Unreality of time: McTaggart (presentation)

Remark 1. Unusually, McTaggart's full name is 'John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart'. 'John McTaggart' are his given names, 'Ellis McTaggart' are his surnames. His surname at birth was 'Ellis', the last 'McTaggart' was added later. Sometimes he is referred to as 'Ellis McTaggart', but here we of course follow the by now universal tradition and only use 'McTaggart'.

THE SERIES INTRODUCED. McTaggart's argument was called 'one of the greatest philosophical arguments', and it is well to follow it slowly, and also in the order of presentation.

He begins by distinguishing two ways in which temporal positions 'appear to us'. One way is by talking about them as 'earlier' and 'later'. The other is 'past', 'present', and 'future'. And he notes that the ascriptions of the first kind are permanent: Elizabeth II's reign is earlier than Charles III's, and it will always be so. The ascriptions of the second kind are changing: Elizabeth II's reign is (in the) past, Charles III's reign is present, but will not always be so. 458

The first series is labelled 'B-series' and the second series is 'A-series'. And McTaggart now claims that the A-series is 'fundamental' to the reality of time. Because this is so, time is unreal. So there is some bug in the A-series that McTaggart will reveal to us.

Other pieces of terminology are introduced: what occurs in time, the contents of a temporal position, are called 'events'. The positions themselves are 'moments'. And what occupies any single moment are then 'pluralities of events'.

PERCEPTION OF TIME. We never perceive time unless through both series. We perceive the present events *directly*, says McTaggart. Other events are either past or present. Similarly, they are either earlier or later than the present. 458

Two comments are in order. First, perceiving present events 'directly' is not how we normally speak. I can say:

(18-1) a. Elizabeth II is now dead.

  b. Charles III is now reigning.

  c. Donald Trump is now eating a burger.

In neither of these claims it makes sense to speak of direct perception (and for different reasons). Inference and memory are involved in them as much as in the talk and thought about the past and the future.

Second, it may be that I am able to perceive past and future, not only the present. So, e.g., when I hear you speak, which of the sounds I perceive directly. Suppose you shout:

(18-2) Watch out!

It seems as though I hear the words uttered directly, or at the very least individual phonemes. So at best there is an ambiguity here: do we simply identify the present as something directly perceivable, or do we identify it independently and then add that it can be perceived directly? I suspect for McTaggart it is the latter, and then there is a problem.

ONLY B-SERIES? Suppose we treat the A-series as an illusion (as 'subjective'). Could time be characterised in terms of B-series? No, says McTaggart: for then change would be impossible. In the next several paragraphs he wishes to show this. 459

McTaggart first postulates the following proposition:

(TC) Time involves change.

Things can exist without change. But for this to be possible, there must be *other* things changing. Then we are able to say that the thing was not changing, whilst other things were.

So the question is: can there be change with only B-series? I.e. having been presented with a B-series of events, should we be able to affirm change?

McTaggart's answer is no. Queen Elizabeth's reign (El-reign) is earlier than King Charles's (Ch-reign), and as we said, has always been and will always be. So El-reign has always been, first, an event, and second, an event with a definitive position in the series.

Similarly, we cannot say that events merge. If El-reign merges into Ch-reign, then at some moment (in 2022, say) El-reign is no longer, and only Ch-reign is. But this is impossible, because we have just said that every event is assigned a permanent position in the B-series. Also, we cannot say that El-reign and Ch-reign are one big event, since this would certainly imply that there is no change (the threat of the Parmenidean being is then on us). 459–460

Also, change cannot be assigned to individual temporal positions. All such positions remain permanent in the B-series.

CHANGE REQUIRES A-SERIES. Change, if intelligible, requires that events remain events, and that, for each event, it is the *same* event before or after change. McTaggart's next crucial move is to say: the only characteristics (or properties, features) of the events that satisfy these conditions are temporal characteristics 'past', 'present', and 'future'.

Consider the event $E = \langle$the death of Queen Anne$\rangle$. As time passes, from the beginning to eternity, E does not change in any regards except in these: it was once future, then it was present, then it was past.

Having singled out these temporal characteristics, we face a difficulty: if the event E does have different characteristics at different times, and if this is what we now call 'change', then we fail our own earlier requirement that the event should be the same event in the course of change. One alternative is to say that the temporal change we now consider is extremely local: events change just in these respects. McTaggart sees no difficulty in talking this way (and recognising so-called 'Cambridge change'), but ultimately prefers to say that no change really happens—because A-series is inconsistent. This claim will be established later.

Interim conclusion again: as it requires change, time then requires A-series.

C-SERIES. B-series are temporal, says McTaggart: the predicates 'earlier' and 'later' have temporal connotations. One might balk at this idea. Don't we say that the number 2 occurs earlier in the series of natural numbers than the number 3 and later than the number 1? Yes, we do, but this talk is presumably metaphorical. Nothing is lost if we instead say 'before' or 'after'.

This kind of series (C-series) is a collection of items arranged in a certain order—that is, standing in a certain relation with each other. But the items in it are not events, since events are part of a temporal order. I am not sure how important this remark is, whether it is a merely terminological point.

McTaggart insists that B-series, unlike C-series, involves change: 'when change and time come in', C-series becomes B-series. It is not clear to me what argument McTaggart means to supply for this. Perhaps this is again an intuition. But it seems right. The terms 'earlier' and 'later', as they are actually used, are reserved for temporal order.

Change is one feature differentiating B-series and C-series. Direction is another. From the same C-series $\langle M, N, O, P \rangle$ I can get either the B-series $\langle M, N, O, P \rangle$ or the B-series $\langle P, O, N, M \rangle$. McTaggart says further that 'we equally keep to the [same C-] series in counting backward'.

Now, whatever McTaggart may have said about the C-series elsewhere (in the *Nature of Existence*), and he said a lot, what he says here is obscure. Take the C-series of the letters of alphabet. True, as already conceded, you do not say that x is *earlier* than y, unless metaphorically. It is also true that for practical purposes we often do not care if x is before or after y. Yet clearly these are two different series $\langle a, b, c, \ldots x, y, z \rangle$ and $\langle z, y, x \ldots c, b, a \rangle$. They are different for no other reason that, if the relation R arranging the elements of the series is fixed, then in the first series, e.g., xRy and $\sim yRx$, whereas in the second series it is the other way around. This is just another way of saying that R is asymmetrical.

The obscurity of McTaggart's view hinges on the meaning of direction. Direction may have a temporal connotation, in which case the complaint is that the C-series have no 'earlier' and 'later' relations. If it does not have a temporal connotation, then it amounts to the fact that the ordering relation is asymmetrical. In this sense of a direction, the series of natural numbers, of points on a line, or of alphabet letters have direction (or better, may be assigned direction).

Again, it is true that we normally understand time as having one particular direction. But what this amounts to, I think, is only that we reject alternative orderings of events. So, we say, you are free to consider the French Revolution happening before the English Revolution, and no logical contradiction can be created by this talk (perhaps as in *Benjamin Button*), but this is not how events *really* happened in time. So we privilege one ordering relation over all others, something we are disinclined to do in the case of natural numbers and points on the line.

Remark 2. This is not the end of the story: we return to the idea of C-series in the discussion of Broad (see Handout 18).

COMBINING C-SERIES AND A-SERIES. How can we get direction in C-series? We can postulate a special 'present' position in the series. We then say that all the elements before the present-position have been present, and all the element after it will be present. We need for that temporal predicates, a characteristic of A-series. And we further declare that the first collection of elements constitutes the past, the second collection constitutes the future.

We conclude that so combining A-series and C-series is sufficient to generate time, i.e. to arrange elements in the series that we can recognise as time. We do not define what past, present, and future are. We can only illustrate its notions with examples.

Now this remark may seem puzzling. Hasn't McTaggart just now defined past, present, and future by stipulating the present-position? Presumably his intention was different. The present-position itself, for it to be

'present', must first be understood. This understanding is intuitive and itself presupposes understanding of the concepts of past and future.

McTaggart further remarks the B-series is not ultimate. This is because we can obtain its relations 'earlier' and 'later' from first having C-series and then introducing the present-position. In this way the elements of C-series 'become' the elements of B-series.

TWO OBJECTIONS TO THE ESSENTIALITY OF A-SERIES. McTaggart now turns to two very interesting objec- tions. The first is this: we have temporal series in fiction—that is, we can say that there are fictional events. And it seems clear that they form B-series. Some events in fiction, i.e. in a particular work of fiction, are earlier or later than other. Yet are they in A-series? It seems not: this is the whole point of saying that they are fictional, not historical. So they are not past, future, or present. So: on one hand, they are in time, but on the other hand, they are not in any A-series. So: A-series is not essential for characterising time.

McTaggart's response is this. We imagine fictional events to take place in time. So we imagine them to be in A-series. Yet we do not believe them to be in time—precisely because they are fictional. So we do not believe them to be in any A-series. But has the objection been answered?

The second objection: there can be different, independent A-series. That is, there can be different pasts, presents, and futures arranged in different series. The emphasis here is on 'independent'. In a sense, there are different A-series in a single reality, since each is characterised by the different present-positions. But they are not independent. The contents of each position are the same; the only difference is in temporal predicates assigned to them. The objector here, however, has in mind another idea. Suppose two A-series are of such kind that in one of them x is past and y is future, while in the other y is future and x is past. Or suppose, less controversially, that no events of the first series are in the second, and *vice versa*. Yet both are describable as A-series.

In a way this objection echoes the first. We could say that, given these assumptions, one series is real and the other fictional. Or perhaps both are fictional. In no case we are prepared to say that both are real. You can *imagine* them to be real, but nothing entitles you to believe in their reality.

McTaggart's main response is different. He claims that, provided there are any A-series, there will be *a* time, but not *the* time. This is not an objection against the essentiality of A-series, either for a time or the time.

Remark 3. We return to the last objection when we discuss Quinton's article.

Remark 4. For the rest of McTaggart's discussion see Handout 19.

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