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Cosmology of the Wheel and the Dark One's Prison

Submitted by [Trebek the Destroyer](#)

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I'm going to try and lay out the issues that the Wheel of Time cosmology brings up in my mind. I didn't have a plan for this before I started writing, but it seems to have taken on a life of its own. I don't claim that all of this is original work, either, so if I've borrowed from you, thanks! And if I address your theory specifically to say I don't like where it leads, sorry, no offense intended.

The books imply that the Wheel is an infinite cycle, without beginning or end. Unfortunately, this conflicts with what we know of the universe we live in, which certainly appears to be winding down. There are also more local difficulties: extinction-level meteor impacts, stellar aging, and exhaustion of natural resources all dictate that the same world can't be inhabited for eternity without the equivalent of divine intervention. There are three basic possibilities: 1) our theories are wrong, and our universe can last forever; 2) the Wheel of Time universe is finite, and whoever says otherwise is just wrong; 3) the Wheel of Time universe is not our universe. Obviously since we're dealing with a fantasy series it doesn't have to be our universe, but according to RJ the third age is intended to be a possible past/future of our own world. So let's eliminate 3.

Thermodynamics is the main issue with our universe lasting forever. All closed systems ever observed tend toward entropy, and we usually assume that the universe is a closed system. However, there could conceivably be circumstances in which a closed system tended towards order, and the universe might not be a closed system. Those are random ideas that have absolutely no evidence, but we're talking fantasy. Especially with the Power around, there's no physical reason our universe couldn't last forever. Getting around proton decay might be a trick, I'm not completely clear on my m-theory. But we can worry about that in 10^{40} years. Local issues are a bit more of a problem.

Whether the timeline of the WoT universe is finite or infinite, there is certainly a cycle of history. I started out thinking that maybe that wasn't true, that crazy Ishmael (big philosopher, remember) wrote a book about it in the Age of Legends and it just became accepted as fact. But the cycle is definitely there. This is evidenced by the fact that Artur Hawkwing recognized the Dragon, and referenced fighting with and against him on occasions beyond number. "I have fought by your side times beyond number, Lews Therin, and faced you as many more."

Quote of the Moment

*My heart rises with the sun.
To the chime of swords
Blood and bloody ashes...!*

-Saldaean poem

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wotmania: feed your wheel of time add...

Short of Hawkwing lying or having false memories, neither of which we have any reason to assume, we must believe that there is some cycle to history in the Wheel of Time. If one were to assume that "times beyond number" means at least a hundred cycles, and that an age lasts 3000 years on average, we get a reasonable lower bound for the age of the cycle of about five million years.

I don't believe that any planet's natural resources could possibly last five million years in a mineable form (like Elayne's alum deposits), with at least several thousand of those years inhabited by an industrialized society. They'd all be mined out, and spread around the planet. However, we can summon up the Power once again to solve our problems. At some point in the cycle, the Power is used to bring humanity new deposits of minerals, to wipe out any significant asteroid capable of hitting Earth within the next cycle, and every few billion years, to fix up the sun. Channeling is great for insoluble problems!

(As a side note, if there's no particular significance to what planet the cycle occurs on, it's also possible that instead of fixing our own world, humanity actually Travels to an entirely new one. Moghedien implied that such travel did occur during the Age of Legends. Makes me wonder whether there are any colonies out there.)

So with channeling, there's no physical reason the WoT universe can't be infinite in both directions. However, the lack of a beginning to history causes serious issues. One is that of the Dark One's continuous attempts to escape his prison. If the Dark One can actually escape under certain realizable circumstances, then is it not reasonable that in an infinite sequence of random events, he would have already done so? The four main possibilities are that 1) the Dark One can never actually escape, and keeps trying because he a) doesn't know, or b) doesn't care; 2) the Dark One has escaped, but his escape does not permanently destroy the cycle of time, due to a) divine intervention, or b) the Dark One not actually desiring to end the cycle; 3) Events aren't random; and 4) the universe had a definite beginning, and the Dark One has only made a countable number of attempts to escape, all of which have been foiled. If we take the pronouncements that there are neither beginnings nor endings to the wheel of time to be the word of Robert Jordan on the nature of the universe he's writing about, then 4 is eliminated, leaving 1, 2, and 3.

There are several possible reasons for the Dark One to try to escape, even though it can never happen. He may not realize the impossibility of the task. Perhaps despite his immense power his memory is somehow flawed, and he can not recall the infinitude of past failures. It's also possible that even though he knows he can't escape, he finds the side-effects of the attempt desirable. Maybe he just likes death and destruction. (And a great cry of "YA THINK!?" did issue forth...)

If the Dark One can indeed escape, however, we have another set of

problems. His stated goal is to break the cycle and remake the universe to his specifications. But if that's the case, then the only ways the cycle can continue after his escape are if breaking free doesn't automatically get him his way, or if his desired structure of the universe is identical to its current one! If the escape is always undone, the wheel remade, and the Dark One re-imprisoned, then the effect is identical to his escape being impossible. Pragmatically, we can disregard this possibility. This is good, because otherwise it would bring up the question of how the Dark One could have been forcibly imprisoned by his equal in the first place, and I'd really prefer not to deal with that.

The remaining possibility is that the Dark One can escape, on the occasions he has escaped he has remade the world as he wanted, but that this new universe was identical to the old one! This would require a significant stretch of the language involved: the Dark One does want to destroy the cycle, but only so he can make it again; the wheel is without beginning, but only in the sense that it has always had a nearly identical predecessor. However, it's not totally unworkable. One theory compared this to the Dark One and the Creator playing a cosmic game, taking turns seeing who could imprison the other in creation for the longest time. The imprisonment would thus be somewhat voluntary, explaining how the Creator could imprison a being of equal power.

Given all our basic assumptions, it seems that 2b is our most likely candidate for the reality of the situation thus far. The Dark One and the Creator are playing a game, and all us little humans are only significant in a utilitarian sense. Basically, they're both really sucky gods.

However, logical as it seems, I find this solution unsatisfying. Under the above, all Rand's friends may die if he fails, but y'know, who cares, they'll come back around sooner or later. It's all happened before, and it'll happen again, no big deal. So let's add a new basic assumption: that I will find the explanation of the situation dramatically satisfying. (Hey, it's my article.) If the Dark One has already escaped an infinite number of times, but is still imprisoned, then his escape has no lasting consequence. If the Dark One can't escape or doesn't want to, then Rand's actions have no consequence. I find both unsatisfying. Therefore, the Dark One CAN escape and permanently destroy reality as we know it, but has never done so in the past, due to the actions of the Dragon. For this to be the case in a random history, he must not have made an infinite number of attempts. In that case, we can conclude that the Wheel of Time MUST have had a beginning. The opening of each book can be called a metaphor or poetic license.

Unfortunately, the idea of an infinite future has the same problem as that of an infinite past: the Dark One will eventually escape! The Dragon's actions only delay what is eventually inevitable, and the universe's unending nature guarantees its own eventual destruction.

It's a riddle. The Dragon must win, but not permanently. He must win

every time, eternally, but there must still be a chance of his losing. How can there be an eternal battle, which either side can win, but which one side always will? How can I flip a fair coin infinite times, and have it always come up heads? (Without being Mat.) I believe that the answer lies in the nature of free will.

One of the major theological debates goes as follows: if God knows what I will do before I do it, in what sense do I have free will? God knew before the creation of the world that I'd be sitting here typing this article. So how can I be said to be doing it of my own will? If I decided not to type it, would God then be wrong? Or would he simply have known that I'd never type it? Many explanations have been proposed, including from God's lack of foreknowledge, our lack of free will, and even the ability to affect the past knowledge of God. But the most consistent one has always been totally outside the box.

There are two definitions of the word "eternal". One is that something exists without end in either direction of time, like the Dark One seems to. The other, though, is that something exists totally outside of time. God didn't know what I was going to decide before creation, because for him, there is no "before". God does not sit here watching, saying "Knew you'd do that. Knew you'd do that." God does not exist in time at all. He exists outside of time, and sees all things that I have ever done or will do at a glance. I have free will, but God already sees how that shapes the future. It's difficult to explain that well, but I hope the idea got across.

The Dark One once commented to Demandred that "EVEN I CANNOT STEP OUTSIDE OF TIME". If the Dark One is unable to step outside of time, it is implied that the Dark One exists within time. This assumes that the Dark One's statement is true, and that he has no reason to lie to Demandred about his abilities, but I see no reason for him to lie at that juncture. And herein I believe we find our solution, as possibility 3 above: events aren't random.

The Creator and the Dark One once (insofar as that has meaning) both existed outside of time. Time did not exist. For whatever reason, the Creator created the Pattern and trapped the Dark One within it. The Pattern is infinite, maybe even in both directions, but the Creator is outside of time and sees all of it at once. The Pattern is woven so that there is near infinite variation, and so that there is free will. But the Creator being as uber as he is, he wove the entire infinity of the Pattern, even all the alternate worlds, in such a way that it would never happen. And the Dark One, being within time, can never know that this is the case.

The Dark One's prison is time itself. He CAN escape. But he never will.

Agree or Disagree?


 

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