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Self-Reverentially Coherent Theory of Time: An Examination of McTaggart's Argument for the Unreality of Time

Christopher Porter

Introduction

McTaggart's Paradox, which is the focus of this paper, is laid out by J. Mct. E. McTaggart in his famous article on time in the larger work of *The Nature of Existence*. In it, he proposes two things that, according to him, prove the unreality of time. The first is that an A-series of time (distinguished from a B-series of time) is an essential characteristic of time itself.¹ The second charge presented is that an A-series of time inherently produces a contradiction.² For McTaggart, "past, present, and future are incompatible determinations. Every event must be one or the other, but no event can be more than one."³ However, as we shall see, it appears

¹ J. Mct. E. McTaggart, "Time: An Excerpt from *The Nature of Existence*," In *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, edited by Peter Van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman, 116-23. 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008) 121.

² McTaggart, 123.

³ Ibid, 121.

that each event will have at least two (if not all three) of the determinations. To solve this, McTaggart claims we must rely upon an infinite of increasing complexity in our determinate descriptors.⁴ This constitutes a contradiction for McTaggart that logically leads to the conclusion that time is unreal.

McTaggart's Paradox

Throughout this paper I will use the following premise/conclusion layout of McTaggart's argument:

- 1) An A-series of time is essential to time.
- 2) An A-series of time produces a contradiction.
- 3) Time is unreal.

The contradiction arises that (call them x and y) if x is y then x has the characteristic of being present at the present moment, as well as being past at a future moment, and future at a past moment.⁵ I do not, nor intend to dispute McTaggart on this point, however, it is what follows this where I begin to take issue with McTaggart's argument. He continues on: "But every moment... is both past, present, and future."⁶ From here he extrapolates that "If M is present, there is no moment of past time at which it is past. But the moments of future time, in which

⁴ Ibid, 122.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

it is past, are equally moments of past time, in which it cannot be past.”⁷ This is McTaggart’s Paradox and what follows are various authors attempting to explain, restructure, or simply criticize McTaggart’s argument. After their analysis, I shall offer my own.

Dummett

Michael Dummett attempts to, as his article implies, present “A Defense of McTaggart’s Proof”. Whether or not he is successful is to be seen, but I believe Dummett does add some important considerations to McTaggart’s argument. First, when considering the various determinations and the possible infinite regress, instead of dealing with lengthy examples such as event M is “present in the present in the present in the... in the present”, we can say that it is logically equivalent to say that M is present.⁸ This demonstrates that, “...if there is a contradiction connected with the predicates of the first level, the contradiction is not removed by ascending in the hierarchy.”⁹ Second, Dummett claims that 2) depends upon 1) for its validity.¹⁰ Brian Garrett will, in his article refuting Dummett, note that this claim is odd given that, if true, it implies that the contradiction in the A-series is based on

⁷ McTaggart, 122.

⁸ Michael Dummett, "A Defense of McTaggart's Proof of the Unreality of Time," *The Philosophical Review* 69, no. 4 (1960): 498.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 500.

the *existence* of the A-series. Again, Garrett believes that this is an odd rendering of the two parts, but it nonetheless gives us insight into how the argument for and against the contradiction in the A-series begins to build. In addition to the previous points, Dummett claims that McTaggart assumes a complete description of reality, which Garrett defines as one which, “leaves out no truth and which is free of tensed expressions, such as “past”, “present”, and “future”.”¹¹ This point is contested by Garrett quite strongly, so I will not dwell on it much past noting that, if true, it would add some weight to McTaggart’s argument for an attempt to explain the determinates with non-temporal copulas.

Garrett

Brian Garrett further develops the notions surrounding McTaggart’s Paradox. To begin Garrett notes that for McTaggart to be correct the B-series of time is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for time; while the A-series is both a necessary and sufficient condition for time. This is a fascinating proposition; one which I would not accept at first because there would appear to be an intrinsic necessity to keep the A-series and B-series connected together in order to explain time. However, James Frederick and William Rowe in their article *Time and Change* talk about, well, this very relationship of time and change which would

¹¹ Brian Garrett, “Time, Space, Dummett and McTaggart,” *Metaphysica: International Journal for Ontology and Metaphysics* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 65.

seem to have direct implications here. Frederick and Rowe believe that McTaggart holds to a view that time and change are one and the same which is why he requires that the B-series be incapable of explaining time. However, let us assume for a moment that Frederick and Rowe's argument is correct that, "As change thus requires time, it cannot be the basis for time itself."¹² This would imply the following:

A) If change exists, then time exists.

From previously though we can say that

B) If time exists, then A-series of time exists.

And

C) If A-series of time exists, then time exists.

It should also be noted that the A-series *is* essentially defined by change. In this way it would appear that A) and C) are equivalent, and given that it is obviously impossible to have time without the A-series (such that B) is required) we are bound to say that time and change are one and the same, thus validating McTaggart's notion.

Broad

¹² James Frederick and William Rowe, "Time and Change," *Philosophical Forum* 48, no. 2 (June 1, 2017): 207.

Finally, the last offer I would like to look at, and the one with the most substantial contributions to our analysis of the A-series contradiction aspect of the paradox, is that of C. D. Broad. Broad offers us a definition of how McTaggart assigns the various determinants to an entity, which will later develop into the contradictions. He says, “*S has been P* means ‘There is a moment *t* such that *S* has *P* at *t* and *t* is past.’”¹³ This applies to any temporal copulas, whether *is*, *will be*, *has been*, etc. Now, Broad’s article is, in essence, a criticism of McTaggart’s and we shall begin to move into our full attempt to show that there is, in fact, no contradiction within an A-series of time.

Broad’s first and most blatant criticism is that he does not see a contradiction. For Broad, “pastness, presentness, and futurity are incompatible predicates, this is true only in the sense that no one term could have two of them simultaneously or timelessly.”¹⁴ McTaggart, by contrast, saw them as incompatible under any circumstances. This first criticism by Broad leads directly into the second; there is no need to begin an infinite regress because there is no contradiction to begin with.

¹³ C. D. Broad, "McTaggart's Arguments against the Reality of Time: an Excerpt from Examination of McTaggart's Philosophy," In *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, edited by Peter Van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 125.

¹⁴ Broad, 126-127.

Third, Broad addresses McTaggart's use (or lack thereof) of temporal copulas. For McTaggart, it is vital that we be able to explain a sentence without the use of temporal copulas which were the source of the infinite regresses.¹⁵ Broad, however, finds this to be a frivolous move that retards our explanation of sentences in an unnecessary way. For example, if I were to tell my friend to describe a colorful sunset to me in detail, but do so without referencing colors, my friend would likely be lost and left describing an only half real sunset. The definitional example Broad attributes to McTaggart for "S *has been* P" seems to only be developed so because of an attempt to define it without the temporal copula of *has been*.¹⁶ Now, consider, Broad believes that we have no need to explain these things with non-temporal copulas, but if we remove them in favor of the definition provided previously, then we are left with a new need to explain such definitions in terms of temporal copulas. It appears that such a definition would create a problem in order to solve it.

Analysis

After having examined all of the arguments for and against McTaggart's theory I will present my own analysis of why no contradiction arises. To begin, let me remind the reader of McTaggart's extrapolation that I take issue with. "If M is present, there is no moment of past time at which it is past. But the moments of

¹⁵ Ibid 127.

¹⁶ Ibid.

future time, in which it is past, are equally moments of past time, in which it cannot be past.”¹⁷ I believe we should accept that if *M* is present that given any moment in the past *M* is not past. However, what follows does not seem to be coherent. A future moment *t* at which *M* is past will eventually become a moment of the past, but it does not follow that when *t* becomes past that *M* cannot be in the past for *t*. In fact, the opposite seems true, it is clearer that when *t* becomes past, *M* shall have become even further past.

I would submit that McTaggart’s “contradictions” claim their status as contradictions without regard to a fundamental principle of the universe, relativity. It has been shown by Einstein that time does not travel at the same speed for everyone, but is relative to your position and speed compared to what you are observing. This does not mean that the two different measurements of time contradict one another, but merely that relative to their observation positions different statements are true. In the same way, I feel that the contradictions presented by McTaggart disregard relativity to the timeline. Even if we were to say that there is no time, we must still, I believe, accept that there are moments. These moments must be in relation to one another in some way. The way in which they relate, at the least, is to reference the other point. If I metaphorically “stand” on *t* I can look and make statements about either the futurity or pastness of *M*, but if I

¹⁷ McTaggart, 122.

stand on *M* I can make radically different statements about presentness or otherwise of *M*. These statements are not at odds with each other because they each are made *on* a different relative position. In this way, I do not have to enter McTaggart's regress because I am not attempting to explain a contradiction by stacking determinates, but merely to more deeply describe from what relative position I am explaining a certain point.

Conclusion

McTaggart's Paradox is a topic which certainly piques the interest of curious philosophers; however, with Broad, I would have to say that McTaggart's claims result in nothing more than an empty "howler" that at first seem to hold water, but after a while starts to run dry and we are stuck looking for what went wrong. The attempt to limit the temporal copulas used when describing entities seems to undermine the very notion of what the copulas stood for in the first place, and the use of an infinite regress merely becomes a side effect of the assumption of a contradiction. I hope that I have been able to show that the determinates are not merely static adjectives that cannot be used overlapping, but rather are dynamic adjectives that can mean many different things relative to their specific vantage points. In the end even if 1) is correct, Dummett is wrong to assume that 1) holds the crux of McTaggart's Paradox, when it can be shown that 2) does not hold up on its own, and thus the Paradox fails to prove the unreality of time.

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