

The Philosophy of Time

Lecture Three

McTaggart against the A-Series

Rob Trueman
rob.trueman@york.ac.uk

University of York

McTaggart against the A-Series

A Quick Recap

McTaggart's Little Argument

McTaggart's Big Argument

Tense and the Copula

Two Time Series

- We are looking at McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time
- This argument involves a conceptual distinction between two different time series
- **The A-Series**
 - Past — Present — Future
 - The Moon Landing is in the past, this lecture is in the present, and the Mars Landing is in the future
- **The B-Series**
 - Earlier — Later
 - The Moon Landing happened earlier than this lecture, which happened earlier than the Mars Landing

Static versus Dynamic

- The difference between the A-Series and the B-Series is that the former is dynamic, and the latter is static
- **Dynamic A-Series:** The Moon Landing was once in the future, then it became present, and now it is in the past
- **Static B-Series:** It has always been true that the Moon Landing is earlier than this lecture, and that always will be true

McTaggart's Argument for the Unreality of Time

- McTaggart's argument then has three premises:
 - (1) The reality of time requires the reality of change
 - (2) The reality of change requires the reality of the A-Series
 - (3) But, the idea of a dynamic A-Series contains a contradiction, so there can be no real A-Series

Change and the A-Series

- Last week we looked at premise (2):
 - (2) The reality of change requires the reality of the A-Series
- In a nutshell, McTaggart's justification for (2) runs as follows:
 - The B-Series is static, and so mere variation along the B-Series does not count as **change**; for **real change**, you need the dynamic A-Series
- We looked at two alternative conceptions of change, one originating with Russell and the other with Mellor
- We ended on an ambivalent note: Russell and Mellor's conceptions of change are attractive, but they also face difficulties

This Week

- In this lecture and the next, we are going to focus on premise (3):
 - (3) The idea of a dynamic A-Series contains a contradiction, so there can be no real A-Series
- As we will see, McTaggart's argument for (3) can be difficult to grasp, and at first it can even seem **obviously silly**
- However, the argument really runs very deep, and if it is fundamentally mistaken, then it will be interesting to see **where** it is mistaken

What If We Reject (2)?

- Before we get going, I want to briefly pause on the following point
- After last week, some of you may have already decided to reject premise (2) of McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time
 - (2) The reality of change requires the reality of the A-Series
- If so, you might think that you do not really need to worry about premise (3): you have already satisfied yourself that McTaggart's argument is unsound
- In a sense that is true, **but...**

What If We Reject (2)?

- Premise (3) is **still interesting**, even if we have already rejected (2)
- If McTaggart is right about (3), then the A-Series isn't real: the distinctions between past, present and future aren't **real** distinctions to be found in the objective world
- Now, without the help of premise (2), this is not enough to show that time itself isn't real, but it is still a pretty interesting conclusion

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McTaggart's Little Argument

- McTaggart's main argument against the A-Series is that it is **contradictory**
- But he also provided a less startling argument against the reality of the A-Series
- So before we look at McTaggart's big argument against the A-Series, we will take a quick look at his little one

Intrinsic or Relational?

- If the A-Series is a **real feature of the world**, then to say that an event is “present” is to attribute a real, objective property to it
- McTaggart's first question is:
 - Is this property **intrinsic**, or **relational**?
- McTaggart gently suggests that either way, this property of presentness is a bit mysterious

What the Distinction Amounts to

- **Relational property:** the property of standing in a given relation to something
 - being the son of Queen Elizabeth II
 - being the husband of Queen Elizabeth II
 - being five feet away from Queen Elizabeth II
- **Intrinsic property:** a property which an object has “in and of itself”
 - being six feet tall (?)
 - weighing 70kg (?)
 - being conscious (?)

Presentness as Intrinsic

- On this view, some events just have an intrinsic property of presentness
- Some events just “glow” with presentness, and that’s all there is to it
- This is clearly a very mysterious thing to say

Presentness as Relational

- On this view, what makes an event present is that event standing in some particular relation to some particular thing
- But what relation to what thing?
- Also, whatever the thing is, it will have to be something **outside** of time:

“the relations of the A-Series are changing relations, and no relations which are exclusively between members of the time series can ever change. Two events are exactly in the same places in the time series, relatively to one another, a million years before they take place, while each of them is taking place, and when they are a million years in the past” (McTaggart 1927 p. 19)

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McTaggart's Big Argument

- McTaggart thought that the A-Series contained a **contradiction**
- Contradictions cannot be true
- A contradictory description of the world can never be a description of how the world really is
- So if McTaggart is right, then when we describe the world using the A-terminology, like 'past', 'present' and 'future', we cannot be describing the world as it really is
- In short: the A-Series cannot be real

The A-Properties are Incompatible

- McTaggart's argument starts with the uncontroversial assumption that *past*, *present* and *future* are **incompatible** properties:
 - If *e* is present, then it is not past or future
 - If *e* is past, then it is not present or future
 - If *e* is future, then it is not past or present
- This is **obviously** true, but moreover, it **has** to be true if the A-Series is real:
 - If the A-Series is real then when an event changes its position on the A-Series this must be a **genuine change** in that event
 - That is possible only if the different A-properties are incompatible with each other

Every Event has Every A-Property

- McTaggart claims that although the A-Properties are incompatible with each other, the A-Series requires that **every** event have **every** A-property:
 - In 1980, this lecture was in the future, so it has the *future* A-property
 - Today, this lecture is in the present, so it has the *present* A-property
 - In 2020, this lecture will be in the past, so it has the *past* A-property
- So this lecture has *past*, *present* and *future*
- But those properties are incompatible, so the A-Series is contradictory!

Question

What do you think of McTaggart's argument at this point?

The Obvious Response

- So far, McTaggart's argument just looks **silly**
- The obvious response is that *past present* and *future* are incompatible in the sense that no event can have them all **at the same time**, but this lecture has these properties at **different** times
 - This lecture **was** in the future
 - This lecture **is now** in the present
 - This lecture **will be** in the past

McTaggart Begins to Counter

- Question: What do we mean by '*a* was *F*' ?
- McTaggart's Answer: '*a* is *F* in the past'
(This is not quite what McT says. He has: '*a* is *F* at a moment of past time'. But this unnecessarily complicates the discussion by adding things called 'moments')
- **IMPORTANT:** The 'is' in this '*a* is *F*' is supposed to be **tenseless**, not present tense
 - It is like the 'is' in '2 plus 2 is 4' or 'Courage is a virtue'
- The work of indicating tense has been taken out of the copula 'is', and put into the words 'in the past'

McTaggart Begins to Counter

- The same goes for all the tenses:

a was F \Rightarrow a is F in the past

a is now F \Rightarrow a is F in the present

a will be F \Rightarrow a is F in the future

Complex Tenses

This lecture **was** in the future



This lecture is in the future in the past

This lecture **is now** in the present



This lecture is in the present in the present

This lecture **will be** in the past



This lecture is in the past in the future

Complex Tenses

- More generally, rather than just having the 3 simple A-properties *past*, *present* and *future*, we have 9 complex ones:

past		past
present	in the	present
future		future

Incompatibilities

past		past
present	in the	present
future		future

- Some of these properties are compatible with each other:
 - past in the past & present in the past
 - future in the future & present in the future
- But some of these properties are **incompatible** with each other:
 - present in the present & past in the present
 - present in the present & future in the present
 - past in the present & future in the present

Every Event has Every A-Property

- But now McTaggart insists again that **every** event have **every** A-property, even though some of them are incompatible:
 - In 1980, this lecture was in the future in the present
 - Today, this lecture is in the present in the present
 - In 2020, this lecture will be in the past in the present
- So this lecture has *past in the present*, *present in the present* and *future in the present*
- But those properties are incompatible, so the A-Series is contradictory!

The Obvious Response, Again

- Again, we might want to say that this argument is silly
- This lecture has *past in the present*, *present in the present* and *future in the present* **at different times**
 - This lecture **was** in the future in the present
 - This lecture **is now** in the present in the present
 - This lecture **will be** in the past in the present

A Regress

- But now we are clearly off on an **infinite regress**
- 'was in the future in the present' becomes 'is in the future in the present in the past', and the same for all the other cases
- We will now end up with 27 complex A-properties

past				past				past
present		in the		present		in the		present
future				future				future

- Some of these properties are incompatible, but every event has all of them...

A Vicious Regress?

- Moreover, this regress looks **vicious**
- At every stage, the believer in the A-Series seems **forced** to move up to the next stage to avoid a contradiction
- At every level they run into the same contradiction again, and so they never solve it

Question

What do you think of McTaggart's argument at this point?

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McTaggart's Analysis of Tense

- The key to McTaggart's argument is the following analysis of tense:

a was F \Rightarrow a is F in the past

a is now F \Rightarrow a is F in the present

a will be F \Rightarrow a is F in the future

- It is crucial to remember that the 'is' on the right hand side of these analyses is supposed to be **tenseless**
- The tense is taken out of the copula, and is put into an expression of its own
- If we did not analyse tense in this way, then McTaggart's argument would fall at the first hurdle

Without McTaggart's Analysis of Tense

- McTaggart would try to convince us that this lecture has the A-properties *past*, *present* and *future*
- As before, we would reply that it doesn't have them all simultaneously:
 - This lecture **was** in the future
 - This lecture **is now** in the present
 - This lecture **will be** in the past
- But without McTaggart's analysis of tense, the argument stops there

Broad's Response to McTaggart

- Broad gave this kind of response to McTaggart's argument
 - See Chapter 12 of his *Examination of McTaggart's Philosophy*, vol. 2 (item 2 in the reading pack)
- For Broad, McTaggart's mistake is to think that we can express what is meant by a sentence with a **tensed** copula — *a was F* — can be equally well expressed by a sentence with a **tenseless** copula — *a is F* in the past
- Why is this a mistake? Well, it's McTaggart's own argument which shows that it is a mistake!
 - If we try to analyse tense in McTaggart's way, then you are forced into an infinite regress to avoid contradiction

How Plausible is Broad's Response?

- According to Mellor Broad's reply is fundamentally confused
(See item 4 in the reading pack, pp. 54–5)
- Mellor reminds us that according to McTaggart's opponent, the A-Series is meant to be a real feature of the world of events, not just a way we speak
- But then, why should it matter whether we express A-Properties by tensing verbs or by using expressions like 'in the past'?
- Won't we be saying exactly the same thing either way?

How Plausible is Broad's Response?

- Indeed, it seems we could imagine a language which is just like English, except all the verbs are tenseless
- Instead of tenses, we use expressions like 'in the past', in the way that McTaggart suggests
- Wouldn't that language be just as good (or bad) as English as it really is? We could translate between them with ease
- But if we **could** speak like that, then Broad's objection must be wrong
- Broad would have to say that by expressing *past* by tensing verbs, we are doing something different from expressing them with 'in the past'

Question

What do you think of Broad's response to McTaggart?

Stalemate?

- At this point you might feel a bit unsure of what to say
- On the one hand it is tempting to agree with Mellor that there would be **nothing wrong** with a language which eliminated tense and used 'in the past' etc. instead
- But then Broad will reply that there is something wrong with such a language: it leads to McTaggart's regress
- It can be hard to know who represents the lesser of two evils here: Broad or McTaggart

Tangles?

I am well aware how easy it is to talk nonsense about Time, and to mistake for arguments what are in fact merely verbal tangles. I think it is quite possible that I may have done this. I have altered my mind too often on this most perplexing subject to feel any confidence that my present opinions are either correct or well-founded. But I give them for what they are worth.

(C. E. Broad, 1938, p. 308)

Next Week

- Next week we will look at Dummett's fascinating attempt to untangle McTaggart's argument
- As we will see, this leads to an interesting connection with **presentism**

Reading for Next Week

- Read (or re-read):
 - Dummett 1960 (item 3 in the reading pack)
 - Lewis 1986 (item 5 in the reading pack)
 - Craig 1998 (item 7 in the reading pack)