

Metaphysics // Fall 2016

Handout 12

Time: Dummett

OUTLINE OF McTAGGART'S ARGUMENT. Dummett begins by sketching McTaggart's argument roughly along the lines of our presentation in Handout 11. Notice the multiplication of temporal predicates and compare it to our version.

EVENTS AND OBJECTS. Next Dummett looks at the following objection: McTaggart's argument depends on the ontology of events. For it to be stated cogently, one must assume that events are entities having properties. Yet the paradox can be stated in terms of material objects too in such a way that incompatible predicates apply to the same object, thus rendering A-series contradictory.

INDEXICALS. There is another objection which is that McTaggart's argument depends on the use of indexical ('token-reflexive') expressions such as 'now', 'here', 'I'. Using these predicates in the specification of entities we are bound to uncover a paradox, a sophism really. Tokyo is nearby far away, but far away nearby; similarly, Socrates is myself to himself, but himself to myself.

SPACES AND TIMES. But this objections from indexicals, Dummett argues, fails: there is no analogy between and space, and an A-series cannot be constructed for space. The reason seems to be that we can observe events (or objects, if you will) in space without us being located in that very space. On the other hand, any observer pretending to observe events in time must himself be in time.

There are two parts to this claim: about space and about time. Dummett gives my visual field as an example to support the first part of the claim. I observe objects in my visual field, forming visual space, but I am not part of that space. But on what grounds are we saying that? It seems that I (*I?*) stand in spatial relations to the visual objects, and this should give some reason at least to think that I inhabit the same space.

A different line of argument may involve conceivability. Couldn't I imagine a different space which I am no part of? Kant claimed he couldn't; others sometimes disagree. Often those others use quite specific conceptions of space making their disagreement easy (as when they identify space with the distribution of matter). In any case, I do not see how I can advance here on the authority of my conceiving capacities.

What of times? Here too, of course, it is quite difficult to think of alternative times. But this difficulty has no significance, unless I first show how it does not arise in the case of space.

Remark 1. As we saw, modal realism pretty much postulates alternative spaces and times, or spacetimes, undeterred by these troubles.

Remark 2. A good source for exploring this issue further is Quinton, 'Spaces and times'.

THE OPEN QUESTION. It might seem that focussing on this conceivability track and the putative disanalogy just mentioned would distract our attention from the main point of Dummett's argument. The main point is that, after a most complete description of a situation, I am still able to pose a relevant question:

Is that situation taking place now? or was it in past? or will it be in the future? (12-1)

There is, so Dummett argues, no complete description of reality unless this further question is answered. But this means there is *no* complete description, since different answers to this question are possible.

Dummett further argues that McTaggart's premiss throughout is that reality is capable of a complete description. If so, time is unreal. And yet, this conclusion is self-refuting. In effect McTaggart claims that we perceive events in a sequence we mistake as temporal (as an A-series). But what does our perception of them consist in? At the very least our perception changes as events (as objects of this perception) change. Then we have to conclude that we are perceiving events in time!

Remark 3. This last argument is way too quick. Notice how it paves the way to Dummett's own rejection of realism.

SOME COMMENTS ON THE OPEN QUESTION. Suppose I refuse to ask the open question (12-1). Or better, suppose I don't refuse, but answer that this situation is neither past, present, or future. Then, in admitting that, I am saying that the situation is not real. For example, in a fictional series of events none of them is past, present, or future. This is so, even though they can be arranged into a B-series (earlier, simultaneous-with, later). Thus the other side of the claim emerges: being part of an A-series is a criterion of being real.

Yet again, where do we stand with regard to space (pun unintended)? Cannot I ask the same question there? Why not? Why cannot I ask how far from here these events are taking place? And again, if I say that these events are neither far, nor near, why am I not entitled to conclude that these events are unreal?

YSB