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Reconstructing McTaggart's Argument

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Professor Rankin kindly praises my reconstruction of McTaggart's argument and then proceeds to present a considerably distorted version of it which he criticizes.[1] I hope that a brief note may set matters right. As he correctly states we begin with:

'E is in the future' is true when asserted at M_1	(a)
'E is in the present' is true when asserted at M_2	(b)
'E is in the past' is true when asserted at M_3	(c)

Clearly it is possible that all the three previous propositions should be true. But then we note that given:

'P is Q' is true when asserted at M_1	(d)
'P is not-Q' is true when asserted at M_2	(e)

(d) and (e) are of necessity incompatible.

It is one of McTaggart's basic tenets that 'futurity', 'presentness', and 'pastness' are genuine properties of E and that 'having futurity' implies for instance 'not having presentness' (a) and (b) should be just as inconsistent as (d) and (e).

Now there seems to be a way of escaping this difficulty by pointing out that (a), (b), and (c) are equivalent to:

E is after M_1	(a')
E is simultaneous with M_2	(b')
E is before M_3	(c')

which are not incompatible. This, however, lands us in another difficulty that we are no longer ascribing monadic A-properties to E but dyadic B-properties, e.g. of having the relation of beforeness to M_1 and so on. A-properties are however essential to McTaggart. He describes therefore an attempt to reintroduce them through sentences ascribing these properties to M_1, M_2, and M_3. This however leads us once more to the kind of contradiction we had before, and so on.

Because of my having suggested the possible replacement of (a), (b), and (c) by (a'), (b'), and (c') Rankin attributes to me the grievous error of

[1] Kenneth Rankin, 'McTaggart's Paradox: Two Parodies', *Philosophy* (July 1981), 347–348, fn 11.

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maintaining that A-terms are definable. This would indeed be a very serious matter considering that I myself have defended at length[2] McTaggart's claim that B-statements are definable in terms of statements containing elements that are A-statements but not the other way round. But of course the point is that Rankin's charge is entirely unfounded. Clearly neither (a) nor (b) nor (c) is an A-statement. Admittedly, if someone asserts at M_1:

E is in the future (ϕ)

he is making an A-statement. Statement (a), however, which contains (ϕ) as an element is definitely not an A-statement and assigns the B-relation of 'after' between E and M_1.

It will be useful to state very briefly the two pivotal points of McTaggart's arguments so that we may see that he says nothing far-fetched and given certain assumptions that do not violate common sense, the inconsistency he has claimed to have derived is genuine.

(1) 'Futurity', 'presentness', and 'pastness' are full-fledged incompatible properties that all temporal particulars possess.

(2) If two properties P and Q are incompatible then two statements (whether asserted simultaneously or not) ascribing them simultaneously to the same particular, are contraries.

Incidentally, contrary to Rankin it is not required that E be of infinitesimal duration. E may be temporally extended but as long as one statement assigns P to all its temporal parts, any other statement which assigns Q to it is incompatible with the first statement.

There are two and only two ways in which this difficulty could be resolved:

(i) Deny (1) and maintain with Russell that monadic temporal properties are not genuine and all properties which seem such can in fact be exhibited as dyadic B-properties. The difficulty would then disappear since the same particular can have for instance the dyadic property of being before one moment while also having the property of not being before some other moment.

This is unacceptable to McTaggart who holds that if we eliminate A-properties we eliminate time itself.

(ii) Suggest that A-properties are unique. That is, deny that (2), which does indeed apply to all other properties, applies also to the very special monadic temporal properties of particulars. (I attempt to show how this can be done in my 'How Time Flies', *Mind* (October 1982).) McTaggart has not considered this suggestion.

It seems clear that if (i) and (ii) are rejected, we are confronted with the

[2] *Aspects of Time* (Hackett, 1980), 44-48.

co-existence of incompatible hard facts. To avoid a concrete difficulty like this, any such manoeuvring as invoking 'the iterativeness of A-determination' as Professor Rankin would have it, will prove to be ineffective.

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