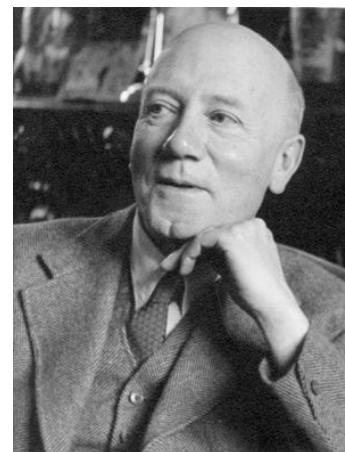
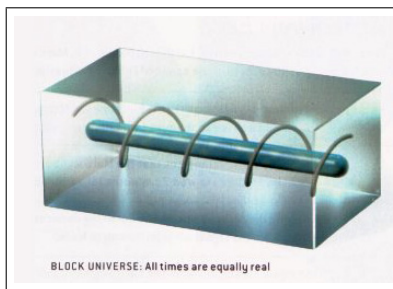
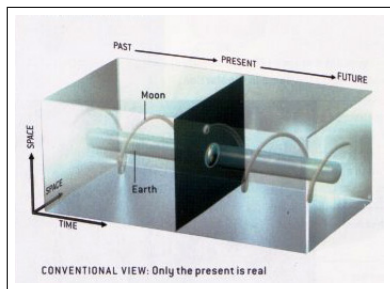


Time – Lecture 1

I Two views of time: ‘dynamic’ v ‘static’ conceptions



I.1 Three (independent?) ingredients in the dynamic view

1. A **DISTINGUISHED ‘NOW’**: One moment is picked out as *objectively* ‘special’. There are various views about *how* the present moment is special, including: (i) ‘Presentism’ – nothing *else* exists; (ii) ‘Growing block’ – the present is the *last* moment of what exists; (iii) ‘Moving spotlight’ – All times are equally real, but one time is uniquely and objectively picked out as the *present* moment (i.e. ‘Now’ is importantly different from ‘here’): ‘We are naturally tempted to regard the history of the world as existing eternally in a certain order of events. Along this, and in a fixed direction, we imagine the characteristic of presentness as moving, somewhat like the spot of light from a policeman’s bull’s-eye traversing the fronts of the houses in a street. What is illuminated is the present, what has been illuminated is the past, and what has not yet been illuminated is the future.’ (C. D. Broad, 1923 – NB: Broad doesn’t endorse this view)
2. ‘**FLOW**’: In contrast to space, time is characterised by ‘flux’, or ‘change’. (In Broad’s metaphor this is captured by the *motion* of the spotlight, but we could adapt the metaphor so that it kept the motion but abandoned the idea that one moment is special – imagine a sequence of spotlights, rather than just one.)
3. **DIRECTION**: There is an objective distinction between past and future, earlier and later. (The issue: do *processes*, unlike say pieces of string, have an objective beginning and an objective end, or is it a matter of our point of view?)

2 John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart (1866–1925)

• Russell on McTaggart: “McTaggart was even shyer than I was. I heard a knock on my door one day ... a very gentle knock. I said ‘come in’ but nothing happened. I said ‘come in’ louder. The door opened, and I saw McTaggart on the mat. He was already a president of the union, and about to become a fellow, and I was inspired and in awe on account of his metaphysical reputation, but he was too shy to come in, and I was too shy to ask him in. I cannot remember how many minutes this situation lasted, but somehow or other he was at last in the room.” (Russell 1951)

• Norbert Weiner on ‘the Mad Tea Party of Trinity’: “It is impossible to describe Bertrand Russell except by saying that he looks like the Mad Hatter. McTaggart ... with his pudgy hands, his innocent, sleepy air, and his sidelong walk, could only be the Dormouse. ... G.E. Moore, was a perfect March Hare. His gown was always covered with chalk, his cap was in rags or missing, and his hair was a tangle which had never known the brush within man’s memory.”



2.1 McTaggart’s argument for ‘the unreality of time’

- McTaggart distinguishes between two sorts of temporal ordering: the ‘**A-series**’ (past, present, future) and the ‘**B-series**’ (earlier–later). (Also: ‘**C-series**’, which is like the B-series, but without objective direction – i.e. just like space.)
- He argues as follows: (1) Time is real only if real change occurs. (2) Real change requires change in A-series properties – so it requires that they be real, too. (3) But the A-series is contradictory, so cannot be a feature of reality.

2.2 Questioning steps (1) and (2)

- Some people disagree with step (1). They say (e.g.) “Physics has shown us that time is just like space (indeed, it’s just one dimension in 4D *spacetime*) but it is still *time*.” This seems mainly a verbal dispute. McTaggart needn’t disagree that time *in that sense* exists, he just thinks it doesn’t deserve the name ‘time’.
- Some people disagree with step (2). They say (e.g.) “All we need for change is that the same object have a given property at one time but not at another time, the way a cup of coffee is first hot and then cold.”

McTaggart says (roughly) “that’s not real change, because it is eternally true that the coffee is hot at the earlier time and cold at the later time – so nothing has changed at all, ‘from the Universe’s point of view’” Again, this seems largely a verbal dispute.

2.3 Thinking about step (3)

- McTaggart thinks that *real* change (i.e., what he means by ‘change’) would have to be a matter of *events* gaining and losing *real* properties of *being future*, *being present*, and *being past*. (Roughly: events *seem* to be first future, then present, then past. If change is real then this ‘seeming’ must be veridical. Each event must *really* have these properties.)

- **Problem** (McT thinks): the properties of *being future*, *being present* and *being past* are simply contradictory – for change to be real, every event would have to have all three ... but that’s impossible!

- **Reply:** Yes, but they don’t have to have these three properties *all at the same time!* At any particular time, each event has only one of them. So no contradiction.

- **McT’s response:** If this way of avoiding the contradiction isn’t going to just take us back to to ‘static’, ‘timeless’, B-series picture, it itself needs to be phrased in terms of the A-series properties. It must amount to the claim (say) that an event’s being present is itself an event that may be past, present or future. So we get *second-order* A-series properties (9 of them, in fact), like the property of being present in the past. But the same problem arises all over again at this level – real change requires that events have all these properties, and yet some of them are incompatible.

- **The dialectic:** McTAGGART: “There’s a contradiction at the first level, and you don’t get rid of it by moving to the second level (unless you slip back into the static picture, in which case game over); and the same applies to higher levels.” HIS OPPONENT: “There’s no real contradiction at the first level, as we see by moving to the second level.” (QUESTION: Who wins here?)

- **Why it matters, even if we reject (1) & (2):** The issue is about the tenability of the view that the A-series is *objective* rather than ‘perspectival’ (i.e., just like *here* and *there*). Contemporary ‘B-theorists’ often hold that McT was right about (3), and that this creates problems for ‘A-theorists’.

- **A better reply to McT for A-theorists?** Instead of *agreeing* with McT that every event has all three properties of *being past*, *being present* and *being future*, and then trying to escape the apparent contradiction by moving to the second level, why not take the (claimed) privileged status of the present seriously, and insist that each event has only such property? (The French Revolution is just past, e.g.) So no contradiction at all (only one property, in each case). McT may attempt to reintroduce the contradiction by going to the second level, but the same strategy is available there: no event has a contradictory set of 2nd-level properties, from the (privileged) present standpoint. **PROBLEM?** Doesn’t this leave us with a kind of ‘static’ presentism, unable to account for the ‘real change’ that McT is looking for?

3 Juggling the ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’ temporal viewpoints

- A-theory (i.e., any view with objective *now*), normally tries to combine two thoughts: (i) An *exclusive* thought: one moment is special. (ii) An *inclusive* thought: every moment gets its turn at being special.

- McTaggart reconstrued? “Thought (ii) involves a contradiction, unless we weaken it so much as to make it trivial.” (Paraphrasing the master: “If we’re all special, that just means we can’t talk about special.”)

- In these terms, the last suggestion above was that the A-theorist try to avoid the contradiction, by putting more weight on (i) – i.e., by insisting on speaking *exclusively* from the standpoint of the present moment.

- **PROBLEM:** Doesn’t this discard too much of (ii)? Think of our account of the past (all 13×10^9 years of it). In that story, do we say of any event that when it occurred it was *present*, in the exclusive sense – that its moment was the *privileged* moment? If we say it of one event, we must say it of all, since by assumption we are not speaking from any of *those* times – we are speaking from the (“real”) privileged present, i.e., *now*. But saying it of *all* amounts to saying it of *none* – we lose the notion of privilege altogether!

- So if we insist on the exclusive viewpoint, we lose the right to put the notion of a distinguished present moment (and therefore, for McT, the real change that depends on it) into history. This gives rise to a deep dilemma for A-theorists: anything they want to say about *us*, *now*, that they take to depend on, or be associated with (e.g., as reliable evidence for it!), the special status of the present, must be stuff they do *not* ascribe to folk in history (even their own past selves). (Why? Because from the exclusive viewpoint, the special ‘now’ is missing from the past.)

- So by McT’s lights, we can’t say that there was change in the past, or will be in the future (the past and the future are ‘timeless’, by McT’s standards).

- **CONCLUSION:** The only coherent kind of A-theory seems to end up saying that the A-theory *wasn’t* true in the past, and *won’t* be true in the future.

Reading for next week: Williams 1951, Maudlin 2007, Price 1996 (ch. 1) & 2011.

