

MCTAGGART'S PARADOX AND THE INFINITE REGRESS OF TEMPORAL ATTRIBUTIONS: A REPLY TO SMITH

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In a recent article in this journal, Quentin Smith attempts to demonstrate "that the idea that presentness, pastness and futurity are properties does indeed entail an infinite regress, but that this regress is neither vicious nor constituted of tenseless predications."¹ Although I have no quarrel with his thesis that the regress is not constituted by tenseless predications, it is the main purpose of this paper to show that the regress is in fact vicious. I shall do this by arguing that Smith's way out of "McTaggart's Paradox" involves precisely that vicious infinite regress of temporal attributions his analysis sought to avoid.

According to Smith, the paradox involved in McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time does not involve any contradiction in temporal attribution. Rather, it is McTaggart's own remarks about the infinite regress that are paradoxical, not the infinite regress! Why does he say that? McTaggart claims, correctly according to Smith, that the attribution of presentness, pastness and futurity leads to a contradiction unless they are attributed successively. Smith continues,

However, in each case it *is* specified that the terms to which they are attributed have them successively. . . . How could it [the infinite levels of predication] *never escape* from contradiction if it *never was* contradictory? The first set of terms, the events, are contradictory only if it is *not* specified that these terms have presentness, pastness and futurity successively. But it *is* specified that they have them successively!²

Smith simply claims that an appeal to succession avoids the contradiction McTaggart finds in temporal attributions, but he does not offer an argument. As we shall see, however, he needs to give an argument since McTaggart's point is that an appeal to succession does not suffice to avoid the contradiction.

Smith does not deal directly with McTaggart's argument against the obvious reply to something being past, present, and future. Instead he proceeds to give an explanation of what, for him, are McTaggart's

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paradoxical remarks. Smith claims that McTaggart mistakenly believes that the original set of terms is contradictory because he infers from

(1) The attribution of the characteristics past, present, and future to the terms of any series leads to a contradiction, unless it is specified that they have them successively

to

(2) The attribution of the characteristics past, present, and future to the terms of any series leads to a contradiction, which is subsequently resolved by specifying that they have them successively.³

Smith then remarks that “This is an invalid inference for a statement of the form A, *unless* B does not entail a statement of the form, A *and* B.”⁴ Clearly, if McTaggart’s paradox is based upon that inference then it is invalid, but there is textual evidence to suggest that McTaggart’s belief that the first set of terms never escapes contradiction is not based on that elementary logical blunder.

Smith claims that an appeal to succession nips the problem in the bud, or rather, demonstrates that there is no problem to begin with. Smith makes this point as if McTaggart never thought of it, which of course he did, treating it as the most obvious apparent solution.⁵ Virtually all the points that Smith makes in Section One of his paper depend on the assumption that there is no contradiction in something being past, present, and future. But McTaggart thinks that there is a contradiction in temporal attributions. Therefore, if we are to understand McTaggart’s paradox we must come to see why he thought that the appeal to succession is futile, involving either a vicious circularity or a vicious infinite regress.

The problem of time and change may be briefly stated as follows: what is the proper analysis of the fact that say, an apple is green at one time and red at a later time, or, synonymously, that an apple is green before it is red? In the facts so stated the apple is first green and then red, and not first red and then green; such is the point of saying that it is green before it is red and that there is change in a given direction. For detensers like myself the direction of time is based on the unanalyzable temporal relation of succession, but for McTaggart temporal relations are analyzable in terms of the flow of time or the moving NOW.⁶ As McTaggart argues in *The Nature of Existence*,

... the series of earlier and later is a time series. We cannot have time without change, and the only possible change is from future to present, and from present to past. Thus, until the terms are taken as passing from future to present, and from present to past, they cannot be taken as in time, or as earlier or later; and not only the conception of presentness, but those of pastness and futurity must be reached before the conceptions of earlier and later and not *vice versa*.⁷

For McTaggart, temporal relations are not there from the outset but are generated by the moving of the NOW along a non-temporal, but ordered C series.

Further evidence that McTaggart thought of temporal relations as reducible can be gleaned from his remarks in "The Unreality of Time" where he argues that time and change in a particular direction depends upon the A series and the C series. As he puts it,

We can now see that the A series, together with the C series, is sufficient to give us time. For in order to get change, and change in a given direction, it is sufficient that one position in the C series should be Present, to the exclusion of all others, and that this characteristic of presentness should pass along the series in such a way that all positions on the one side of the Present have been present, and all positions on the other side of it will be present. . . . no other elements are required to constitute a time-series except an A series and a C series. . . . It is only when the A series, which gives change and direction, is combined with the C series, which gives permanence, that the B series can arise.⁸

This point cannot be overemphasized: for McTaggart, temporal relations between events are not ultimate, but are analyzable in terms of the moving NOW.

With this background we can begin to understand McTaggart's claim that the appeal to succession to avoid the contradiction contained in temporal attributions involves either a vicious circle or a vicious infinite regress. Appealing to succession involves a vicious circle because

it assumes the existence of time in order to account for the way in which moments are past, present, and future. Time then must be pre-supposed to account for the A series. But we have already seen that the A series has to be assumed in order to account for time. Accordingly, the A series has to be pre-supposed in order to account for the A series. And this is clearly a vicious circle.⁹

In short, in order to account for something having incompatible temporal properties the defender of passage must assume that the term in question has those properties in succession, but in order for a term to be first future, then present, and then past, we must assume that it has incompatible temporal properties. Thus, one cannot appeal to succession in order to explain how time and change are possible without falling into a vicious circle.

To develop this last point further, recall that an account of time must provide an account of say, a poker's first being cold and then being hot, or synonymously, its being cold before it is hot. McTaggart's account of change involves the claim that every event in the poker's history changes with respect to the properties of pastness, presentness, and futurity. However, A-changes in events can account for time and avoid the incompatibilities problem only if events acquire and shed A-properties successively. Unfortunately, given McTaggart's positive conception of time that can only mean that *first* the poker's being cold is present and the poker's being hot is future, and *then* the poker's being cold is past and the poker's being hot is present, or more simply, that the cold poker is present *before* the hot poker is present. As the italicized words indicate, however, time or more specifically, the temporal relation of *earlier than*, must be assumed in order to account for A-changes in

events, "but we have already seen that the A series has to be assumed in order to account for time"¹⁰ (since the B series is defined in terms of the application of the A series to the C series). Consequently, the contradiction involved in the original A series cannot be avoided by appealing to the relation of succession since the A series must be assumed in order to account for succession and therefore, since the A series is involved in paradox, succession is too.

McTaggart's difficulty with temporal prediction can be put in another way, in which the fallacy will exhibit itself as a vicious infinite series rather than as a vicious circle. If we avoid the original contradiction by claiming that the terms have the incompatible A-properties at different times, that is, E is future at t1, present at t2, and past at t3, then the problem is avoided only if t1, t2, and t3 refer to different moments of time. For if the events do not have their A-properties at different times, then they are either timeless or simultaneously past, present, and future, and the paradox is unavoidable. What, then, is the basis for t1, t2, and t3 being *earlier than* t2 and t2 being *earlier than* t3? Given McTaggart's analysis it can only be that Presentness moves along the series of moments in such a way that each moment is past, present, and future. But then, the contradiction in the (first) level of events rearises at the (second) level of moments. Nor is the resolution to be found in postulating another level of moments at which the preceding level can have its temporal properties. For this new series is genuinely temporal only if its terms occur in a given direction, but the direction of a series is generated by temporal attributions which has not and, I submit, cannot be freed from contradiction.¹¹

It should be clear, therefore, that Smith can hardly be thought to have undermined McTaggart's paradox by simply claiming that it does not arise because incompatible temporal properties are had by events, moments, or whatever, successively. Nor has Smith argued, rather than merely claimed, that McTaggart's remarks concerning temporal attributions are paradoxical. What remains to be demonstrated is that Smith's own account of temporal attribution falls prey to precisely the vicious circularity or vicious infinite regress that McTaggart argued was inherent in the nature of time conceived of as involving the moving NOW or passage.

McTaggart claims that since pastness, presentness, and futurity are incompatible properties they cannot belong to the same event simultaneously, but must belong to it successively. Notice that this suggests that McTaggart is not claiming, as Smith maintains, that "*temporal predications are predicated by tenseless copulas*,"¹² for if the copula is tenseless then the temporal properties would not be exemplified at the same time, but would simply be exemplified. Of course, there is a difficulty in the tenseless predication of temporal attributes even if that is not understood as the simultaneous attribution of incompatible properties. But it is equally plausible, if not more so, to

treat McTaggart as supposing that temporal attributions are predicated by tensed copulas. Thus, we begin with the three statements: “E is now present,” and “E is now past,” and “E is now future,” and these are mutually contradictory unless it is specified that E has these incompatible properties successively.

In tensed language, this means that the event *is* present, *will be* past and *has been* future, or that it *is* past, and *has been* future and present, or that it *is* future and *will be* present and past.¹³

The crucial issue is whether or not this is anything more than a verbal solution to a metaphysical problem. I shall argue that given Smith’s analysis of temporal predication the answer is that it is not since the original contradiction is not avoided but just transferred to different terms.

According to Smith, the reality of temporal attributes implies an infinite regress of inferences of presentness inhering in their own inferences. That is, the correct analysis of “E is present” is

(6c) E is present, and the being present of E is present, and the being present of the being present of E is present, and so on infinitely.¹⁴

He explains this by saying that

the first conjunct of (6c) predicates presentness of the event E and each of the remaining conjuncts predicates presentness of a *different* inherence of presentness; the second conjunct predicates presentness of the inherence of presentness in E, the third conjunct predicates presentness of the inherence of presentness in its inherence in E, and so on.¹⁵

This passage makes clear that for Smith, inherence exemplifies the temporal attribute of presentness. However, if inherence is present, then it must be past and future as well. This does not come out very clearly since in his analysis of “E is past” and “E is future” all the inherence relations are present. Smith says:

The correct explication of “E is past” is (8) E is past, and the being past of E is present, and the being present of the being past of E is present, and so on infinitely. An analogous complete explication is given to “E is future.”¹⁶

Nevertheless, the inherence relation is past, present, and future and, as I shall argue, the appeal to succession or higher level inherence relations does not enable him to avoid the original contradiction involved in the first set of terms.

Suppose we resolve the difficulty of claiming that E is past, present, and future by claiming that it has those attributes successively. E is present, was future and will be past, or it is past, was future and present, or it is future and will be past and present. The copula in each case is tensed and that leads to a difficulty. Consider the first disjunct of conjuncts. If E is present, was future and will be past, then the inherence of presentness *is now present*, and the inherence of futurity is now *past*,

and the inherence of pastness *is now future*. Thus, in order to avoid the difficulty of E's being simultaneously past, present, and future, Smith is forced to claim that *the inherence of a temporal property in E is simultaneously past, present, and future*.

Analogous remarks can be made about the other two disjunctions. For example, if E is now past, and has been present and future, then the inherence of pastness is now present, and the inherence of presentness and futurity is now past. And, finally, if E is future, and will be present and past, then the inherence of futurity is now present, and the inherence of presentness and pastness is now future. In either case, the first order inherence relation has incompatible temporal properties simultaneously. Thus, the notion of succession, analyzed in terms of tensed inherence relations, does not really avoid the contradiction of something being past, present, and future since it rears its head at the level of inherence.

It would be of no avail to attempt to avoid the contradiction at the first level of inherence by saying that inherence₁ has its temporal attributes successively. In tensed language that means that inherence₁ is present, will be past and has been future, or that it is past, and has been future and present, or that it is future, and will be present and past. However, if, to consider just the first disjunction, inherence₁ is present, will be past and has been future, then given Smith's analysis of the copula it follows that the inherence₂ of presentness is now present, the inherence₂ of pastness is now future, and the inherence₂ of futurity is now past. Thus, McTaggart's problem is simply transferred from the first level of inherence to the second level of inherence. Consequently, the resulting infinite regress is in fact vicious since the original set of terms never escapes from contradiction at all.

One final point. In the second section of his paper Smith argues convincingly that "the various attempts to show that presentness, pastness, and futurity are real but are neither attributes nor regressive are unsuccessful."¹⁷ If his arguments are sound and if my argument against his "way out" of McTaggart's paradox is successful, then we have provided further evidence for the view that the tensor's account of time rationally ought not to be accepted.¹⁸

NOTES

¹ Quentin Smith, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XXIV, No. 3 (1986), pp. 383-396. The quoted passage occurs on p. 383.

² *Ibid.*, p. 385.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

⁵ See, J. M. E. McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence*, Vol. II, ed. C. D. Broad (Cambridge: University Press, 1927), Section 330; and "The Unreality of Time," in *Philosophical Studies*, ed. S. V. Keeling (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1934), p. 124.

⁶ Cf. L. Nathan Oaklander, *Temporal Relations and Temporal Becoming: A Defense of a Russellian Theory of Time* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984).

⁷ McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence*, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

⁸ McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," *op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹¹ For a detailed examination of McTaggart's paradox and various replies to it see Oaklander, *Temporal Relations and Temporal Becoming*, *op. cit.*, Chapters II and III.

¹² Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

¹⁸ I wish to thank Melvin M. Schuster for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.