

AFTER EXPERIMENT SEVEN

Parallel processing.

BY MICHAEL W. LUCHT

Experiment 6. Apparatus: Smith & Wesson Model 13.' Having written thus, Professor Hillabin began searching for the gun among the piles of books, papers and assignments. His students believed him to be disorganized — Hah! — little realizing that the mess afforded perfect concealment. Besides the gun, it presently occluded vials of cyanide, assorted knives, a parrot and even an electric chair. If the vice-chancellor found out, she would throw a fit — especially about the parrot. Faculty policy strictly prohibited pets in academic offices.

Eventually, Hillabin unearthed the weapon from beneath a pile of decaying term papers. After meticulously filling the chambers with bullets, he faced a problem. His methodology required him to test it, but a gunshot might be noticed, even in the philosophy department. He glanced at his watch; it was past 11 p.m.. Deciding to risk it, he pointed the gun at the wall, aiming between a soaring stack of old journals and an even taller tower of unmarked exam papers.

Missing the gap, the thunderous bang was accompanied by a cloud of confetti. Oh well, only exam papers...

Hillabin had barely replaced the spent shell when Professor Forthington stormed in. "Hillabin! What the hell are you up to now? You've ruined my desk!"

Hillabin reflected on his bad luck that his neighbour, famous for heading home on the dot ever since the great philosophers' strike of '00, had selected this of all nights to work late.

He carefully recorded 'Apparatus working' in his notebook before glancing up. "Sorry old *chum*. I'm conducting a series of quantum suicide experiments."

"Sounds positively ghastly! Why don't you do some real work on Kierkegaard's spiritual angst?"

Hillabin sighed. It was hell for an experimental metaphysicist to have an existentialist as a neighbour. "I am probing," he said, trying not to sound excessively pompous, "the nature of reality!"

"Yeah, I'm sure people will find that enormously helpful when dealing with the general meaninglessness of life." Bug-eyed, Forthington stared at the gun. "So, you're trying to kill yourself then?"

"Quantum *suicide* — duh!" Hillabin replied, using the vernacular of his students. Forthington raised an eyebrow. "May I watch?"



"Why not?" Hillabin shrugged, placing the barrel in his mouth.

"Wait!"

"What?" Hillabin asked, gagging.

"Any last words?"

Rather than dignifying the question with an answer, Hillabin pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked — and that was about it.

"See?" Hillabin asked triumphantly.

"I don't know." Forthington pinched his lower lip. "Could be a fluke."

"That's the whole point!" However, to strengthen the result, Hillabin pulled the trigger five more times, producing five more clicks. He turned the gun around. When he again aimed at the wall, the gun emptied without a hitch.

Forthington's initial reaction was to scream: "My poor office!" followed in rapid succession by: "That's amazing."

"It sure is," Hillabin agreed, recording 'Success' in his notebook.

Flipping to the next page, he wrote: 'Experiment 7. Apparatus: Cyanide.' Hillabin uncorked one of the small vials, poured a drop into a tiny bowl and offered it to his parrot. A pity, really, but Hillabin had to eliminate the possibility that the chemistry department had appeased him with some harmless liquid. It had been known to happen.

But not this time. The parrot, stressed by the loud bangs, badly needed a drink. Ten seconds later, it keeled over.

"It's dead," Hillabin muttered.

"No, it's not!" Forthington retorted instantly.

As much as he enjoyed gratuitous Monty Python references, Hillabin was

beginning to suspect that his colleague was not treating his work with the gravity it deserved. As there was not much to be done about that right now, he downed the poison in one gulp and leaned back on his chair. After five minutes, he wrote 'Success. Probably survived due to some peculiar immunity. Must remember to ask a biologist.'

"So, you really can't commit suicide?"

Forthington asked.

"Not just me. Nobody!"

"Really? Wow!" For once, Forthington looked impressed. "You know, this is so remarkable. Who would have thought? I almost wish that I could give it a try."

Hillabin reloaded the revolver and held it out. "Be my guest."

"Oh, I don't know."

Hillabin once more tried shooting himself, with the same result as before. "This is exactly what you will observe. I guarantee it." He again held out the gun.

"Well, in that case..." With his arm shaking, Forthington finally took the weapon and aimed it at his head. "Should I really?" he asked, sweating.

"Don't be such a logical positivist!"

The shot killed Forthington instantly, making the huge mess in Hillabin's office significantly less palatable.

Despite this, Hillabin was pleased with the progress achieved that day. He had successfully established that the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics was correct. Each time he had tried killing himself, the universe forked into many. In the bulk of them he died. However, as it stood to reason that he could not observe universes in which he did not exist, his consciousness — his point of view, if you will — would always find itself in a universe in which he had survived, no matter how unlikely the odds.

Looking down on Forthington's body, Professor Hillabin felt an unanticipated tinge of guilt. Should he have told him that in the vast majority of universes he would die? Surely, even he must have known?

Then again, did it matter? In at least one parallel universe, Forthington was no doubt already annoying another version of Hillabin by going on and on about how amazing it was that he still lived.

But not in this universe, thank God. Shrugging, Hillabin dialled security. ■

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