

## CHAPTER 6

### The Unreality of Time : McTaggart's Paradox

McTaggart's argument<sup>1</sup> against the reality of time is quite different from the other arguments that we have discussed so far. His argument turns on the features peculiar to time, that is, on the distinction of time into past, present and future, whereas the other arguments focus on the difficulties of continuity and infinity.

McTaggart's analysis of the concept of time involves both a positive and a negative thesis. In the positive thesis he shows that we conceive of time in two fundamentally different ways<sup>2</sup> :

First, we conceive of time in a dynamic or tensed way in which events are determined as being past, present and future. But these events get continually changed in respect

of these tensed determinations. Thus what is present now becomes gradually past, while that which was future becomes present. In the process of temporal becoming past events become more and more past and future events less and less future. The event 'death of Queen Anne' was at some time in the far future, gradually it became present, and then it became past. This is to be called as the dynamic conception of time.

But we conceive of time in a static or tenseless way in which the temporal relations of precedence and succession between events are expressed in timelessly true or false statements. The statement 'The battle of Hastings occurred before the battle of Waterloo' is a **permanent truth, for the** relation 'earlier-later' is a fixed relation that can never change.

These two kinds of temporal facts have been named by McTaggart as the 'A-series' and 'B-series' of events respectively. The pastness, presentness and futurity are referred to as A-determinations and the temporal relation of precedence and succession as B-relation.

For McTaggart both the A-series and B-series of temporal facts are essential for the reality of time. As he says, "...we never observe events in the time except as forming both these orders"<sup>3</sup>. To deny the B-series is to conceive

of a time which admits of no distinction between earlier and later time - this is a conceptual absurdity. But the B-series is not sufficient for our conception of time, because with events of the B-series there is no change. For example, if P is earlier than Q, it is earlier forever. The relation of earlier and later is permanent. In McTaggart's opinion, time essentially involves change and all change occurs only in connection with the events of the A-series. So, McTaggart concludes, without the A-series there would not be any time at all<sup>4</sup>. The B series is not sufficient to constitute time for which change is so essential.

McTaggart then wants to show that the B-series logically presupposes the A-series. The temporal relation earlier than (or later than) can be defined in terms of the A-determinations of the events. If P is past, Q is present, then it is established that P is earlier than Q. McTaggart says that events having no A-determinations could not have B-relations between them.

According to McTaggart, the A-series is more fundamental. The B-series is a time series only because its member-events form an A-series of past, present and future events. If we remove the A-series from the nature of time, we are left with a non-temporal B-series, which may be termed as the C-series. The A series, McTaggart says, cannot be derived from any other series, but the B series can be derived from a union of the

A series with a C-series. The C-series here stands for a series whose generating relation is non-temporal, such as the series of integers. Let us illustrate this point : if we correlate a present event in the A-series with one of the integers such as 0, and then correlate the past and future events in the series with the negative and positive integers respectively, a B-series will be formed owing to the generating relation of earlier (or later) than between them. An event X is earlier than an event Y, if the integer with which X is correlated, is less than the one with which Y is correlated. McTaggart's analysis seeks to show that the B-series can be formed out of an A-series with a C-series; so the A-series is more fundamental<sup>5</sup>.

Having thus established the necessity of the A-series for time, McTaggart attempts to demonstrate the contradictory, and therefore, unreal nature of this series, thereby establishing the unreality of time itself. It has been pointed out by McTaggart that A-determinations are changing relations or properties of events. An event of any one of these determinations will also have the other two. But the temporal predicates, past, present and future, are incompatible and yet to every event all of them apply. Some one might reply, however, that a particular event may have all the three determinations only successively. For example, an event M has been future, will be past and is now present. But, in McTaggart's opinion, this is not at all a solution; for explaining away the alleged contradiction in the A-series we

have postulated a second-order time-series. The event has all these determinations successively at moments of time in the second-order time-series. For we are meaning that, M was future at a moment of past time, will be past at a moment of future time and is present at a moment of present time respectively. This involves either a vicious circle or a vicious infinite regress. For the second-order time-series is itself a time-series, its members which are moments of time, must also form an A-series, that is to say, must have mutually incompatible temporal determinations. In this way, in order to get rid of contradictions by reference to higher and higher orders of time series, at every step we are left with a contradictory A-series. As Gale puts it : "The curse of contradiction" pursues us down this infinite regress, like a sort of baton that each A-series passes on to the next"<sup>6</sup>.

McTaggart is a follower of the Hegelian idealistic tradition. On the idealistic principle "the real is rational and it cannot involve any contradiction. Hence reality cannot be characterised by the contradictory A-series, and since the B-series presupposes the A-series it will not do either. Time and change, McTaggart asserts, require the A-series. The unreality of the A-series, therefore, implies the unreality of time and change.

This, in short, is McTaggart's celebrated paradox of time. Subsequent philosophers of the twentieth century, in their

attempts to find a solution, felt that like the great Zenoian paradoxes McTaggart's paradox of time too admits of no simple solution.

Static and Flowing Time in the Philosophy of Iamblichus :

Iamblichus<sup>7</sup>, a neo-Platonist from Syria in the 4th century A.D., distinguished between a static and a flowing time. He relates the idea of time with the idea of a changing 'now'. It is the flowing time, he says, that is divisible into past, present and future. This conception seems very close to the modern one. The static time is elevated above the sensible world. It does not admit of the divisions into past, present and future. The idea of flow or passage does not apply to the static time. Hence it is immune to the paradox of time. Iamblichus' conception is far away from the detailed and intricate argument of McTaggart and much more Platonic. However, in McTaggart's distinction between the static and dynamic aspects of time we can hear a faint echo of Iamblichus' view.

G.E.Moore's Refutation of McTaggart's Theory of Time :

Moore<sup>8</sup> has attempted to repudiate McTaggart's theory of time by an appeal to commonsense facts. If time is unreal,

Moore contends, nothing is past, present and future, nothing is earlier or later than anything else; this amounts to saying that there are no temporal facts. But is it not true that someone is writing at the present moment on this paper? So when McTaggart says that there are no present, past and future facts, his argument entails a false statement; hence, by the rule of modus tollens his arguments can be proved to be false.

It may be remarked that Moore's argument begs the question. The reality of temporal facts is the very question at issue. Hence Moore's attempt fails to locate and hit the core of McTaggart's argument.

McTaggart's paradox of time leads us to admit, against our commonsense belief, that time is unreal. While discussing Zeno's paradoxes of motion, we found that Zeno had constructed his paradoxes with the metaphysical aim to show that reality has a timeless existence. He did know that arrows do fly and a fast runner does overtake a slow runner. Yet he wanted to show that change and becoming are illusory. Had he not been predisposed to the metaphysical aim, he would have realized that there was something wrong in his logic. Similarly, we feel that something has gone wrong in McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time. So we propose to submit it to a closer scrutiny, and to trace the underlying assumptions, if any, that led him to his cherished conclusion that time was no dimension of reality.

McTaggart's Paradox ; A Critical Review :

McTaggart's arguments appears to be based on the assumption that an event continues to be; that it never ceases to be an event. The event 'the death of Queen Anne' was always, and will always be. It changes in one respect only : it was at one time future, then at one time it became present, then it became past, and gradually will become more and more past. But the event will never cease to be.

Hence, McTaggart argues, every event must have three incompatible determinations - past, present and future. He seems to be correct in asserting that the attribution of pastness, presentness and futurity to the same event leads to a contradiction, unless they are attributed successively.

What really happens when we attribute them successively ? On the first level, it is specified that each event is past, present and future not simultaneously, but at different moments of time. On the second level, it is specified that each moment has these attributes at different higher level moments of time. It follows that none of the attributions leads to a contradiction. But McTaggart claims that since there is an infinite number of higher and higher levels of predication, the first level of predication never escapes contradiction.

McTaggart's inference should be invalid. For his premise is : The attribution of pastness, presentness and futurity to the terms of any series leads to a contradiction unless it is specified that they have them successively. From this McTaggart draws the conclusion that, the attribution of pastness, presentness and futurity to the terms of any series leads to a contradiction which is subsequently resolved by specifying that they have them successively.

But the conclusion does not follow from the premise. For the specific form of the argument is as follows :

p, unless q.

∴ p.q.

But logically 'p, unless q' does not entail 'p and q'.  
 p, unless q  $\equiv \sim p \vee q$ ; hence  $\neg (\sim p \vee q) \supset (p \cdot q)$  : this statement is contingent and not a logically necessary statement. So  $\sim p \vee q$  does not entail p.q. It might be urged, on the other hand, that the infinite regress of temporal predication, as shown in McTaggart's analysis, is a regress of analysandum and analysans; not of contradictions and resolutions. So the charge of viciousness does not stand.

McTaggart further assumes that there is a hierarchy of levels of moments, that in order for a moment to be present, it must occupy a higher level of present moment. So he indirectly admits that presentness inheres in the first-level

moment only when it is at a second-level moment, which is also present. But it would be more parsimonious to say that presentness inheres in the first level moment at present. This would mean that presentness inheres not only in the moment but also in its inherence in the moment. In this way one could avoid the infinite regress of inherence of presentness in higher and still higher levels of moments.

McTaggart has also assumed that events occupy moments. This is not a self-evident assumption, nor is it logically necessary. There is no contradiction in the idea that presentness inheres in an event. So it is possible to do away with different levels of moments along with the first level of moments itself.

There is still another assumption in McTaggart's argument, that the temporal predicates are predicated by a tenseless copula. But the present tense sentence 'E is present' conveys the information that E is now present, rather than E was or will be present. But if this presentness is predicated tenselessly, for example, 'E is (tenselessly) present', the detensed sentence does not convey the full information that our ordinary language bears. For it does not indicate whether E was present, or is now present, or will be present. But in ordinary discourse, in the tensed sentence 'E is present', 'E' stands for an event, 'present' stands for the property of 'presentness', and the present-tense copula

'is' stands for the present inherence of the property of 'presentness' in the event. So it might be asserted that tensed sentences do not imply any regress. A regress ensues only if these sentences are analysed in terms of tenseless predication of pastness, presentness and futurity.

In McTaggart's thesis we find a third series, the C-series<sup>9</sup>, which we misperceive as a temporal series. It comprises an ordered series of events with the basic relations of 'inclusive of' and 'included in'. These two basic relations of this series are transitive and asymmetrical. They can come before or after other members in the series, as numbers in the number series. It should be pointed out that the C-series does not play a material part in McTaggart's actual argument. But it has an important bearing on his idealistic conception of reality. McTaggart is not a monist in Bradley's sense. Reality, according to him, consists of a timeless C series of ordered events. But McTaggart's account does not explain how we get involved in the illusory conception of the temporal A-series in place of the non-temporal C-series.

Finally, McTaggart's argument is based on the fundamental assumption that the occurrence of an event is itself an event. But events happen, and do not exist or undergo any kind of change. If time itself is conceived as a process in time then the infinite regress of the McTaggartian type seems to be unavoidable.

## REFERENCES

1. J.E. McTaggart, The Nature of Existence, Vol. II, C.D. Broad (ed.), Cambridge, 1968, Chapter XXXIII.

McTaggart's paper "The Unreality of Time" was published in Mind 16, 1908. The argument against the reality of time has been further developed by him in his 'The Nature of Existence' to counter the objections raised by Russell and Broad against his original paper.

2. Ibid, pp.9-10.
3. Ibid, p.11,
4. Ibid,
5. Ibid, p.13.
6. R.M. Gale, The Language of Time, London, 1968, p.14.
7. R. Sorabji, op.cit, p.38.
8. G.E. Moore, Some Main Problems of Philosophy, D. Lewis (ed.), London, 1952, Chapter XI.
9. McTaggart, op.cit, pp.30-1.