



The End of Certainty

By Ilya Prigogine

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Time, the fundamental dimension of our existence, has fascinated artists, philosophers, and scientists of every culture and every century. All of us can remember a moment as a child when time became a personal reality, when we realized what a "year" was, or asked ourselves when "now" happened. Common sense says time moves forward, never backward, from cradle to grave. Nevertheless, Einstein said that time is an illusion. Nature's laws, as he and Newton defined them, describe a timeless, deterministic universe within which we can make predictions with complete certainty. In effect, these great physicists contended that time is reversible and thus meaningless.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In this intellectually challenging book, Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine tackles some of the difficult questions that bedevil physicists trying to provide an explanation for the world we observe. How is it, for instance, that basic principles of quantum mechanics--which lack any differentiation between forward and backward directions in time--can explain a world with an "arrow of time" headed unambiguously forward? And how do we escape classical physics' assertion that the world is deterministic? In a sometimes mathematical and frequently mind-bending book, Prigogine explores deterministic chaos, nonequilibrium thermodynamics, and even cosmology and the origin of the universe in an attempt to reach an explanation that can reconcile physical laws with subjective reality.

From [Booklist](#)

Since adolescence, Nobel laureate Prigogine has been haunted by the thorny problem of time, which has so preoccupied him that he scrawled "Time precedes existence" on a scientific memorial in Moscow. One of the founders of chaos theory, Prigogine has for decades propounded a view contrary to the assumption of temporal reversibility that is commonly accepted by theoretical physicists (ordinary folk have always been baffled by the idea that minus-t and plus-t [terms representing, respectively, time going backward and going forward] can somehow ever be the same). Although accepting relativity and the time-space continuum, Prigogine proposes a radical synthesis of Newtonian and quantum physics that is intriguing enough to reward the tough going that the book's intense concentration of formulas (on which Prigogine's arguments center) will be for most general readers. Prigogine claims that it is time's arrow that finally makes clear how probabilities become actualities and how "becoming" becomes "being." A groundbreaking work by a major figure in today's scientific revolution. *Patricia Monaghan*

From Kirkus Reviews

A Nobel Prizewinning chemist bridges science and philosophy in explaining how chaos theory shows that time is real and determinism untenable. To some, the title may misleadingly suggest a book about the hopelessness of knowing whether anything is real. In fact, Prigogine (coauthor, *Order Out of Chaos*, 1984, etc.) argues that one object of everyday belief--the irreversibility of events, or the arrow of time--is much more real than classical and quantum physics have allowed. According to Prigogine, most physicists, from Newton to Einstein to Stephen Hawking, have described the universe as deterministic and "time-symmetrical"--with the corollary that time, probability, and free will can only be illusions resulting from human ignorance. Because that view conflicts with much of philosophy and common sense, it has contributed to the alienation of science from the rest of human culture. Prigogine moves toward ending that alienation by affirming the reality of time, arguing that advances in the physics of nonequilibrium processes and unstable systems now make it possible to revise the basic laws of physics "in accordance with the open, evolving universe in which mankind lives." In passages dense with mathematics, Prigogine shows how probability and irreversibility affect particle interaction, thermodynamics, classical and quantum mechanics, and cosmology. The validity of these claims can only be judged by specialists; the general reader is given little aid in understanding them, much less in gauging how well they support the author's belief that "we are actually at the beginning of a new scientific era." But the nonmathematical sections of the book concisely outline Prigogine's brand of realism: one in which actions have meaning and creativity is prized because consequences are real and the future cannot be predicted. A blend of philosophy and physics that will stir both specialists and nonspecialists to think freshly about what is real. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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