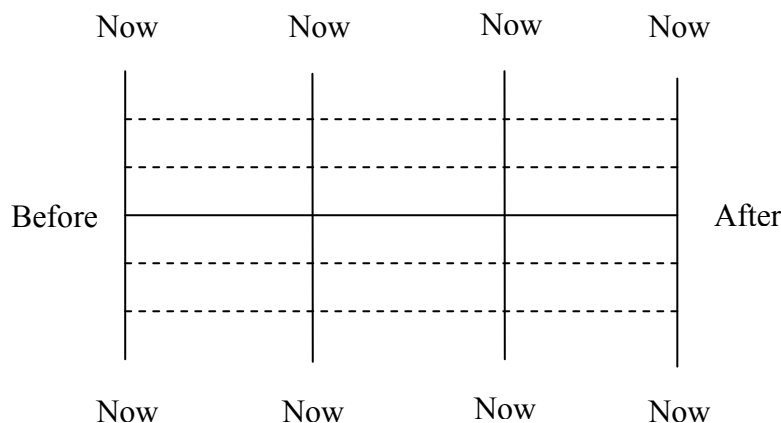


Recurrence and Immortality

To go further in comparing Ouspensky's ideas about recurrence in *New Model* and HH's answers to questions in *Birth & Death*, a little background reading is required. It needs a bit of an intellectual effort to puzzle out some of the more obscure ideas.

In Ouspensky's formulation of three dimensions of time¹ (*New Model of Universe*, 3rd edition, p 427), he starts off with the usual idea of linear time, before-now-after. In studies of time there is a universal issue about our psychological perception of it: we have a 'present moment' only as long as a breath and then the moment is gone. If it were not for this quirk of nature, time might appear more like one of the spatial dimensions, with everything in the past in full focus instead of becoming increasingly hazy with the passage of time, and with the future laid out as if everything had already happened (at least as far as the next turn in the road).

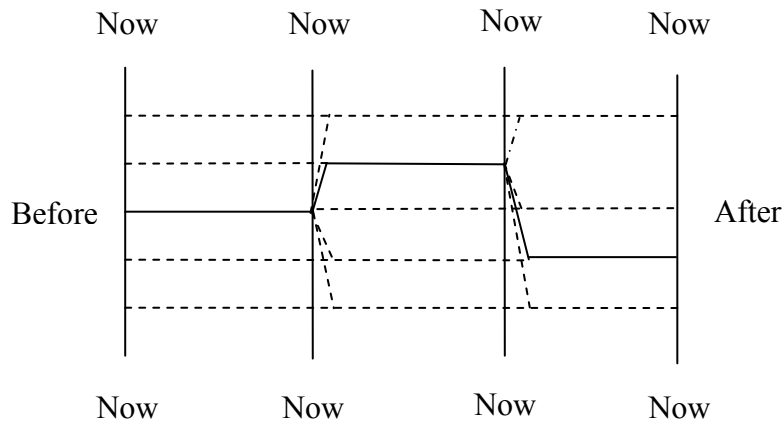
Ouspensky goes on to consider 'eternity': what it is, where it lies. It is not 'all time', it is 'out of time'. He draws the following diagram:



At each moment of time there is a perpendicular line of 'perpetual now' (*nunc stans* in medieval Christianity). He calls this perpendicular direction the 'fifth dimension'. He speculates that parallel to our 'historical' line of time there may be other possible lines of time, shown as dotted lines. Each moment brings different possibilities and it is possible to swap from one line to the next as a different possibility is realised, so our progress on what is now a plane of the fourth and fifth dimensions is a zig-zag rather than a straight line.

Perhaps he means something like the following, where the dotted lines are unrealised possibilities:

¹ By coincidence the idea of a second dimension of time is a topical issue (*New Scientist* 13 October).



Suppose the full line is your life. If it is uneventful, there is no possibility of change and it continues on in a straight line. At a time of decision or crisis, change is possible: you might change your job or partner; maybe the new arrangement is what you should have done years ago; you have now switched to a time-line where this possibility existed but was not realised.

Ouspensky goes on to consider the sixth dimension – out of the plane of the paper, in which all possibilities in the moment are realised. That is, only one possible line of time is followed in the fourth dimension, but *all* the possible alternatives are followed as lines out of the plane of paper in the sixth dimension, so the time-line becomes a solid. Maybe in a previous life you had one job and in the present life another, so both time-lines exist.

He says subsequently that three dimensions are sensed by us as direction, duration and velocity. This needs some thought.

Arguing that relativity theory shows that all objects have a separate time system, he writes:

Separate time is always a completed circle. We can think of time as a straight line only on the great straight line of the great time. If the great time does not exist, every separate time can only be a circle, that is, a closed curve. But a circle or any closed curve requires two coordinates for its definition. The circle (circumference) is a two dimensional figure. If the second dimension of time is eternity, this means that eternity enters into every circle of time and into every moment of the circle of time. Eternity is the curvature of time. Eternity is also movement, an *eternal movement*. And if we imagine time as a circle or as any other closed curve, *eternity will* signify eternal movement along this curve, eternal repetition, eternal recurrence.

The fifth dimension is movement in the circle, repetition, recurrence. The sixth dimension is the way out of the circle. If we imagine that one end of the curve rises from the surface, we visualise the third dimension of time – the sixth dimension of space. The line of time becomes a spiral.

How does the idea of eternity as the curvature of time fit with the idea of eternity as being out of time?

* * *

There are equally challenging aspects of the Indian teaching on rebirth. HH said that 'whatever thoughts you entertain at the time of death will make your next body' (*Birth & Death*, p 58) – 'Conscious Death' is the corresponding System idea.

In the *Srimad Bhagavatam* we find the following:

THE ATTAINMENT OF FREEDOM

A true Yogi realizing the approach of death sits calmly in Yoga posture, and, with his heart purified and mind under perfect control, becomes absorbed in the consciousness of Brahman. Thus he lives in a state of perfect tranquillity.

Time, the great destroyer, which lords it over everything in the universe, is annihilated. The universe itself melts into nothingness. The Yogi is no longer aware of his physical self.

The worshipful Lord Vishnu alone is in his heart. All to him is God. Such is his blissful state.

Desiring to give up the body, he allows the vital energy to pass through the different centres of consciousness. First, the energy is concentrated in the solar plexus, called the Manipura. From there the energy rises to Anahata, the heart. It then passes to the centre near the throat, called the Visuddha. From there it ascends to Ajna, the centre between the eyebrows.

At this point one of two things may come to pass. If the Yogi has reached the state of desirelessness, he realizes the absolute Brahman, and the vital energy ascends to the Sahasrara the thousand-petalled lotus-centre in the brain, called the doorway to Brahman. Then the Yogi, realizing his unity with Brahman, completes the separation of himself from the senses, the sense-organs, the mind, and the body, and passes away. He attains to what is known as absolute freedom. This is called immediate liberation.

There is also a more gradual process for those who fall slightly short of perfect, with a refining process through a kind of purgatory. However, it seems that HH does not prescribe this approach to dying for us (*ibid* pp 57-58).

For the really less than perfect there is rebirth. HH (*Birth & Death* pp 23-4) gives an explanation of the process of birth and death. He first explains that consciousness creates matter, corresponding to cause and effect. Then:

Behind the law of cause and effect there are two stages. One is the real stage where only the consciousness is experienced which results in happiness, and the other is the Laya [dissolution] stage where the forms are still and without any experience. These are also known as Turiya [pure consciousness] and Laya. The substance of the creation passes between this Turiya to Laya and all the manifest forms arise in between. This 'in-between' is the movement in eternity. This eternity is one and on this underlying thread of eternity the consciousness takes manifold forms through changes. Thus a point of appearance of a form which in substance exists in eternity is called birth, and the point of change appreciated by consciousness is called death. Once this idea of birth and death is understood, then it becomes easy to appreciate the idea of rebirth which is based on this continuous movement.

This is difficult. What does it mean?

* * *

There are many literary records of experiences of immortality. Wordsworth's famous poem is actually rather sad:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparell'd in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

Although feelings of immortality are not at our command or ever present as they may have been in childhood, they do come as a result of work. We have something that watches over us. For the most part we are at most dimly aware of 'it', but sometimes 'it' comes to stay inside us for a few seconds, minutes or even hours, and when it comes there is no problem about death or rebirth, heaven or hell. 'It' feels like something that has always been and always will be, and one imagines that it will remain as death approaches and everything else slips away.

Sean Crampton wrote about his experience of immortality on a battlefield in Italy in the Second World War:

BATTLEFIELD

It was on the battlefield of the Catania Plain in the Sicily Campaign of 1943. I was at the peak of physical condition: a young, eager subaltern commanding a rifle platoon in a crack infantry regiment.

The previous week we had marched across country from Syracuse clearing out small pockets of resistance and had at last mounted a full-scale night attack across the Catania plain, where the Germans had established a strong defensive line which halted our advance.

The armies faced each other across the plain, and I was detailed to make nightly patrols into no-man's-land.

One night, we discovered a huge dump of enemy landmines stacked in the barbed wire entanglement some 20 yards from their forward outposts, obviously waiting to be planted.

The following night, I was ordered to blow them up!

It was 1 a.m. on a starlit night about 2 hours before moonrise, when I set out with four riflemen and two sappers with explosive charges to do the job.

We crept quietly up to the mine dump. The Germans were indeed laying the mines on the other side of the wire. We could hear them whispering, and could hear the chink of their entrenching tools.

My sappers laid their explosives with a two-minute delayed fuse and we slipped away to crouch behind a wrecked Bren gun carrier in comparative safety until the charges went off.

In retrospect, it must have taken us at least a minute to crawl to the safety of the carrier. I stood up and stretched, checked with the sapper corporal to make sure it was a two minute fuse. He confirmed it. I looked around, and was amazed to find that I could "see" all the landscape. It seemed to be dimly lit from within - not like moonlight, but more like a black-and-white film: a quiet, monochrome glowing. I was intensely aware of myself in this landscape and all that was going on around me. I was also aware in an "unhurried" flash of major events in my past life - and then an overwhelming joy flooded over me, an indescribable delight, and with this delight came an absolute certainty of my own immortality. This certainty had total conviction, and (in parenthesis) that conviction has never left me. Then the explosives went off with an enormous, shattering bang, accompanied by a blazing mushroom of fire.

The explosion ended the inner experience, but the memory remains as vivid as ever.

It was this experience which led me after the war, to search for its meaning, and so started my spiritual pilgrimage.