

MOTIVATION

Opportunity knocks.

BY ROSS CLONEY

Tuesday the 14th, six in the morning and I woke up to find my 16-year-old self at the foot of my bed.

"I'm really sorry." She sniffed and then wiped her nose on her sleeve. "They said I really should do this as soon as I arrived."

"They?" I cautiously sat up in bed and glanced around. Aside from the impossible right in front of me, everything else seemed perfectly normal.

She looked off into the middle distance like she was dragging up a buried memory. "The... um... the Buddhist and the Nietzschean arguing at the end of the Universe."

I stared blankly. This must be a stress dream. A stalled research programme, an empty bank account and no idea of what to do with my future.

No wonder I was dreaming about me at 16, looking just like I did when I first knew I wanted to be a physicist.

"There's a Buddhist at the end of the Universe?" The question was out of my mouth before I realized how insane it sounded.

My younger self sat on the edge of the bed. She was seeming more focused now.

"What you would recognize as a Buddhist. And a follower of what you would ascribe to Nietzsche. The last two viewpoints left after all the others fell away, eroded by time. They say this meeting is very important."

"So... there are only two people left?" Part of me wondered why I was interrogating a dream.

The focus in her eyes was intense now. "They are not singular entities. They... we are amalgamations of vast numbers of individuals, species, societies. Sentient worldviews, omega-level cultures at the very summit of technological progress."

My mouth soundlessly repeated what she said. This was straight out of the science fiction I used to read.

Although that never mentioned Buddhists.

"And you want to talk to me?"

"We have as best we can stalled the end of existence but we cannot slow the heat death any longer. The dharma wheel wobbles on its axis. The will to power no longer has fresh ground to impress itself upon. Change is ceasing. And for all our aeons of arguing, we agree that this is undesirable. The forced

would consider the observable Universe with varying degrees of direct or violent persuasion. To outside observers they would appear simultaneous."

"Oh." I suddenly felt very small and a little threatened. Then that phrase drifted back to me. *To outside observers.*

"Besides, the heat death cannot be avoided. This Universe will end. We seek a way to keep the wheel of dharma turning. To find a new will to power."

"I don't understand... you're not trying to alter the past to avoid your fate?"

"We are the summation of all that has come before but we are limited to our own timeline as much as you are. We cannot change the past. All that has happened has happened. But not all that has occurred has happened."

I looked at my younger self. *Not all that has occurred has happened.*

cessation of samsara does not automatically earn nirvana. Nonexistence is the antithesis of life affirming."

"And what does this have to do with me?" My suspicion and disbelief were steadily being overcome by curiosity. The bed felt firm beneath me, the air from the window had an autumnal chill to it. If this was a dream, it was the most vivid one I had ever had.

My younger self turned her head to look at my desk. She even had those stupid star earrings I wore until undergrad. Although hers were red, not the blue I remember having.

"You were writing a very interesting paper." There it was, same place it had been for months, before the funding dried up and my motivation with it. 'Is a multiverse needed? New interpretations of old problems.' It wasn't even what the grant was on, just a thought game I had been playing around with.

"So something about my research is, or will be, key to stopping the heat death of the Universe?"

She smiled at me. "In the singular no. We are making three million four hundred and sixty-two thousand nine hundred and twelve interventions across a period of roughly 1 billion years and a span of 63.7% of what you

Understanding was right at the edge of my awareness. Had I no memory of this meeting because it hadn't happened in the timeline of my past?

"You're trying to create... alternatives? You can't change the past but you can try to create divergent timelines, some of which will have a way for you to... escape."

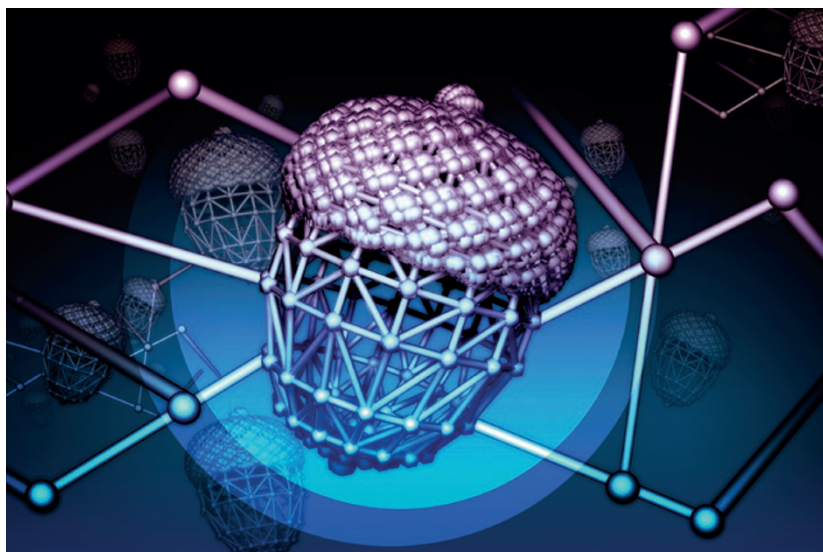
"There is one timeline but much potential. We can stitch what could have been onto what is. For a while. But even a moment would be enough to start a new cycle."

My alternate stood up, smoothed out her dress and walked to the window. She was looking pale, almost immaterial. How long could a god-level-civilization-entity keep timelines stitched together?

"I still don't understand what my role in this is," I said.

"The same role an acorn plays in a forest," she said, smiling. Then a gust of wind and she was dust, slowly settling on the half-finished manuscript on my desk. ■

Ross Cloney is a postdoctoral fellow based in Brighton, UK, working in genome stability. In his spare time he wants to clone dinosaurs for a completely original idea he's had for a theme park.



JACEY