

Einstein once said, "For we convinced physicists, the distinction between past, present, and future is only an illusion, however persistent." How would a physicist explain that statement?

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A slightly fuller context of the quote is illuminating:

Now he has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.

It appears in the context of a letter to the family of a deceased friend. So I would say that the quote is about physicists rather than about physics. It's a physicist using a bit of humor to empathize with and comfort people who are grieving.

It's not entirely without physical meaning. Time as understood by physicists is very different from the everyday notion of time. Under relativity, "the present" is different for all observers, and under quantum mechanics, it doesn't even have a precise meaning.

Under ordinary circumstances, nobody will ever notice the difference. In a time of grief, one can hang on to that difference as a source of comfort, even though it doesn't really apply here. Their grief, like their interactions with the deceased, were all at the human scale and live at that human scale.

But the quote is just a little humorous. To say that he departed "a little ahead of me" is camaraderie, acknowledging his own mortality and the universality of the grief they're feeling. It's gallows humor and whistling past the graveyard, in an attempt to deal with the human tragedy of a lost loved one.

It's not any great insight into physics, but it's a very deep understanding and compassion for human beings.

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