



Dear Uncle Mike,  
What do you think happens when you die?  
Erin R., Portland

Dear Erin,  
Not much, if you listen to some people. Uncle Mike doesn't. Uncle Mike is a closet quantum physicist and, having seen no evidence of death in the physical world, sees

no reason to buy into the notion of grim reapers. No, Uncle Mike is not a nitwit. He knows full well that, one sunny day, he'll drop in his tracks like a pole-axed steer. Uncle Mike doesn't see this as death. He sees this as recycling.

When pondering the Great Beyond and our place in it, Erin, you never want to forget the conservation of mass/energy. In the big picture (a universe that's both closed and unbounded), nothing is lost and nothing is gained. Physical systems (our bodies among them) deteriorate and lose integrity, their little quantum components cease to work in concert and go their separate ways. Uncle Mike can't bring himself to see this as tragedy.

Here's the real question: when we say "I", what do we mean? Is there something about us that isn't our body? Something that's in the world but not of it? Of the many ways to frame this question, Uncle Mike's favorite is von Neumann's Chain.

John von Neumann invented the logic behind the stored program computer, which is to say the computer as we know it. A quantum physicist of the first rank, he also coined cybernetics and game theory and wrote the text often referred to as 'the quantum Bible'. One day, John von Neumann set out to find where the universe comes from; to answer the question, why is there anything?

It's by no means an idle question. Quantum Physics, the most successful idea in the history of science, rests on the quantum effect. Simply put, the physical world manifests itself in discrete bits: the quanta. The photon, electron, proton, neutron and neutrino combine to form all that is and their interactions as the forces of nature. The universe arises from difference. Von Neumann's question was, where does difference arise? Why is there a universe?

The equations of quantum physics make several things very clear. Among them is this: observed reality, that which is, is an insignificant fraction of all that might have been. The universe of our perceptions is a thin foam of object/events on the surface of a limitless sea of unmanifest probabilities. At any point in space/time, a vast array of possible realities exist, some of them more likely than others.

In order for there to be anything, all possible somethings but the one that's there must somehow disappear, the likelihood of their occurrence reduced to zero by some statistical deus ex machina: the god, or the ghost, in the machine. Quantum physics calls this event (the birth of the universe on a point scale) the collapse of probabilities. Von Neumann's question was this: What triggers the collapse of what might be into what is? What is it that makes something of nothing?

To find out, von Neumann built a mental schematic of quantum reality now called von Neumann's Chain. The chain consists of three links; a source, a signal, and a receiver. Von Neumann could imagine no simpler system since, if you remove any of these links, nothing in the way of observed reality can occur. The trouble is, there's nothing unique about the links. At bottom, they're made of the same unmanifest probabilities (von Neumann called it 'quantum stuff') as everything else. At the level of deep reality (the potential world behind this one), source, signal, and receiver are one.

Bear with Uncle Mike, Erin, there really is a point to all this.

Try as he might, von Neumann could find no preferred, or even possible site on the quantum chain for the collapse of probabilities to occur. With the source? Just probabilities. With the signal? More of the same. The receiver (observer)? Not even there. Nowhere in observable reality is there a place for difference to arise. And, without difference, the distinction between one thing and another, nothing exists but the unbroken sameness of 'no thing'.

What von Neumann concluded from this is pretty interesting stuff: whatever it is that collapses unmanifest possibility into the universe we perceive, it is not and cannot be part of observable reality. Not just observed reality, but observable reality. Whatever transforms what might be into what is, it isn't part of what is. When the man who invented quantum logic asked himself what, if anything, lies outside the perceptual universe, he could think of only one thing: Consciousness.

Okay, Erin, we're nearly there.

If we go with von Neumann's conclusion (and, try as it might, current theory has found no way around it), then the universe arises from, and is the creation of, consciousness. It stands to reason that, in order for the universe to exist fully (as, by the way, a four-dimensional hypersphere), its probabilities must be collapsed into reality at every point in space/time. This means that, in order to come into being, the universe must be at all points conscious.

Which brings us back to death. Or, more correctly, to Uncle Mike's definition of the personal pronoun 'I'. To Uncle Mike, we're all point conscious perspectives: unique vantage points of an endless act of creation. If one of these perspectives (yours, for instance) were to disappear (where to, God only knows), some portion of the universal geometry would cease to exist and the entire framework of space/time would collapse.

So, Erin, what happens when we die? We die. But death? No disrespect to priests and undertakers, but the equations just don't allow for it.

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