

Time Lecture 3

1. In the last two lectures we said something about the asymmetry of time; we saw how its apparent asymmetry might be explained in terms of the corresponding asymmetry in what we can bring about, and we saw how Dummett traced the appearance of the latter asymmetry to our belief that we can know about the occurrence or otherwise of a past action independent of our present intentions. The aim of this and the next lecture is to consider another aspect of time viz its reality or otherwise. I shall consider McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time ("The Unreality of Time" in R. Le Poidevin & M. MacBeath, ed., *The Philosophy of Time*.)
2. First we must grasp a fundamental distinction. This is the A-series/B-series distinction. Essentially there are two ways of specifying the time at which an event occurs e.g. the death of Queen Anne. One way is to specify how long ago it occurred or how long it will be until it does occur. This specification consists of two things: saying whether the event is past, present or future, and, if it is past or future, saying *how* past or future it is. E.g. "Queen Anne died 280 years ago" or "The dentist's appointment is in three weeks." Events can then be arranged in terms of the degree of their pastness and futurity, with all future events coming after all past events, and events that are more past (less future) being earlier in the series than events that are less past (more future). This series is called the *A-series*. Notice that an event's location on the A-series changes as time passes: in 1704 the death of Queen Anne was in the future; in 2004 it lies in the past.
3. Another way to specify the time of an event is to state its relative temporal location to another event. The standard Christian dating system is of this type e.g. when we say "Queen Anne died in 1714" or "The dentist's appointment is on 18 March" we are saying, roughly, that Queen Anne's death is 1714 years after the birth of Christ, or that the dentist's appointment is 18 days, 3 months and 2005 years after the birth of Christ. Events can then be arranged in terms of which events are later or earlier than other events: an event X precedes another event Y on the series if and only if X is earlier than Y. Notice that an event's location on the B-series does *not* change as time passes: in 1704 and in 2005 the death of Queen Anne lay 1714 years after the birth of Christ.
4. It is worth remarking incidentally that the A-series/B-series distinction has an analogue when it comes to space. The A-series analogue of space is an arrangement of events or objects depending on how far away they are from *here* (New York is further away than London); the analogue of the B-series is an arrangement of events or objects depending on how far away they are from a fixed event or object (Paris is closer to Greenwich than Peking).
5. The two parts of McTaggart's argument are as follows. The first (pp. 23-31 in Le Poidevin and MacBeath) aims to show that the A-series is necessary for time and the second aims to show that the A-series is impossible. If both parts are correct then he will have shown what he intended to i.e. that time is unreal.
6. The first part can itself be divided into two parts: the first aims to show that change is necessary for time, and the second that the A-series is necessary for

change. To see how uncontentious the first part is (i.e. that change is necessary for time), we need to understand that McTaggart has a very weak understanding of “change” (see p. 64 of Shoemaker’s article in the Le Poidevin collection). In one sense of change, we say that certain things do not change over time. For example if you have a piece of rock floating around in space and nothing affects it, you might say that the rock does not change at all for millions of years. But in another sense of “change” you might say that every event changes all the time. For example the death of Queen Anne changes all the time in the sense that it recedes further and further into the past. Even though the details of Queen Anne’s death were the same yesterday as they were today, nevertheless it has changed in the very weak sense that today it is farther back in the past than it was yesterday. In that sense of “change”, which is McTaggart’s, it looks obvious that change is necessary for time.

7. Is the A-series necessary for change in this sense? It might seem not on the grounds that the change just described can be accommodated by saying that the death of Queen Anne is further away on the B-series from Monday than it is from Sunday. McTaggart’s reply is that as far as the B-series is concerned, there is no change at all: for what has really changed? It was *always* true that the death of Queen Anne had those differing relations to Sunday and Monday (McTaggart p. 25). So the event has *not* changed. The *only* characteristic of an event that can change is its position on the A-series.
8. Another way of thinking of the matter is this. St Augustine thought of God as existing outside of time (*Confessions* xi, 6). So God knows the arrangement of everything on the B-series, but nothing about the position of any event on the A-series. He knows time in the way that somebody might be said to know a region of space who possessed a detailed map of it. But in that case it looks as if there is something that He doesn’t know, namely which of the events on the B-series is taking place *now*. So his picture of time is incomplete in a crucial way, and this incompleteness could only be remedied by God’s knowing the arrangement of events on the A-series. It seems therefore that McTaggart is correct in thinking that the A-series is essential to time.
9. But why should we not say the same about space? Why not say that a spatial A-series is necessary to space? An interesting answer appears in Dummett’s “Defence of McTaggart’s Proof of the Unreality of Time”, *Truth and Other Enigmas*, pp. 351-7). Dummett traces our reluctance to say that there are *really* any “A-facts” about space to the fact that we have a model for standing “outside” space in a way that we do not for time, and that therefore we can imagine a perspective from which such “facts” vanish. The model is the visual field. It is important to realise that “the visual field” means what Berkeley would have meant by it. It is just the contents of your sense-data. There, there is no here or there, near or far. *We* see the visual field in the way that St Augustine’s God sees time. Since we can readily imagine such a perspective, from which spatial A-facts are absent, we find it much easier to believe that they are not really there and hence that the spatial A-series is not necessary to space. But a temporal analogue of the visual field is inconceivable.