

## PROPOSITIONS, FACTS, AND BECOMING<sup>1</sup>

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One problem that worried C. D. Broad throughout his philosophical career was the problem of time and change. Concerning the problem of time he once said, "this is the hardest knot in the whole of philosophy."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps that explains why he completely reversed himself on the status of temporal becoming, i.e., the change of an event from first being in the future, then becoming present, and then receding into the past. Initially, he defended the view that events are not past, present, or future *simpliciter*, but are merely *earlier than*, *simultaneous with*, and *later than* our memories, perceptions, and expectations of them.<sup>3</sup> Yet, soon after his first musings on time, he came to hold that the notions of past, present, and future are incapable of being analysed in terms of temporal relations between states of mind and their objects. Although my sympathies lie with some version of Broad's first view I do not intend to offer any arguments in its support. Nor will I offer any direct arguments against his later view. Rather, I wish to point out an unnoticed and perhaps unwanted consequence of adopting the view that becoming is absolute or intrinsic to events. The consequence is that there cannot be any timelessly true propositions or facts about temporal objects.

I shall proceed by dividing the paper into two sections. In the first section I shall explain (a) what is involved in maintaining that becoming is absolute, (b) one reason why Broad came to hold that view, and (c) what philosophers have meant by the terms 'proposition' and 'fact'. In the second section I shall show that the two views of absolute becoming on the one hand, and timelessly true propositions or facts about temporal objects on the other hand, are incompatible.

In Broad's major works he adopts an antisubstantialist account of change.

He maintains that an ordinary physical object such as a chair does not contain a peculiar constituent over and above the successive events that constitutes its history that remains literally the same through change.<sup>4</sup> On Broad's view, to say that a thing changes means that its history can be cut up into a series of successive short slices, or events, and that two successive slices have characteristic qualitative agreements and disagreements.

The analysis of a thing into many diverse particular events is compatible with affirming or denying absolute becoming. Those who deny absolute becoming say that the successive events that constitute the history of an individual thing exist once and for all in a network of relations of *earlier* and *later*. Events do not come to stand in temporal relations with other events by coming into existence, but rather they are timelessly earlier, later, or simultaneous with each other. Thus, those who deny absolute becoming tend to think of a temporal sequence as analogous to a spatial sequence with the primary difference being the different relations between the terms.

Proponents of absolute becoming refuse to admit the analogy. They maintain that the successive events that constitute an individual's history do not in some sense all 'co-exist', but rather they come into existence, or become. As Broad says:

In the experience of a conscious being Absolute Becoming manifests itself as the continual *supersession* of what was the latest phase by a new phase, which will in turn be superseded by another new one.<sup>5</sup>

According to Broad, absolute becoming is the continual supersession of one event by another event. What has not yet supervened does not exist and what has already been superseded has ceased to exist. Becoming is thus the generation of events which did not previously exist and their subsequent annihilation.

One reason why Broad holds that there is absolute becoming is that he thinks it is essential to time or temporal sequence since the latter requires change *in a given direction* and such change presupposes absolute becoming. Let me explain this point by using an example of Broad's. He would say that the change of an apple from red to green is a change in a given or intrinsic direction because the apple is *first* red and *then* green, or synonymously, it is red *before* it is green, from any point of view. In this respect time differs from space since a spatial series has a direction

only in reference to something external to the series. Broad came to believe that the reason why a temporal series has an intrinsic or given direction and a non-temporal series does not is that the terms of a temporal series undergo becoming whereas the terms of a non-temporal series do not. The point is important so I shall quote a passage where Broad makes it:

This [absolute becoming] seems to me to be the rock-bottom peculiarity of time, distinguishing a *temporal sequence* from all other instances of one-dimensional order, such as that of points on a line, numbers in order of magnitude, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, it is absolute becoming that accounts for the 'flow' of time from *earlier* to *later*. Consequently, according to Broad, the very notion of a thing's changing being analysed as a *temporal* sequence of events with qualitative differences and similarities presupposes absolute becoming.

As I stated earlier, I do not intend to refute the view that becoming, time, and change are essential to each other, but rather to prove that those who hold that they are cannot also hold, as some do, that there are timelessly true propositions or actual facts about temporal objects. I shall proceed to prove that after giving a brief description of what philosophers have taken propositions and facts to be.

According to one standard notion, an essential feature of propositions and facts is that they are *timeless*.<sup>7</sup> At least part of what is meant by 'timeless' in this context is that the truth value of a proposition and the actuality of a fact is unchanging and therefore need not be qualified by reference to time. For example, while it is not incorrect English, it is entirely unnecessary to say that the proposition (or fact) expressed by ' $2+2=4$ ' is true (or actual) at  $t_1$ . Similarly, the proposition (or fact) expressed by "This chalk is yellow at  $tt$ " is timeless in spite of its making reference to time because its truth value (or actuality) is unchanging and therefore independent of time. A timeless proposition or fact is not, on the standard view, one that exists at every moment, or throughout all of history since that implies that facts or propositions are continuants. Rather, a timeless fact or proposition is an entity that does not come into existence, does not stand in any temporal relation to something, and does not change.

## II

Suppose we assume that events undergo absolute becoming, i.e., they come into and go out of existence apart from human thought or language.

Could there still be any timelessly true propositions or facts? For example could the following sentences express them?

- (a) Event  $e$  is present
- (b) Event  $e$  is past

I submit that (a) and (b) cannot express timelessly true propositions or facts about event  $e$ . For if becoming is absolute then to say that an event is present means that it comes into existence; that there exists such an event, and to say that an event is past means that it ceases to exist; that there no longer exists such an event. Thus, the view that (a) and (b) express timeless propositions or facts about  $e$  entails the absurdity that it is timelessly true or actual that event  $e$  comes into existence and ceases to exist or that event  $e$  exists and event  $e$  does not exist. To avoid that contradiction we must qualify what (a) and (b) express by reference to time. That is, we must say that (a) and (b) express propositions that are true (or actual) at certain times, and false (or non-actual) at all other times. But if propositions or facts about temporal objects must change with time then they cannot be the timeless objects their proponents intend them to be. Therefore, assuming events undergo absolute becoming (a) and (b) cannot express timelessly true propositions or facts.

Suppose we assume that the following sentences express timelessly true propositions or facts:

- (1) Event  $e$  is present at  $t_1$ .
- (2) Event  $e'$  is future at  $t_1$ .
- (3) Event  $e$  is past at  $t_2$ .
- (4) Event  $e$  is present at  $t_2$ .

Could the events in such a world undergo absolute becoming? I do not think so because absolute becoming implies that change has an intrinsic direction or, synonymously, that events form a temporal sequence. But if (1)-(4) express true propositions or facts then either events do not form a temporal sequence, or they form one in a sense that does not involve absolute becoming. To see what is involved in this last point we must first note that whatever the specific ontological essay one gives to ' $t_1$ ' and ' $t_2$ ' they have to be understood as referring to different *times*. If one is going to account for the direction of change, in this case whether  $e$  is earlier than  $e'$  or vice versa, it must be the case that  $e$  and  $e'$  exist at different

*times*. Thus, we cannot account for  $e$  and  $e'$  being terms of a temporal sequence until we can account for  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  being members of a temporal sequence. At this point there are two possible moves: First, we may say that  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  are members of a temporal sequence with an intrinsic direction because  $t_1$  is earlier than  $t_2$  and *earlier than* is the unique and unanalysable relation of temporal sequence. Or, second, we may say that  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  are members of a temporal sequence because,

- (i)  $t_1$  is present at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  is future at  $t_1$ .
- (ii)  $t_1$  is past at  $t_2$  and  $t_2$  is present at  $t_2$ .

If we adopt the first alternative then we are giving up absolute becoming since we are denying that the order of events from earlier to later is grounded in the becoming of temporal objects. If we adopt the second alternative then we are once more admitting that there is time without becoming for the proposition or fact expressed by, say, " $t_1$  is present at  $t_1$ " is not logically equivalent to that expressed by " $t_1$  is present" meaning " $t_1$  is now present." That is, the proposition expressed by " $t_1$  is present at  $t_1$ " has an unchanging truth value, but the proposition expressed by " $t_1$  is now present" is true at sometime and false at all other times. Thus, if (i) and (ii) are the ground of  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  being terms of a temporal sequence, then there is no *now* or *presentness* and hence there is no becoming. If we recast the second alternative so as to include the concept of absolute becoming then we get the following sentences:

- (i')  $t_1$  is now present and  $t_2$  is now future.
- (ii')  $t_1$  is now past and  $t_2$  is now present.

However, the 'facts' or 'propositions' expressed by these sentences cannot account for  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  being members of a *temporal* sequence, i.e., a sequence with an intrinsic direction. Thus, to suppose that (1)-(4) express timelessly true propositions or facts implies that either there is no absolute becoming, or there is no temporal sequence. Since absolute becoming implies that there is a temporal sequence it follows that if (1)-(4) express timelessly true propositions or facts then there is no absolute becoming.

The argument of the preceding paragraph is quite general. For on the becoming view any timeless truth or fact about a temporal object will have to include a time, i.e., a member of a temporal sequence. However, a believer in absolute becoming cannot include a time in a timeless proposi-

tion or fact unless he takes *earlier than* as an unanalysable temporal relation, i.e., unless he abandons absolute becoming. Therefore, it follows that a believer in absolute becoming cannot consistently believe in the existence of timeless truths or facts about temporal objects.

If my thesis is correct then we can see that there is an important truth contained in McTaggart's proof of the unreality of time. McTaggart argues that if there is absolute becoming in a world of timelessly true propositions or facts then a contradiction ensues. He also maintains that time necessarily involves *both* timeless propositions or facts about the relations of precedence and subsequence between events and absolute becoming. He concludes that time is contradictory and therefore unreal.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, we need not accept McTaggart's conclusion. If time consists of either the timeless facts of precedence and subsequence between events or absolute becoming, *but not both*, then it may still be real. What McTaggart's proof does show, however, is the incompatibility between timelessly true propositions or facts about temporal objects and absolute becoming that I have discussed.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A slightly longer version of this paper was read at the Western Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association in Chicago, Illinois, in April, 1975. I wish to acknowledge the helpful comments of the editor-in-chief, Keith Lehrer and my colleagues Charles E. M. Dunlop and Paul K. Peterson.

<sup>2</sup> C. D. Broad, *Scientific Thought*, (New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1959), p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Broad's article entitled 'Time', in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, (ed., James Hastings), (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1968), XII, pp. 334-45.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. C. D. Broad, *Examination of McTaggart's Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), I, pp. 142-166. C. D. Broad, *Scientific Thought, op. cit.*, pp. 53-84. And C. D. Broad, *The Mind and Its Place in Nature*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1925), p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> C. D. Broad, 'A Reply to My Critics' *op. cit.*, p. 766.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 766.

<sup>7</sup> By referring to the 'standard' notion of a proposition, I mean that my explication follows that offered by Moore, Russell, Frege, and Broad. Compare, for example, G. E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966). B. Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1903). G. Frege, 'The Thought', reprinted in *Essays on Frege*, ed., E. D. Klemke, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1968). And, C. D. Broad, *The Mind and Its Place in Nature, op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. John M. E. McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence*, ed., C. D. Broad, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), II, pp. 9-31. And, John M. E. McTaggart, 'The Unreality of Time', *Mind*, XVIII, No. 68, October, 1908, pp. 457-474, and reprinted in John M. E. McTaggart, *Philosophical Studies*, ed., S. V. Keeling, (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1934), pp. 110-131.

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