "Fuck!" I say. "Shit!" No matter how much it terrifies and sickens me, I can't leave it alone. I pick at it in my mind like a scab, never letting it heal.

I try to collapse my fear of death, fold it in on itself. In vain I attempt to cram the unknown into the tiny confines of rational thought.

I want to stop.
I can't.

The mind is predisposed to search for meaning, to make parallels, to see patterns. Sometimes this results in revelation;
sometimes it results in the creation of a sad fiction. More and more I'm having trouble divining the difference.

Charles Hinton, in "Many Dimensions," compares the foolhardiness of our endeavors to Egyptian priests worshiping a veiled deity, attempting to bind her with cloth. "So we wrap 'round space our garments of magnitude and vesture of many dimensions," he says. "Till [sic] suddenly, to us as to them, as with a forward tilt of the shoulders, the divinity moves, and the raiment and robes fall to the ground, leaving the divinity herself, revealed, but invisible."

Hinton presents the inner workings of space as a god, as something to be feared, respected—maybe even worshipped. Something we should recognize will always be just beyond reach, wholly apart from us and unable to be understood. Something not seen, but somehow felt to be there.