The Conscious Soul, Cyclical Time, and the Phenomenon of Déjà Vu - II

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Abstract

This paper explores the philosophical and scientific implications of memory and the phenomenon of déjà vu within frameworks that challenge the linearity of time. Inspired by the White Queen's observation in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*—"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards"—we investigate the possibility that memory may operate beyond conventional temporal bounds. By integrating insights from neuroscience, cognitive psychology, literary analysis, and contemporary cosmological models such as eternal recurrence, the block universe, and conformal cyclic cosmology, we propose that déjà vu may serve as a philosophical and experiential clue to the cyclical or non-linear nature of time. This interdisciplinary inquiry suggests that human consciousness and memory might occasionally transcend the constraints of presentism, prompting a reevaluation of how time, identity, and experience are fundamentally understood.

1 Introduction

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Lewis Carroll's White Queen utters a statement that is as curious as it is thought-provoking:

> "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," the Queen remarked.

While often interpreted as whimsical nonsense, this line challenges foundational assumptions about memory, time, and consciousness. What if memory could indeed operate forward in time? What if the strange phenomenon of déjà vu is more than just a cognitive anomaly—perhaps even a clue to the deeper structure of time?

This paper investigates the intersection of memory, déjà vu, and theories of cyclical and non-linear time. By drawing connections between Carroll's literary metaphor, neuroscientific models of memory, and cosmological theories such as eternal recurrence, the block universe, and conformal cyclic cosmology, we examine the possibility that memory may not be strictly a retrospective process.

Our aim is to consider whether déjà vu could represent a momentary overlap between states of consciousness across different points in time—or even across different cycles of existence. In doing so, we integrate perspectives from philosophy, physics, and literature to suggest that our current understanding of time and memory may be incomplete.

2 Memory, Déjà Vu, and Linear Time

Traditionally, memory is conceptualized as a process anchored in linear time. It involves the encoding, consolidation, storage, and retrieval of past experiences, primarily orchestrated by structures such as the hippocampus, amygdala, and prefrontal cortex. These processes enable individuals to navigate and interpret the present based on the accumulation of past experiences.

However, the phenomenon of *déjà vu*—a fleeting sensation of familiarity in an objectively novel situation—presents a challenge to this linear framework. Déjà vu, derived from the French for "already seen," is a psychological event where an individual feels that they have previously experienced the current situation, despite evidence to the contrary.

Several cognitive models have attempted to explain déjà vu:

- **Split Perception Theory:** Suggests that the brain processes the same sensory input twice, out of sync. The first perception is brief and subconscious; the second, conscious perception is interpreted as familiar [**?**].
- **Memory Mismatch Model:** Proposes that déjà vu arises from partial activation of memory circuits, where the brain signals familiarity without a corresponding full memory recall [**?**].
- **Temporal Lobe Epilepsy Hypothesis:** Indicates that déjà vu may result from brief electrical misfiring in the temporal lobe, especially in individuals with epilepsy, providing a neurological basis for the experience.

In all these models, déjà vu is considered a disruption or anomaly in the temporal mechanics of memory—suggesting that the mind may occasionally blur the boundaries between past and present. In more speculative frameworks, such as those rooted in theories of cyclical time or block universe models, déjà vu might be interpreted not as a malfunction but as a momentary access to information from a future or parallel context.

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4 Theoretical Frameworks for Cyclical Time and Memory

4.1 Eternal Recurrence

The concept of eternal recurrence, famously proposed by Friedrich Nietzsche, posits that the universe and all events within it are destined to recur infinitely in a self-similar form. This radical idea implies a closed temporal loop in which time is cyclical rather than linear.

Nietzsche introduced this notion not merely as a cosmological theory, but as an existential challenge. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he asks whether one could will the recurrence of one's life, infinitely repeated in all its pain and joy [**?**]. While initially metaphysical and philosophical in nature, the idea of eternal recurrence has found echoes in scientific models that consider closed, finite universes and cosmologies with cyclical properties.

If time is indeed cyclical and experiences repeat, then memory may not be limited to recording the past. Instead, it could function as a trans-temporal faculty capable of accessing information from previous cycles. In this speculative framework, phenomena like déjà vu might represent residual memory traces from prior iterations of existence, rather than cognitive anomalies or neural misfires.

Such a hypothesis invites a reinterpretation of memory itself—not just as a biological process embedded in the brain, but as a deeper informational structure potentially embedded in the fabric of reality. This would imply a radical shift in our understanding of consciousness, time, and identity.

4.2 Block Universe (Eternalism)

The block universe theory, also known as eternalism, posits that time is a fourth dimension much like the spatial dimensions, and all points in time—past, present, and future—are equally real. This view contrasts with presentism, which holds that only the present exists. In a block universe, events do not come into being or fade away; instead, they are fixed in a four-dimensional spacetime manifold.

Eternalism has significant implications for the understanding of memory and conscious experience. If all moments exist simultaneously, then the sensation of temporal flow is not a fundamental property of the universe but a feature of human consciousness moving through a static landscape of events [**?**, 10].

From this perspective, memory may be likened to a mechanism that accesses coordinates in the temporal dimension. Normally, memory retrieves past coordinates. However, there is no ontological reason, in a block universe, why it could not also access future coordinates under certain conditions. This interpretation opens the door to speculative explanations of phenomena like déjà vu as instances where memory transiently references future states of consciousness.

The block universe model is supported by interpretations of Einstein's theory of relativity, which treats time as interwoven with space in the fabric of spacetime. In this model, time dilation and simultaneity are relative, reinforcing the idea that the past, present, and future are not absolute but observer-dependent [11].

4.3 Conformal Cyclic Cosmology

Conformal Cyclic Cosmology (CCC) is a cosmological model proposed by Sir Roger Penrose, which suggests that the universe undergoes infinite cycles of expansion and decay, known as "aeons" [**?**]. In this model, the remote future of one aeon becomes the Big Bang of the next, facilitated by a conformal mapping that stretches and smooths spacetime at both extremes.

The CCC model implies that the universe has no beginning or end in the conventional sense. Instead, time progresses through a sequence of cosmological cycles, each emerging from the asymptotic infinity of the previous one. One of the key features of CCC is that all massive particles eventually decay or become negligible in the very long term, allowing for a conformal (angle-preserving) transformation that bridges one aeon to the next.

This framework has profound implications for the nature of time and memory. If information from one aeon can, in principle, influence the next—either through gravitational waves, patterns in the cosmic microwave background, or other yet-unknown mechanisms—then it is conceivable that certain cognitive or informational residues might persist across aeons.

In this context, memory could be more than a neural function confined to individual organisms. It might have a substrate in the physical universe itself, capable of transcending

aeons. Phenomena such as déjà vu might then be viewed not merely as cognitive anomalies but as echoes of experiences from prior cosmic cycles.

While CCC remains a speculative and controversial theory, it provides a unique perspective on how time, memory, and consciousness might function in a universe that is fundamentally cyclical and infinite.

5 Déjà Vu as a Philosophical and Scientific Clue

Déjà vu has long intrigued both scientists and philosophers. While often dismissed as a cognitive anomaly or neurological quirk, it can also be viewed as a clue pointing toward deeper truths about the nature of memory, consciousness, and time.

From a psychological standpoint, déjà vu is typically explained through models such as split perception, memory mismatch, and neurological misfiring in the temporal lobes [**?**, **?**]. These models locate the cause of déjà vu within the individual's brain, suggesting it arises when familiarity is triggered without conscious recollection.

However, from a philosophical and metaphysical perspective, déjà vu challenges the conventional assumption that memory is strictly retrospective. If one experiences a strong sense of familiarity without any identifiable source, this may imply that memory is not always confined to past experience. Instead, it could represent a transient overlap between mental states across time, or even cycles of time, as posited in theories such as eternal recurrence and conformal cyclic cosmology.

In a block universe, where all points in time are equally real, déjà vu may reflect a moment of consciousness accessing information from a different point in the temporal dimension [**?**, 10]. In a cyclical cosmology, it could be an echo from a previous iteration of existence. Either view implies that memory might have non-local or trans-temporal properties, and that consciousness is capable of interfacing with more than just the linear present.

These interpretations reframe déjà vu from being a glitch to being a possible insight—an experiential clue that our understanding of time and memory is incomplete. It invites us to reconsider the rigid boundaries we place around the experience of time, and to explore the possibility that human cognition might sometimes graze the edges of a deeper, more complex temporal reality.

6 Carroll's Literary Insight and the Nature of Time

Lewis Carroll's literary works, particularly *Through the Looking-Glass*, offer a fertile ground for exploring unconventional notions of time and memory. One of the most provocative lines in the book comes from the White Queen:

> "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," the Queen remarked.

At face value, this line appears nonsensical or whimsical. However, upon closer inspection, it challenges the foundational assumption that memory must be confined to the past. The Queen's claim opens the door to a reimagining of memory as a faculty that could work bidirectionally—or even multidirectionally—in time.

In Carroll's Looking-Glass world, logic is often inverted, and time itself appears to function in reverse or sideways. This literary setting becomes a metaphorical space for examining philosophical questions. The Queen's remark implies a form of consciousness that remembers the future just as easily as the past, aligning remarkably well with speculative models in physics and philosophy, such as the block universe or conformal cyclic cosmology [**?**, **?**].

From a narrative standpoint, Carroll uses paradox and temporal playfulness not merely for humor, but as a means to destabilize rigid thought systems. His characters often blur the boundaries between reality and imagination, allowing readers to engage with alternate epistemologies and metaphysical assumptions.

In this context, déjà vu, as discussed in earlier sections, becomes not merely a psychological phenomenon but a literary symbol—a manifestation of time's fluidity and the porous nature of memory. Carroll's literary insight anticipates contemporary discussions in theoretical physics and cognitive science about the non-linearity of time and the flexibility of human perception.

Thus, the White Queen's seemingly absurd statement becomes a profound philosophical prompt: what if memory could indeed work forwards? And if so, what would that imply about the structure of the universe, the nature of time, and the scope of human consciousness?

7 Conclusion

The exploration of memory, déjà vu, and cyclical time challenges deeply held assumptions about the nature of experience and reality. Drawing from literature, neuroscience, and theoretical physics, we observe that memory might not be strictly confined to the past, and time might not flow in a linear, irreversible direction.

Through the lens of eternal recurrence, the block universe model, and conformal cyclic cosmology, it becomes plausible to imagine memory as a trans-temporal faculty—capable of accessing both past and future. Déjà vu, traditionally considered a cognitive anomaly, might in these frameworks serve as a clue or echo of consciousness navigating non-linear or cyclical time.

Lewis Carroll's White Queen, with her declaration that "it's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," offers a poetic yet philosophically resonant critique of linear temporality. Her literary absurdity mirrors real questions in contemporary science: What if our memories occasionally breach the temporal constraints we assume are absolute? What if consciousness occasionally slips through the seams of a block universe or resonates across cosmological aeons?

These questions remain speculative but powerful. They urge us to reconsider how we define memory, time, and selfhood. The interplay between scientific models and literary imagination reveals that the boundaries of our cognitive experience might be more porous, and our place in time more complex, than we typically acknowledge.

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