James Gleick  

James Gleick is right. “Time Travel is sexy.” Time travel is one of those rare topics that not only bridges disciplines but captures the interest of the full range of academic training. This, of course, has led to a vast amount of time travel themes in literature, philosophy, psychology, and physics. In physics, for example, there are good examples of time travel being studied as a serious theoretical topic and as a way to teach, and lure, the uninitiated to consider and study physics. As in other disciplines, these books stay mostly focused on the impact that the discipline can have on understanding time travel and how the possible existence of time travel might affect one’s thinking. Gleick does not take this approach.

Fans of Gleick’s writing, of which I am one, appreciate his ability to clearly explain complex and far-reaching scientific concepts. But, he does much more than that. In *The Information* and *Chaos*, for example, he interweaves historical and biographical information in a way that shows how science is a human and cultural endeavor. With *Time Travel*, Gleick has stepped this up significantly. To see this latest work as a discussion of time travel, as he discussed in his other works on information or chaos, misses what the book has to offer.

Starting with H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*, Gleick gives us a ride through the twentieth century that shows how modern ideas of time have shaped us in broad ways. A few thousand words cannot possibly do justice to the breadth and depth of the topics he explores and connects. And here is one of Gleick’s strengths. He doesn’t just give biographical information in parallel with the person’s accomplishments, or list similar explorations of time travel in literature, psychology, and physics. Gleick connects these in a way that gives the reader an appreciation for the complexity present.

The central topic addressed in this book is the philosophical battle between two concepts of time. Although an old debate, philosophy of time in the twentieth century has seen a pitched battle between the “Universe Rigid” camp and its opponents. Founded primarily from concepts of Einstein’s physics, the Universe Rigid followers hold that time is not real and that all temporal phenomena are constructions of minds. Alternatively known as the Block Universe, this philosophy sees ultimate reality as the coexistence of all events. What we discuss as past, present, and future are not distinguished in this model. All of the events of an individual’s life (and the Universe’s) coexist together, unchanging and eternal. Your experience of growing old and of seeing change are illusions. Believers in free will and the fundamental nature of change would obviously have objections to this.
Gleick traces the challenges and rebuttals surrounding the Universe Rigid through the web of cultural connections. In the end, this is a discussion of how our view of time and ourselves has evolved over the last century. And, as noted earlier, since justice to the breadth of the work cannot be done here, a few illustrative examples will have to do. (I find myself thinking that Gleick has produced a book that is ideal for Kronoscope readers.)

Arguably epitomizing this debate, and well presented by Gleick, is the public debate between Henri Bergson and Albert Einstein. It was Einstein’s spatialization of time that led many to argue for the unreality of becoming and thus the promotion of the Universe Rigid. Bergson, though clearly not anti-science, approached the issue of time from a psychological perspective. Briefly, Bergson’s argument leads one to realize becoming and change are necessary to how we understand what it means to be human. As developed by others as well as Bergson, it is questioned how there can be no time when the fundamental things used to characterize being human are temporal. What are we as human beings without memories or choice? Gleick traces this ongoing struggle in the arts and science and gives a compelling appeal that comes down against the Universe Rigid. And this is a fun ride.

While tracing that, Gleick offers us developmental connections to the past and some surprising tangents. My favorite of these is the discussion of time capsules. (This discussion alone was worth the read.) A creation of the last century, time capsules raise interesting questions about our culture. What is it we are trying to say to the future? Why is it that we choose certain objects for the capsule? I was most intrigued with the assumption that the capsule has any chance of surviving. If archaeology has taught me anything, it is that the chances of some object, even a capsule, lasting and being discovered is very small. This tells us something about how we view ourselves and how we think the future will view us. My reflections on Gleick’s time capsule discussion have me appreciating what I think I honestly always knew. In a few generations, I will be unknown.

Less pessimistic, and even more engaging, is Gleick’s argument that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have seen a shift in our relationship to past, present, and future. He is convincing in showing that we have all become futurists. Time capsules are symptomatic of our obsession with the future. Connected closely to the technological revolution, we are the century that is concerned primarily with what we will be doing, not with the history that beget us or what is now in front of us. Though he does contrast well what it means to personal identity to be future-centered versus past-centered, he does not solidly come down in support of a particular view. This is to our