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The Positive McTaggart on Time

John King-Farlow

It is increasingly fashionable to attack McTaggart's arguments about the Unreality of Time with a minimum of attention to what he was trying to establish. Those who have only read his one still famous paper 'The Unreality of Time' [III] are too likely to assume from professional philosophers' current counter-arguments that the man was a sceptic with only a single (negative) idea in his head, rather than an ingenious, constructive metaphysician. Since so much formal and informal analysis has been directed against so few of McTaggart's comments on Time, and mainly against his destructive claim that the vulgar concept of Time requires as *explicans* an incoherent 'A-series' of becomings with ever-shifted pasts, presents and futures, perhaps it is time to encourage some redirection of analytical assessment to what he was arguing for. I say this not only for historical reasons, though I shall draw historical comparisons, but because rationally assessing what McTaggart really denies about Time may require some serious interest in what he so interestingly asserts about our *experience* of what we call 'Time'. Trousers, *pace* Austin, normally have one wearer but two legs. If McTaggart's negative points deserve such a plethora of analysis, then the positive view needs attention or the analysis is ill-aimed.

The positive McTaggart is best viewed as a powerful contributor to what is still very much a living force in man's intellectual history. Without meaning either to sound portentous or to deny that searches are vulnerable to referential opacity, I shall call this force the *Search for Something Deeper which Underlies our Sense of Time's Passage*. The historian finds that Search going on in the crucially formative years of Indian as well as Greek philosophy during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.: without the Upanishads or the Eleatic fragments he would understand the development of man's philosophical and religious ideas even less adequately.¹ In the modern period of Western philosophy the Search gained new vigour through Leibniz's and Kant's scientifically and mathematically inspired philosophies of Time. Bergson tried to 'stand the Search on its head' by setting 'the concrete above the abstract', and thus by glorifying *durée* and *temps vécu* over physicists' concepts. But recently, theoretical physics and highly abstract forms of mathematics have been pressed back with a

¹ See Ninian Smart's *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy* (London, 1964) p. 24; compare his discussion of the Sāṅkara metaphysicians and their interpretations of 'reality underlying appearances' at p. 98 and *passim*.

vengeance into the service of the old Search by Reichenbach and Grünbaum.² One may usefully contrast different attitudes which the Search has encouraged towards apparently temporal *series of events*. The Eleatics were extreme enough to condemn outright the apparently distinct events presented by our experience, to condemn them as ‘things’ that are logically demonstrable *illusions*, yet ‘things’ somehow made possible by the underlying power of unchangeable Being. Leibniz and Kant are more moderate. For the former our sense of time’s passage presents not ultimate facts but at least *phaenomena bene fundata*. For the latter it reveals an *a priori* form of certain (relatively) rational beings’ *Anschauungen* of phenomena, but does not disclose any *Ding-an-sich*. For both something more fundamental and more appealing to Reason must underlie such phenomena. McTaggart, Reichenbach and Grünbaum are alike in showing a liberality towards events that goes well beyond such moderation: for them there is no sin in accepting as fully objective some series of events forming cosmic history. But McTaggart, Reichenbach and Grünbaum are also together in drawing this more severe conclusion: the rational enquirer cannot accept our vulgar ‘A Series’ notions of Time (pastness, presentness, futurity) and the two allied metaphysical concepts of Absolute Becoming and Time’s (Becoming-directed) Arrow as proper guides for understanding the *real* or *basic* nature of events and their serial alignment.

McTaggart, I shall show, already thought quite well before he published his negative masterpiece ‘The Unreality of Time’ [III] that he could positively contribute a revolutionary, non-sceptical account of what the Underlying Reality would turn out to be. The series of events that seems to follow Time’s phenomenal Arrow takes its real direction from the increasing order of historical stages’ adequacy for representing the Absolute. McTaggart’s early notion of *the order of increasing representational adequacy* is linked naturally, through the reasoning behind later essays which Keeling edited and republished in *Philosophical Studies* [VII] and behind his *Opus magnum et posthumum, The Nature of Existence* [VIII], with such other crucial notions of his evolving system as *determining correspondence*, *the order of increasing inclusiveness*, or *the order of increasing closeness to the final stage in history where good must infinitely exceed all evils*.³ Some philosophers of Einsteinian physics had, by the times when the two volumes of *The Nature of Existence* appeared separately in the 1920s, begun to make out a case that the notion of causality supplied the real clue to the basic order of events. But Reichenbach and Grünbaum each eventually fixed upon somewhat differing notions of *the order of over-all increase in Entropy* as the most realistic replacement for human illusions about the ultimacy of ‘psychological time’. Indeed it would be welcome to see historians of

² For many useful citations of Hans Reichenbach’s and Adolf Grünbaum’s work on Time see Gale [I] and [II].

³ See McTaggart [VIII] Books IV, VI, VII.

The Positive McTaggart on Time

logic, science and philosophy of science try to illuminate certain fascinating likenesses between McTaggart and the Entropists, between a paradigmatic metaphysician and those who affect to despise any creator of an abstract metaphysical system even while they pore over an exceedingly abstract system of space-time geometry.

Offering such broad historical comparisons as were given in the last two paragraphs invites a charge of Toynbee-an pretension, or at least a charge of indulging a wild journalistic taste for depicting the history of ideas in a distorting contrast of fierce primary colours. But when one actually turns to cautious current literature about McTaggart and Time one so often finds such a systematic kind of blindness to important likenesses and differences between McTaggart and other important thinkers on Time that one must try using bold strokes. One must try using them or acquiesce in patterns of distortion and misclassification which are bad for philosophy.⁴ But now I turn to matters of evidence and detail. Curiously enough, a major source for further confusion about McTaggart turns out to be a pair of generally admirable books by a careful scholar—Richard Gale's own study *The Language of Time* (*LT* = [I]) and his anthology *The Philosophy of Time* (*PT* = [II]). In them Gale does a great deal to stress the importance of McTaggart for modern thought on Time. Yet experience with students suggests to me that Gale's treatment of McTaggart (in his own commentary and in his selection of comments from others) creates quite unnecessary befuddlement as to how certain of the Cambridge metaphysician's tactics could ever make any kind of strategical sense. Here I shall try to do a little to redress the balance. Consider:

Just nine months after 'The Unreality of Time' [III] appeared in *Mind* for October 1908, McTaggart published another paper about experience and temporality, 'The Relation of Time and Eternity' [IV], in the same journal. Each complements the other. What is denied about Time is to be understood in terms of what is asserted to be veridical about our Experiences of Series of Events, and *vice versa*. Indeed [IV] had been read to the Philosophical Union of the University of California over a year before [III] was published, and their close publication in one journal by a man who liked to publish in several seems hardly coincidental in the light either of their contents or of the systematic character of his resulting

⁴ See John Wisdom's remarks on Patterns in 'Gods', *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Oxford, 1953). Cf. Chapter IV, 'Patterns', of Renford Bambrough's *Reason, Truth and God* (London, 1969). 'Gods' is a classic essay from which philosophers of Time and historians of all philosophy still have much to learn. Wisdom also discusses the related notion of *Picture Preferences*. For some observations on Time, Truth and Picture Preferences see my 'Seafights without Tears', *Analysis*, 1958; 'Mr. Bradley and the Libertarians', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 1959; 'Three Questions for Prior on Time', *A.J.P.*, 1961; 'Truth Preference and Neuter Propositions', *Philosophy of Science*, 1963.

magnum opus, *The Nature of Existence*, [VIII]. Yet [IV] is not quoted from, nor used, nor even mentioned by Gale in either of his books on Time, and the omission typifies most of McTaggart's modern critics. This omission is especially regrettable since *The Philosophy of Time* reprints not the original text of [III] but a somewhat misleading *selection* of scattered paragraphs from McTaggart's later formulation in [VIII]. This *PT* selection is notably misleading for students since it omits, as do Gale's introductory remarks on McTaggart and as do his selected paragraphs of Broad on McTaggart in the anthology, any reference to McTaggart's crucial concept of a C-Series and its relation to his belief that Events are in some difficult but important sense distinct substances.⁵ Moreover, in Gale's own book *LT* the term 'C-Series' only appears on three pages ([I] 11, 94, 95); worse, the concept's complex role in McTaggart's account of what Time really is becomes obscured by Gale's inadequate introductory clause for the term, 'i.e. a series whose generating role is non-temporal, such as the series of integers' (11).

This is dangerously inadequate since the composition date of 'The Relation of Time and Eternity' makes clear that McTaggart, however confusing and confused his execution, introduced the concept of a C-Series in 'The Unreality of Time', so as to distinguish these three epistemically different sorts of series among others. They are: (ϕ) the sort of series whose elements (like neighbouring houses in rows) have and can be known to have *no* 'intrinsic direction'—that is *ordered things which we can know it makes sense to speak of as reviewing equally rationally and indifferently in one direction or another*. (χ) The sort of series which has or seems to have an epistemically obvious *necessary directedness*; the sort of series whose members are such that the human mind immediately grasps (or thinks it immediately grasps) *a priori* their unique 'intrinsic direction' by virtue of knowing what sort of members they are. Such would be the series which we speak of as 'past, present and future Events'. (ψ) The sort of series whose member Events do have an 'intrinsic direction' or an important analogue in that they OUGHT to be thought of by an optimally rational mind as having one particular direction. The optimally rational mind will so view these Events NOT because it rapidly uses definitional analysis but because it can *eventually* arrive with great effort at a correct conclusion through *VERY COMPLICATED* and appropriately *MIXED* forms of *a priori* reasoning.⁶ Gale tends to confuse the uncared reader in *LT*

⁵ See McTaggart [VII] pp. 116–118 for the C-Series, also page 85 for important remarks on his view of *substances*, with a very helpful clarifying footnote by the editor, S. V. Keeling. McTaggart is in sad part responsible for misleading Gale and others about his views on the C-Series and the possibility of non-temporal directedness, as I hope the closing part of this paper will make clear.

⁶ Compare McTaggart [VII] pp. 116–117, 131, 154, 155; McTaggart [VIII] Volume II, Book VI, Chapters xlv–l, and Book VII, Chapters lxiv–lxviii.

The Positive McTaggart on Time

when he soon goes on to discuss the ideas of Time as having and as lacking a *direction*, without mentioning the C-series explicitly and without distinguishing the epistemically different sorts of *direction* that pertain to (χ) and (ψ)—see [I] pp. 25–26.

I have spoken of *MIXED* forms of *a priori* reasoning because McTaggart makes painfully clear his belief that a form of unremittingly *optimistic* principle for reasonable thinking will have to be part of what he calls ‘*a priori* reasoning’—(See [VII], pages 154–155). I have spoken of *VERY COMPLICATED* forms in view of his difficult, lengthy treatment of Time and metaphysics generally in [VIII]. In connection with the epistemic status of the (ψ) sort of series it is perhaps better still to distinguish: (ψ_1) a sort of series that those who are for McTaggart rational people, (being optimists *qua* rational), know they ought on probabilistic grounds to consider objectively directed until the right blend of *a priori* arguments are found to prove this: (ψ_2) the sort of series that, as we already know, a complex of mixed *a priori* arguments enables a person to prove eventually (after much ratiocination) to be objectively directed; (ψ_3) the sort of series whose objective directedness we have made a strong start towards proving by working to create such a complex of arguments. These three distinctions throw light on McTaggart’s curious blend of assurance (‘I do see a possibility’ etc.) and caution (‘the possibilities . . . may prove to be demonstrations or to be the merest fallacies’ etc.) at the close of [III] and [IV]. For the roots of the (χ)—(ψ) distinction one might profitably consult Descartes on Intuition and Deduction, at Regula III.

At the very end of ‘The Unreality of Time’ McTaggart expresses great confidence in the *probability* of the view that the Events which most men take to be temporally related because of their everyday illusions are objectively related, and not just illusorily connected, in a C-Series of some important sort ([VII], p. 130). In ‘The Relation of Time and Eternity’ McTaggart develops other closely-related views about this series, views which he also takes to be highly probable, though not certain. Here is a passage from that paper, expounding these views. It is a passage which ought to be cited to any student or other newcomer to McTaggart who is being asked to understand, let alone to assess, McTaggart’s claims in ‘The Unreality of Time’:

What is the relation here between Time and Eternity? This will depend on the *direction* in the series in which the greater adequacy is to be found . . . (My italics).

If time is unreal then the time-series is a series of more or less adequate representations of the timeless reality [the Absolute], and this series itself is not really in time. If what determines the position of the stages in the time-series is the different degrees of adequacy with which they represent the timeless reality, then the series which is not really a

series in time, is really a series of degrees of adequacy. If the most adequate of these stages has only infinitesimal inadequacy, then the timeless reality, in its own completeness, forms the last stage of the series. ([VII] pp. 145 and 147).

McTaggart goes on to express a great confidence (somewhat short of certainty) in the thesis that, underlying the illusion of the A-Series with its seemingly self-evident intrinsic direction, there is an epistemically less accessible but very welcome form of objectively hard directedness about the Events which we experience. For Time's mendacious arrow can almost certainly be so replaced by the objective directedness of an unflinching progression from Events that are less adequate representations of Ultimate Reality of Events that are more adequate. And this replacement fits in admirably with other elements of McTaggart's evolving thought. These include notably in [V] his rather Leibnizian view that the plurality of Event-substances' vulgarly conceived efficient *causal links* can be analysed out in terms of *implication*; and in [VI] his reasoned metaphysical optimism about *immortality* and *reincarnation* as a solution to problems about Evil in a universe worthy of rational beings.

If such speculative metaphysics now seems to some to be fantastically antiquated by our idea of modern standards, consider three possible policies for making 'up-dated substitutions'. I choose three at this juncture which might appeal most to despisers of McTaggart among philosophers of science: (a) Ontologically speaking, let the form of Ultimate Reality be a Space-Time solid spread out timelessly in four dimensions. And let the Time of Space-Time be purged of all illusory associations with the pseudo-concepts of Vulgar Time and of Absolute Becoming.⁷ (b) Phenomenologically speaking, let each new revolution which man encounters in the history of science be taken to offer a more adequate representation of What There [tenselessly] Is. (c) In terms of the physical and biological sciences let the emergence of laws like that of (over-all) increasing Entropy and theories like that of Evolution be taken to show how scientific revolutions in turn confirm the wisdom of following 'substitution' policy (b). At the very least, to the considerable extent that such 'substitutional policies' are both coherent and illuminatingly relatable to McTaggart's notion of increasing representational adequacy, the themes of 'The Unreality of Time' as clarified by 'The Relation of Time and Eternity' turn out to be much less unlike his critic Bertrand Russell's view of Time —*The Philosophy of Time*, pp. 65–97—than Russell or Gale have thought or even McTaggart himself could see. For Russell and other 'B-Theorist'

⁷ Compare Donald C. Williams' 'The Myth of Passage', a (would-be) B-Theorist's classic on 'the four-dimensional fabric of juxtaposed actualities'. The paper is reproduced in Gale [II] pp. 98–118. Williams is reinforced at Gale [II] pp. 322–353 by Adolf Grünbaum's 'The Status of Temporal Becoming'.

The Positive McTaggart on Time

critics of McTaggart, who are also irreconcilable foes of Gale, C. D. Broad and others as 'A-Theorists', fundamentally agree with McTaggart that the concept cherished by 'A-Theorists' of Absolute Becoming, however well entrenched in Ordinary Language or in a Common Sense Concept of Time, is essentially worthless for any sound *philosophy* of Time. (In the eyes of many such B-Theorists, of course, love for the concept is a mere case of obscurantist anthropocentrism by the standards of what they take to be the Physicist's world view.)⁸

WHAT THEN ARE McTAGGART'S POSITIONS ON 'THE UNREALITY OF TIME'? They are many, and the definite article belongs in scare-quotes. But here are some basic distinctions which teachers using either McTaggart's attacks of 1908 on Vulgar Time or critical commentary like Gale's should consider drawing emphatically *ab initio analysandi*:

(A) It is *false* to say that Time is unreal, if by this one means what Parmenides, Zeno, Melissus and other Eleatics meant. It is false, if by 'Time is unreal' one means that there is and can be only one (unchanging) entity worth treating as a substance and that therefore our experientially based beliefs about many substances, about *distinct* Events as really being involved in what we commonly refer to as 'change', are just beliefs without a residual point of profound, thorough obscured truth. It is false since the so-called 'time-series' of our experiences does present real distinctions between what, within certain limits, can rationally be viewed as distinct substances.

Observation on (A): Gale is *curiously* unhelpful about the needed clarification of the great differences between McTaggart's positions and the Eleatics' on 'The' Unreality of Time. In *The Philosophy of Time* his introductory comments in the Sections on McTaggart and Zeno do practically nothing to help the new philosopher about Time to realize how the assertion 'Time is unreal' can mask like a blindingly red rag some extremely different philosophical views of Events and human experience. In *The Language of Time* Gale simply begs the question with a few contemptuous words to the effect that Eleatic claims about the incoherence of the concept of Becoming beg the question; he seems utterly unwilling to recognize, let alone to discuss, Parmenides' original attempts to argue by reference to logic and *negation* for 'Being is timeless since unchanging'. ([I] p. 239). Even Plato went to very great pains in the *Parmenides* and *Sophist* to seek adequate counter-arguments against what Gale dismisses as 'the mystic's claims' (p. 239).⁹

⁸ For interesting historical comments and valuable listings on the 'B-theory Answer' to McTaggart see Gale [II] pp. 69–77 and 496–502. For 'A-theorists' compare pp. 71–83 and 497–498.

⁹ Although he mentions Parmenides briefly in his exciting recent paper 'On What There Is Not', (*Review of Metaphysics*, 1972), Gale does not draw any suitable morals about possible historical misrepresentation of Eleatic 'mystics' in his own books on Time.

(B) It is *false* to say that Time is unreal, if by this one means that Time is a mere illusion because we do NOT experience distinct substances through experiencing a so-called 'temporal' series of Events *in a way that helps us to see through the serial ordering what Ultimate Reality is like*. It is false since the so-called 'temporal' ordering of experiences reveals through the underlying *Adequacy-Ordering of Representations* a great deal about what Ultimate Reality is like.

(C) It is *false* to say that Time is unreal, if by this one means that a series of 'temporally ordered' events has no more objective, unique directedness than a linear series of spatial objects.¹⁰ It is false since the so-called 'temporal' ordering corresponds to something which is NOT both relativisably *So* to some rational observers' standpoint and relativisably *Not So* to others' standpoint. Instead this ordering's apparent directedness corresponds to the objective fact that so-called 'later' Events invariably represent the Absolute more adequately than so-called 'earlier' ones in a series.

(D) It is *true* to say that Time is unreal if by this one means that philosophically wise beliefs in the *real* ordering and direction of Events from less adequate representations to more adequate ones in a so-called 'temporal' order should prevail over Vulgar belief in the self-evident objectivity of temporal directedness. This is true since the Vulgar faith in the pseudo-concept of Time suggests that we can know what is the real, objective ordering and intrinsic direction of history merely by sensuous intuition or immediate *a priori* analysis. For us humans at least it is only possible to grasp after much complicated and mixed *a priori* reasoning that the so-called 'temporal order' corresponds to an unflinching increase in Events' adequacy for representing Reality.

(E) It is *true* that Time is unreal if by this one means that *a priori* analysis can show how the concepts of an A-Series and Absolute Becoming, crucial for analysing the ordinary concept of Time, generate a contradiction (or a vicious infinite regress). This is true because proved in 'The Unreality of Time'.

McTaggart's arguments in 'The Unreality of Time' have attracted the attention of such gifted formal and informal analysts as Russell, Broad, Marhenke, Findlay and Gale himself. It is best to evaluate McTaggart's tactics with an eye on his strategy—with an eye on what he does and does not wish to argue about 'The' Unreality of Time. So much for where he stood positively when he began to attack common sense beliefs on Time: *WHY THEN IS McTAGGART SO EASILY MISHANDLED?* In closing I venture to make some tentative suggestions about why his positive views may tend to seem more inscrutable than they are.

I have tried to make McTaggart sound as little likely to be inconsistent

¹⁰ Compare Gale, who apparently *ascribes* this view to McTaggart at *The Language of Time* [I], pp. 25–26 when he writes: 'A linear spatial order has a direction only in reference to the right and left hands of an *external* observer; thus the direction is extrinsic to the order itself'.

The Positive McTaggart on Time

as I could in order to focus attention on what he was arguing *for* when he originally attacked Vulgar Time. Reflection on the texts of [III] and [IV] suggests, however, that McTaggart has a curious weakness regarding the C-Series. (Problems created by that weakness compound problems about his being so comparable to B-Theorists, whose own consistency problems are brilliantly discussed by Galein [I]). Consider this question of McTaggart's: 'If there is a C-Series, are positions in it simply ultimate facts, or are they determined by the varying amounts, in the objects which hold those positions, of some quality which is common to them all?' ([VII] p. 131). McTaggart, as we saw, published the answer in [IV] nine months later that Events share varying amounts of *representational adequacy*, which is their common quality, and that the historically invariable increase in these amounts from what we vulgarly call *earlier* Events to later gives history a direction. Now compare the quotation given from [IV] at [VII] p. 145: 'What is the relation here between Time and Eternity? This will depend on the *direction* in the series in which the *greater adequacy* is to be found.' (The italics are mine). McTaggart is much responsible for misleading Gale and others about his aims by sometimes equating, quite contrary to his purpose, a C_1 Series which has order but no direction at all with a C_2 Series which has order and an (epistemically obscure) direction *but* is not a temporal series. McTaggart writes in [III]: 'A series which is not temporal has no direction of its own.' He writes this immediately after a sentence where 'C Series' occurs ([VII], 117), when the previous quotations of this paragraph indicate that what he should have written to be consistent about his aims was 'A series which is not temporal has no direction of its own which is epistemically easy of access'. Compare my earlier remarks about three species of the genus that I called *the* (ψ) sort of series. Similar corrections are needed to make consistent sense of several other remarks by McTaggart on non-temporal series, but the rewards for tedious corrections include (i) the partial conveying of his exciting, positive metaphysical strategy instead of mere sceptical tactics in connection with [III]; (ii) the establishing of full and illuminating consistency between [III] and [IV] which appeared within nine months of each other, which were both written before either was published, and which seem clearly intended to complement each other.

At any rate, both Time and McTaggart's own gifts for making the subject exciting warrant philosophers' trouble in weeding out his errors well enough to grasp the Point and Substance of his contribution. And the nature of that contribution should be seen in broad historical perspective as an instance of many kinds of philosophers' perennial *Search for Something Deeper which Underlies our Sense of Time's Passage*.¹¹

¹¹ I am indebted to Dr William René Shea for discussing these and related problems about philosophy of Time and philosophy of Physics with me, and hence for helping me to broaden my initial perspective on McTaggart.

John King-Farlow

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