HIGH SCHOOL EDITION
Journal of Student Research

Volume 13 Issue 4 (2024)

Paradoxes in Time Travel

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ABSTRACT

The overall purpose of this study is to examine the complexities and contradictions that arise when contemplating the feasibility of time travel, while also deepening our understanding of the theoretical principles that guide this fascinating concept. The data was collected qualitatively and a meticulous literature review of papers was done. Classic paradoxes like the grandfather paradox, bootstrap paradox, and the causality loop were examined, along with proposed solutions from renowned physicists. The main findings of this study reveal the profound complexities that time travel introduces, challenging our notions of causality and the fundamental laws governing our universe. While certain theoretical frameworks offer possibilities for time travel, the resolution of paradoxes remains elusive, necessitating continued research in theoretical physics to untangle the enigmatic web of time and its potential for manipulation.

Introduction

What is Time Travel?

Time travel generally refers to the discrepancy between an individual's personal time and the external, universal time. For instance, when a traveler leaves one location and reaches another, the time taken is the duration of their journey. However, for a time traveler, the time between departure and arrival does not match the journey duration. If they travel for an hour and arrive at a different time, they might reach either the past or future, depending on the direction of travel.[1]

Our world exists in four dimensions, comprising one dimension of time and three spatial dimensions. Objects that persist over time appear as continuous streaks with both temporal and spatial components. Change, therefore, is the qualitative difference between these temporal and spatial components. A time traveler, unlike ordinary objects, creates an unusual pattern through space-time. Traveling to the past results in a zig-zag pattern, while traveling to the future stretches the pattern. Instantaneous travel creates a broken pattern due to the lack of intermediate stages.[1] For an ordinary person, events follow a typical sequence: childhood, adulthood, and old age, aligned with external time. A time traveler, however, experiences events out of this regular sequence. The statement "soon he will be in the past" means that his temporal position in personal time is slightly later than now but much earlier in external time.

Procedure and Methodology

The study aimed to make the concept of time travel accessible while addressing and debunking some associated paradoxes. Data was collected qualitatively through a comprehensive literature review of papers on related topics. This included works like Smith's *The problems of backward time travel* , Dowe's *The case for time travel*, and Lewis's *The paradoxes of time travel*.[5,2,1] A thematic analysis was used to synthesize the findings, with the ultimate goal of determining whether time travel is logically possible. The study also briefly examined time travel concepts in popular culture.

Results

Causal Processes and Time Travel

Another perspective on time travel is through causal processes. The simplest form is a particle's trajectory through time, where earlier stages cause later stages. This is also true for a person's history earlier stages partially cause later stages, such as a full stomach causing nourishment or earlier perceptions causing later memories.[2] Time travel is a special type of causal process where personal time and external time conflict. For instance, the life of someone from 1932 to 2008 is a normal causal event, not time travel. Conversely, Dr. Who's journey in the TARDIS from 1976 to 1876, taking one hour, is time travel because his personal time (one hour) contradicts the external time (minus 100 years).

Types of Time Travel

1. Doctor: Dr. Who enters the TARDIS, which disappears for outside observers. Dr. Who experiences a brief personal time (like 5 minutes) before arriving at any point in the past or future.
2. Leap: The traveler uses a device and disappears, reappearing at a different time instantaneously, creating a broken streak in temporal components.
3. Gödel: Using an ordinary rocket ship, the traveler moves in a specific direction and, due to space-time structure, arrives in the past or future.
4. Einstein: Traveling at high speeds causes time dilation. Upon returning, only a small amount of personal time has passed while many years have passed on Earth.
5. Putnam: Oscar Smith uses a machine in 2024, and after some personal time, he steps out in 1984. Observers see the machine appear and divide into two, with Oscar stepping out of one and the other showing reversed actions until both machines collide and annihilate.[3]

What is Not Time Travel?

Time travel involves a discrepancy between personal and external time. Situations lacking this condition are not considered time travel, such as:

1. Sleep: Sleeping for ten hours feels like no time has passed, but ten hours have indeed passed.
2. Coma: A person in a coma for five years wakes up feeling no time has passed, though five years have elapsed.
3. Cryogenics: Being cryogenically frozen for hundreds of years, feeling like no time has passed upon awakening.
4. Virtual Reality: Experiencing past or future eras through a simulation without actual time travel.
5. Waiting: Waiting for something in real-time, with personal time matching external time.
6. Crossing the International Date Line: This changes the calendar date but does not involve actual time travel, as personal time remains aligned with external time.[3]

Defining time travel accurately remains complex, as various definitions exclude certain scenarios while including others. Traditional definitions exclude events like sleep, coma, and virtual experiences while including more classic forms of time travel like those seen in science fiction. Yet, theories of relativity and concepts like closed time-like curves present challenges in defining time travel comprehensively. Additionally, the idea of parallel universes poses further questions about the nature of time travel and whether traveling to a parallel past or future counts as time travel.[4]

Paradoxes Associated with Time Travel

Changing vs. Participating in the Past

Before delving into the paradoxes related to time travel, it's crucial to differentiate between 'changing' the past and merely 'participating' in it. Many people imagine that traveling back in time would allow one to alter historical events, such as preventing wars or eliminating notorious figures. It is also thought to offer opportunities to rectify past mistakes. However, this idea inherently presents a paradox in a single past model. For example, if John travels back to get a birthday present for his mother that he originally forgot, there will be two versions of the same event—one from the younger John's perspective and one from the older, time-traveling John's perspective—leading to an inconsistency. Thus, such a time travel scenario becomes incoherent.

Despite this, a time traveler is not entirely powerless. They may not be able to change past events but can still participate in them and influence actions that indeed occurred.

Shifting to models that involve parallel universes (e.g., David Deutsch's model), no paradox arises when stating that John forgets to buy a gift in Universe 1 but remembers in Universe 2. The question remains whether such a scenario involves changing the past as initially envisaged—correcting historical wrongs or altering regretted actions. Some scholars argue that it does, while Smith contends that it does not, suggesting that it involves avoiding the past and traveling to a different version of it where events unfold.[3,5]

The Grandfather Paradox

Consider the classic example given by Lewis. Tim despises his grandfather, whose success in the munitions trade funded Tim's time machine. Though Tim's grandfather died in 1957, Tim, upon building his time machine, travels to 1920 with the intent to kill him. Tim buys a rifle, practices shooting, and sets up an ambush. Yet, despite his determination, Tim cannot kill his grandfather because it's known that his grandfather survived to father Tim's parent, ultimately leading to Tim's existence. Thus, killing his grandfather would create a contradiction.[1] The inherent contradiction in this scenario shows the impossibility of altering past events. If Tim killed his grandfather, it would result in Tim never being born, and consequently, he could not have traveled back in time to commit the act. Few authors argue that the statement "Tim kills his grandfather" is inherently false because if Tim would always fail in his attempt, he cannot accomplish it.

To prevent such paradoxes and maintain consistency, many science-fiction stories employ chaperones who prevent time travelers from interfering with the past. However, this is unnecessary as the time traveler will naturally fail due to ordinary reasons, such as a gun jamming or slipping on a banana peel, preventing the impossible from happening and thus demonstrating that backward time travel is not impossible.[1]

Objections to the Probability of Time Travel

The discussion extends to the probability of time travel. Horwich presents an argument:[18]

1. If time travel were to occur, we should observe numerous uncaused correlations.
2. It is highly unlikely that we should observe numerous uncaused correlations.
3. Therefore, time travel is highly unlikely to occur.

Consider a time traveler attempting to kill their younger self (auto-infanticide). As noted earlier, ordinary events would foil their plans. Each attempt would be hindered by events like a gun jamming or distractions, creating a correlation between the attempts and the hindrances. Since these events do not share a direct causal connection, their occurrence seems improbable.

Smith counters Horwich's premises, arguing that backward time travel does not inherently entail improbable strings of coincidences. Additionally, the lack of observed uncaused correlations does not imply that they are impossible. Thus, even if backward time travel involved inverse forks, we cannot conclude it will rarely occur, akin to dismissing human flight before the Wright brothers' success.[5]

The cumulative, ordinary events preventing the time traveler from achieving their goal, while individually mundane, collectively seem perplexing. Auto-infanticide, involving a person being dead at a younger age despite being alive at an older one, is inherently self-contradictory. Therefore, the failure of such events is almost guaranteed, and the reasons behind them are inconsequential.

Smith describes this phenomenon as a "grand conspiracy" without conspirators, highlighting the perplexing nature of such events. Few scholars express similar concerns about the consistency of continual failure in time travel attempts, suggesting that while individual explanations may be ordinary, their collective improbability is anomalous.

Double Occupancy Paradox

A notable issue arises when a time machine attempts to return to the exact location it currently occupies. This scenario presents a collision problem, as there would be two time machines occupying the same spatiotemporal point simultaneously. However, this paradox is specific to certain forms of time travel. It does not arise in models based on Closed Timelike Curves (CTCs) or in narratives where time machines can alter both their temporal and spatial coordinates. A practical solution to avoid this issue is to ensure the time machine is in motion before activation, as Dowe suggests.[2]

Lack of Time Travelers

An often-cited objection to backward time travel is the apparent absence of time travelers in our history. However, this argument is weak for several reasons. Time travel might be prohibitively expensive, dangerous, or technically challenging. It is also possible that our present era is not deemed interesting enough to attract time travelers. Smith (1997) eloquently puts it, "The longer it takes for time machines to be invented, the more our period of history will appear to future time travelers as four o'clock on 4 March 762 appears to us—that is, fairly low down on the must-visit list".[5] Additionally, we might have already encountered time travelers but failed to recognize them, as identifying such individuals would be like finding a needle in a haystack.
Three important concepts were studied in detail and summarized in the table.

Table. Important concepts and related studies

S.No	Theme	Evidence
1	Grandfather Paradox	Originally introduced by Lewis[1] in *The paradoxes of time travel*. Discussed by various researchers including Dowe[2], Smith[5], and Garrett & Joven Joaquin[7].
2	Causal Loops	Popularized by Lewis.[1] Explored by Meyer[8] , Hanley[9] ,Mellor[10] ,Monton[11], and Dowe [12].
3	Twin Paradox	Explored by Dray[13] , Pesic[14] , Debs & Redhead[15] , Perrin [16], and Muller[17] .

Discussion

The study aimed to demystify time travel and discuss its paradoxes through a meticulous review of relevant literature.

Grandfather Paradox

The Grandfather Paradox is a well-known time travel paradox that explores the logical contradictions of interacting with one's ancestors, potentially altering one's own existence. If a time traveler kills their grandfather, they would prevent their own birth, raising the question of how they could have traveled back in time to commit the act.

Several solutions to this paradox have been proposed. One is the Novikov self-consistency principle, which suggests that any actions taken by a time traveler in the past would be self-correcting, ensuring that the timeline remains consistent. Another solution involves branching timelines or the multiverse theory, where any changes create alternate timelines, leaving the original timeline unaffected.

The Grandfather Paradox has been a topic of discussion since at least the 1940s, gaining prominence in science fiction through authors like Robert A. Heinlein and Isaac Asimov.[6] Renowned physicists such as Stephen Hawking and Kip Thorne have also engaged with the paradox in their theoretical works on spacetime.

Causal Loops

Causal loops, also known as time loops or closed timelike curves (CTCs), involve sequences of events where the outcome influences the initial conditions that led to that outcome, creating a self-referential loop with no clear origin. These loops challenge our understanding of causality and the flow of time by presenting logical inconsistencies and violations of the principle that cause precedes effect.

One famous example is the bootstrap paradox, where an object or information is sent back in time and becomes the cause of its own existence. This creates an infinite loop with no clear starting point. For instance, imagine a time traveler giving a famous composer a sheet of music from the future. The composer then takes credit for composing it, leading to the creation of the very same sheet of music that the time traveler brought back.

David Lewis provides an illustrative example of this in his discussion on time travel: "Recall the time traveler who talked to himself. He talked to himself about time travel, and in the course of the conversation, his older self told his younger self how to build a time machine. That information was available in no other way. His older self knew how because his younger self had been told and the information had been preserved by the causal processes that constitute recording, storage, and retrieval of memory traces. His younger self knew, after the conversation, because his older self had known and the information had been preserved by the causal processes that constitute telling. But where did the information come from in the first place? Why did the whole affair happen? There is simply no answer.[1]

One potential justification for causal loops is the idea that events in a loop are always determined to happen and are inescapable. This concept aligns with a deterministic view of time, where time travel does not introduce new causative elements but merely fulfills what was already destined to occur.

Another solution lies in the concept of parallel universes and the multiverse theory. If time travel leads to the creation of alternate timelines, causal loops might occur within those separate realities, avoiding the need to reconcile contradictions within a single timeline. David Deutsch and others, have explored these ideas, suggesting that traversable wormholes could theoretically allow for time travel without leading to paradoxes.[4,]

Twin Paradox

The Twin Paradox is a thought experiment in the theory of relativity that explores the effects of time dilation on two individuals who undergo different journeys at high speeds, resulting in a difference in their ages upon reunion. This paradox is resolved within the framework of special relativity and does not violate the theory's principles.

The causes of the Twin Paradox lie in the time dilation effect predicted by Albert Einstein's theory of special relativity. According to this theory, time passes more slowly for an object or observer moving at a significant fraction of the speed of light relative to another stationary observer. In the Twin Paradox, one twin stays on Earth (the stationary observer), while the other twin embarks on a space journey at a high velocity close to the speed of light. Upon returning to Earth, the traveling twin would have aged less than their sibling due to the time dilation experienced during the high-speed journey.

The resolution to the Twin Paradox lies in the concept of asymmetry caused by the different reference frames and the acceleration experienced by the traveling twin. This can be understood as follows:

1. Initial state: At the beginning of the experiment, both twins are together on Earth, sharing the same inertial reference frame and not experiencing any acceleration.
2. Separation: One of the twins leaves Earth on a high-speed journey to a distant star and then returns, experiencing acceleration when departing from and returning to Earth.
3. Acceleration breaks symmetry: The key to resolving the paradox is recognizing that the traveling twin experiences acceleration, while the twin on Earth remains in a non-accelerating reference frame. Acceleration breaks the symmetry between the two twins' experiences.
4. Non-inertial frame: Due to acceleration, the traveling twin's frame of reference is non-inertial (accelerating), while the twin on Earth remains in an inertial (non-accelerating) frame.
5. Time dilation during acceleration: According to special relativity, time dilation occurs only in inertial reference frames. Therefore, the traveling twin experiences time dilation during the periods of acceleration, but the twin on Earth does not.
6. Different aging rates: As a result of the time dilation experienced during acceleration, the traveling twin ages more slowly than the twin on Earth during the journey. However, once the traveling twin returns to Earth and both twins are reunited, their clocks are back in the same inertial frame, and there is no longer any asymmetry in their aging rates.

Thus, the Twin Paradox is not a true paradox or a violation of the principles of special relativity. The apparent paradox arises due to a misunderstanding of the symmetry of the situation. When the acceleration experienced by the traveling twin is taken into account, the time dilation effect is consistent with the theory of relativity, and there is no contradiction.

Time Travel in Fiction

Time travel has been a popular and captivating theme in fiction for centuries, allowing writers, filmmakers, and creators to explore the complexities of temporal manipulation and its consequences. The concept of time travel in fiction can be traced back to ancient myths and folklore, but it gained significant prominence during the 19th and 20th centuries.

One of the earliest literary works to feature time travel is "Rip Van Winkle," a short story written by Washington Irving in 1819. Although not a traditional time travel tale, the protagonist falls asleep for several decades and wakes up in a vastly changed world, showcasing elements of time displacement.

The pioneering novel "The Time Machine" by H.G. Wells, published in 1895, is often considered the first proper time travel story. It introduced the concept of a machine that can transport a person through time, leading to adventures in both the distant future and the distant past.

Throughout the 20th century, time travel became a prominent theme in science fiction literature. Notable works include "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" by Mark Twain, "Slaughterhouse-Five" by Kurt Vonnegut, and "Doomsday Book" by Connie Willis, among many others. These stories explore the impact of time travel on individuals and societies, blending science fiction with historical and social commentary.

In the realm of film, time travel became a captivating storytelling device in the mid-20th century. "The Time Machine" (1960), directed by George Pal and based on H.G. Wells' novel, brought the concept to a wider audience. However, it was the "Back to the Future" trilogy (1985-1990), directed by Robert Zemeckis, that solidified time travel as a major theme in popular culture. The films blended adventure, comedy, and drama as the protagonist, Marty McFly, navigates through time using a DeLorean car converted into a time machine.

Television series like "Doctor Who," which first aired in 1963, contributed significantly to the popularity of time travel in fiction. The long-running show follows the Doctor, an alien time traveler, as they explore the universe and visit various points in history.

In recent years, time travel has continued to inspire numerous works across different media. Christopher Nolan's film "Interstellar" (2014) incorporates time dilation and relativistic effects during space travel, resulting in characters experiencing different rates of time. TV shows like "Stranger Things" and "Dark" explore intricate time travel plots and temporal paradoxes, captivating audiences with their suspense.

Conclusion

This research paper aimed to explore the intriguing concept of time travel, delve into its paradoxical nature, and ascertain whether it is possible. While various theoretical models allow for the potential existence of closed timelike curves and the manipulation of spacetime, the resolution of paradoxes remains elusive. Many theories propose the idea of parallel universes, multiple timelines, or self-consistency principles, yet definitive answers still elude our grasp. The uncertainties inherent in time travel further emphasize the importance of continued research in this field to unravel the mysteries of the universe.

Data was collected qualitatively through a methodical literature review of papers on similar topics. This analysis revealed ubiquitous themes, including the famous Grandfather Paradox, which argues against the possibility of time travel. Another major theme was Causal Loops or Closed Timelike Curves (CTCs), which pose significant challenges to our understanding of causality and backward causation. The Twin Paradox, though not a true paradox, presents an interesting concept of asymmetry caused by different reference frames based on Einstein’s Special Relativity. Lastly, the importance of Time Travel in Fiction was discussed, highlighting how media exposure influences our perception of time travel.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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