

#### Time Lecture 4

1. I said in the last lecture that McTaggart's argument could be divided into two parts. The first part aimed to show that the A-series is necessary for time and the second part that the A-series is impossible. The second part appears to contain two arguments for the same conclusion (pp. 31-2 in Le Poidevin and MacBeath). The first argument begins with a claim about what it is for something to be past, present or future. McTaggart says that for an event to have a position in the A-series is for it to stand in a certain relation to an event *outside* of time. His grounds for this are that "the relations of the A-series are changing relations, and no relations which are exclusively between members of the time-series can ever change" (p. 31). He goes on to claim that it is difficult to see how we could ever find an event outside of time, whose standing in a relation with, say, the death of Queen Anne, constitutes the pastness of that event.
2. This argument has attracted relatively little attention from commentators. My own view, for what it is worth, is that the present moment, or indeed any present event, could serve perfectly well as the thing whose relation of futurity to Queen Anne's death constitutes the pastness of that event. Where McTaggart seems to have gone wrong is in assuming that when we say that something *is* past, we are using the tensed—present tense—copula (that is, the sense of "is" in which "John *is* tall" is logically independent of "John *was* tall".) Of course, that present event will not serve equally well for the same purpose *tomorrow*. But that is only a problem if you assume that when we say an event is past on Monday as well as on Tuesday, we are saying that it stands in the same relation to the same thing on both days. McTaggart seems to say nothing to justify that assumption. Be that as it may, McTaggart has another, rather simpler argument for the impossibility of the A-series.
3. The argument is in fact very simple, and appears at first sight to be simply wrong. Let us write "P", "N" and "F" for predicates denoting pastness, presentness and futurity respectively (see Mellor's article in Le Poidevin, pp. 51f.). If any event has any of those properties, it has all of them (or at least two of them: the first event, if there is one, isn't future, and the last event, if there is one, isn't past—p. 32 fn. 5). But these properties are incompatible: no event can have more than one of them: Pe is incompatible with Fe, for example. So no event has *any* of them. The death of Queen Anne, if it is past, is also present and future too. So it cannot be past. It follows that there can be no A-series, and hence that, if—as was claimed last week—the A-series is necessary for time, then time does not exist.
4. The obvious reply is that "past", "present" and "future" are only incompatible in the sense that no event can have all those properties (or stand in all those relations) *at once*. But the A-theorist is not saying that any event has all those properties at once. All he intended was that the death of Queen Anne *is* past, *was* present, and *was earlier* future, and from this no contradiction can be derived.
5. But McTaggart has a reply to this reply. He says that if you say that the death of Queen Anne *was* in the future, you are saying that its being future is in the

past: PFe. But now, instead of three predicates, you are committed to nine (PP, PN, PF, NP, NN, NF, FP, FN, FF), some of which are incompatible (e.g. PP and FF), and yet every event that has any of them has to have all of them. You might reply again by saying that the death of Queen Anne *was* FF and *will be* PP, but McTaggart will respond in just the same way as before.

6. In sum therefore we have a two-part argument for the unreality of time. The first part says that time requires the A-series, and the second that the A-series is impossible. There just is no consensus among philosophers as to whether McTaggart's argument is valid. Had it been Professor Mellor lecturing you he would have said that the second part of the argument is valid but the first is not. My own view is exactly the opposite. But you should remember that it is just *my* view. Mellor's article ("The Unreality of Tense" in Le Poidevin and MacBeath) gives about as convincing an argument for the second part as you could find.
7. Let us say (cf. Dummett, "A Defence..." in *Truth and Other Enigmas* p. 353) that a term is "token-reflexive" if what it refers to depends on the (spatial or temporal) location of its utterance—so that both "here" and "now" are token-reflexive. Let us say that a token-reflexive predicate *applies* to an event if it is true of it at some location, and that two token-reflexive predicates are *exclusive* if there is no location at which they are both true of any event. Then "past" and "future" apply to every event, as McTaggart says, and they are also exclusive. But the fact that they are exclusive and yet apply to every event is *not* a contradiction. This is a way of putting the first, "obvious" objection, but a way of putting it that is not open to McTaggart's reply.
8. What would McTaggart have said to that? I think he would have said the following. Let us say that a description of reality is "neutral" if it is true at all locations. Thus e.g. an ordinary portable street map is a (spatially) neutral description of Cambridge; but a street map with a little star on it saying "you are here" is not a spatially neutral description. Now let us suppose that there is a complete neutral description of the world: that is, a description that contains all the facts and which is true at any (spatial or temporal) location. Let us call it V.
9. The assumption that V exists, together with the assumptions that P and F apply to every event and the assumption that P and F are exclusive, *does* yield a contradiction. Suppose it is a fact in 1704 that Queen Anne's death is future (Fe). Then, since V is true in 1704 (because it is neutral) and contains all facts, it follows that "Fe" is in V. But it is also a fact in 2004 that Queen Anne's death occurs in the past; so by the same reasoning therefore, "Pe" is in V. Since P and F are exclusive, this yields a contradiction.
10. I think therefore that it is the assumption that V exists that makes McTaggart think he has uncovered a genuine contradiction. I said in the last lecture that a valid argument with a patently false conclusion might be interesting if its premises are all plausible; for one of the premises will have to be given up. I think that what McTaggart's argument shows us is that V does not exist: there *is* no complete neutral description of reality.

