

**Phil 420: *Metaphysics*  
Spring 2008**

**[Handout 17]**

**J. M. E. McTaggart: *Time* (1908)**

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**§ McTaggart's Main Claims**

- 1. Nothing that exists can be temporal – nothing existent can possess the characteristic of being in time.**
- 2. There is in fact no time; time is unreal.**
- 3. The appearance of temporal order is mere appearance.**

**The Shocking Claim:**

- We have no experience which does not appear to be temporal.**
- But time is unreal.**
- Hence, our experience is illusory.**

**Part I. The A-series of Time is what makes time possible.**


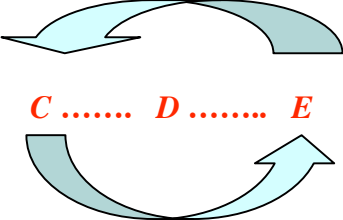
**Positions in Time**

**[A]. Past, Present, Future**

\_\_\_ For the sake of brevity I shall give the name of the A series to that series of positions which runs from the far past through the near past of the present, and then from the present through the near future to the far future, or conversely.

**[B]. Earlier than; later than**

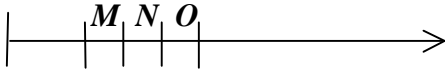
\_\_\_ The series of positions which runs from earlier to later, or conversely, I shall call the B series.

The A-series	The B-series
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>C ..... D ..... E</i></p>  <p style="text-align: center;">Past --- Present --- Future</p> <p>Past ---- Present ---- Future</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Past --- Present --- Future</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Later than</p>  <p style="text-align: center;"><i>C ..... D ..... E</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Earlier than</p>

**McTaggart's claim:**

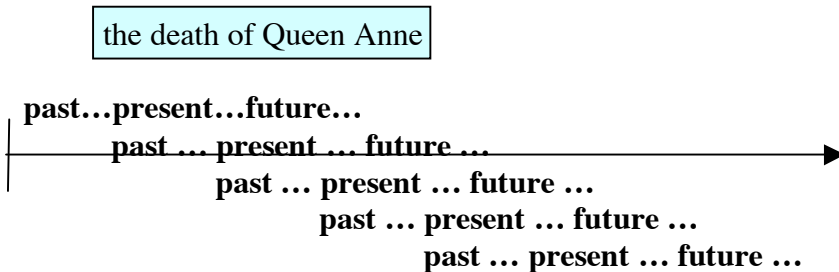
\_\_\_ the distinction of past, present, and future is as *essential* to time as the distinction of earlier and later, while in a certain sense it may... be regarded as more *fundamental* than the distinction of earlier and later.

**§ First Argument: There can be no change in the B series.**



1. The contents of any position in time form an event. In three time segments, we have events *M*, *N*, and *O* such that *M* is earlier than *N* (*N* is later than *M*) and *N* is earlier than *O* (*O* is later than both *M* and *N*).
2. If *N* is ever earlier than *O* and later than *M*, it will always be, and has always been, earlier than *O* and later than *M*, since the relations of earlier and later are permanent.
3. In the *B* series of time (earlier than – later than), *N* will always have a position in a time-series, and always has had one.
4. Between *M* and *N*, for example, there is no moment when *M* changes into *N*, because, if *M* changed into *N* at a certain moment, then at that moment, *M* would have ceased to be *M*, and *N* would have begun to be *N*.
5. Change, then, cannot arise from an event ceasing to be an event, nor from one event changing into another.
6. Therefore, in the *B* series there can be no change possible.
7. There could be no time if nothing changed.
8. Therefore, the *B* series does not constitute time.

**§ Second Argument: Change is possible in the A series.**



1. Take an event – the death of Queen Anne, for example – and consider what changes can take place in its characteristics.
2. That it is a death, that it is the death of Ann, that it has such causes, that it has such effects – every characteristic of this sort never changes.
3. But in one respect it does change. It was once an event in the far future. It became every moment an event in the nearer future. At last it was present. Then

- it became past, and will always remain past, though every moment it becomes further and further past.
4. Therefore, there is change when time is considered as a series from past to present and to future.
  5. Therefore, change is possible in the *A* series.

### Conclusion #1:

The *B* series, therefore, is not by itself sufficient to constitute time, since time involves change.

The *B* series, however, cannot exist except as temporal, since earlier and later, which are the relations which connect its terms, are clearly time-relations. So it follows that there can be no *B* series when there is no *A* series, since without an *A* series there is no time.

### § Three Objections and McTaggart's Replies

#### 1. Russell – Past, present and future do not belong to time *per se*, but only in relation to a knowing subject.

\_\_\_ An assertion that *N* is present means that it is simultaneous with that assertion, an assertion that it is past or future means that it is earlier or later than that assertion. Thus it is only past, present, or future, in relation to some assertion.

\_\_\_ If there were no consciousness, there would be events which were earlier and later than others, but nothing would be in any sense past, present, or future. And if there were events earlier than any consciousness, those events would never be future or present, though they could be past.

\_\_\_ Therefore, an *A* series is not essential to time.

#### McTaggart's Reply:

My contention is that if we remove the *A* series from the *prima facie* nature of time, we are left with a series which is not temporal, and which does not allow change.

No fact about anything can change, unless it is a fact about its place in the *A* series. Whatever other qualities it has, it has always. But what which is future will not always be future, and that which was past was not always past.

#### 2. The possibility of non-existent time-series such as the adventures of Don Quixote.

\_\_\_ Non-existent time series can have earlier than and later than relations, but not past, present and future. In other words, this series does not form part of the *A* series. I cannot at this moment judge it to be either past, present, or future. Indeed, I know that it is none of the three. Yet, it is certainly a *B* series.

\_\_\_ Therefore, an *A* series is not essential to time.

**McTaggart's Reply:**

Time only belongs to the existent. If any reality is in time, that involves that the reality in question exists – if anything is in time, it must exist.

Now what is existent in the adventures of Don Quixote? Nothing. For the story is imaginary.

Thus the answer to the objection is that, just as far as a thing is in time, it is in the A series. If it is really in time, it is really in the A series. If it is believed to be in time, it is believed to be in the A series. If it is contemplated as being in time, it is contemplated as being in the A series.

**3. The possibility of multiple time-lines.**

\_\_\_ If time were real at all, there might be in reality several real and independent time-series. Every time-series would be real, while the distinction of past, present, and future would only have a meaning within each series, and would not, therefore, be taken as absolutely real.

\_\_\_ Of course, many points of time can be present. In each time-series many points are present, but they must be present successively. And the presents of the different time-series would not be successive, since they are not in the same time. And different presents cannot be real unless they are successive. So the different time-series, which are real, must be able to exist independently of the distinction between past, present, and future.

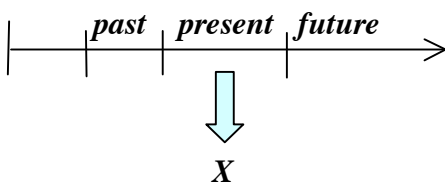
\_\_\_ Therefore, an A series is not essential to time.

**McTaggart's Reply:**

I cannot regard this objection as valid. No doubt in such a case, no present would be *the* present – it would only be the present of a certain aspect of the universe. But no time would be *the* time – it would only be the time as a certain aspect of the universe. It would be a real time-series, but I do not see that the present would be less real than the time.

**Part II. The Contradiction of the A-series**

**To show: An A series cannot exist, and that therefore time cannot exist.**



1. Past, present, and future are characteristics which we ascribe to *events*, and also to *moments* of time, if these are taken as separate realities.

**[3A] – events**

2. Past, present, and future, are relations in which events stand to something outside the time-series.
3. A series is an *A* series when each of its terms has, to an entity *X* *outside the series*, one, and only one, of three indefinable relations, pastness, presentness, and futurity.
4. This entity *X* could not itself be in time, and yet it must be such that different relations to it determines the other terms of those relations, as being past, present, or future.
5. Past, present, and future are incompatible determinations. Every event must be one or the other, but no event can be more than one.
6. But every event has them all. If *M* is past, it has been present and future. If it is future, it will be present and past. If it is present, it has been future and will be past. Thus all the three characteristics belong to each event.
7. Thus we get a contradiction.

**[3B] – moments**

8. If *M* is present, there is no moment of past time at which it is past. But the moments of future time, in which it is past, are equally moments of past time, in which it cannot be past. Again, that *M* is future and will be present and past means that *M* is future at a moment of present time, and present and past at different moments of future time. In that case it cannot be present or past at any moments of past time. But all the moments of future time, in which *M* will be present or past, are equally moments of past time.
9. And thus again we get contradiction, since the moments at which *M* has any one of the three determinations of the *A* series are also moments at which it cannot have that determination.
10. If we try to avoid this by saying of these moments that some moment, for example, is future, and will be present and past – then “is” and “will be” have the same meaning as before. Our statement, then, means that the moment in question is future at a present moment, and will be present and past at different moments of future time. This, of course, is the same difficulty once again. And so on infinitely.
11. Such an infinity is vicious.
12. Therefore, the *A*-series is self-contradictory.

**\* A sub-rebuttal based on a vicious infinite regress:**

1. **Counter-claim:** The characteristics are only incompatible when they are simultaneous, and there is no contradiction to this in the fact that each term has all of them successively.
2. **Rebuttal:** But “being successive” means that they have them in relation to terms specified as past, present, and future.
3. These again must in turn be specified as past, present and future.

4. Since this continues infinitely, the first set of terms never escapes from contradiction at all.
5. Therefore, the A-series involves a vicious infinite regress.

### **Conclusion #2:**

The reality of the A series, then, leads to a contradiction, and must be rejected.

Nothing is really earlier or later than anything else or temporally simultaneous with it. Nothing really changes. And nothing is really in time. Whenever we perceive anything in time – which is the only way in which, in our present experience, we do perceive things – we are perceiving it more or less as it really is not.

### **§ Summary: McTaggart's Master Argument**

- 1. Time involves change. There could be no time if nothing changed.**
- 2. Change is only possible in the A series – If there is no real A series, there is no real change.**
- 3. However, A-series involves a contradiction.**
- 4. Therefore, A-series is impossible.**
- 5. Therefore, change is impossible.**
- 6. Therefore, time is not real.**

Liu's reflections:

1. How would you characterize the passage of time if you do not use any of the human measurements, human perceptions or human conceptions?
2. Does time exist if there is no change whatsoever for anything?
3. What are "objective" temporal properties? If time is relative to perception, then could the same thing be both fast and slow, be both long and short in time?
4. Even if time is *real*, is it *independent of* human representations and human conceptions? (Is time *unreal* in the sense of anti-realism of time?)