

Questions on McTaggart, 'Time', from *The Nature of Existence*
PHIL 1480: Metaphysics
12 January 2005

Note: some of the paper might be skipped on a first reading, and is generally not worth getting too hung up about. In particular, I'd advise against paying much attention to sections 319–323 or 326–328. You can stop after §333: we'll come back to the remainder of the chapter when we read Broad the week after next.

1. What exactly are "the A-series" and "the B-series" (§306)? Series of what? Times? If so, how can they be two different series?
 2. McTaggart seems to think it obvious that 'there could be no time if nothing changed' (§309). Is this really so obvious? Isn't it conceivable that everything should 'freeze' and stay exactly the same throughout some period of time? Would such a possibility really be a counterexample to McTaggart's claim, or is he using 'change' in such a way that there would still be change of some sort even if everything were 'frozen'? (Cf. the initially bizarre-seeming remark a few sentences later that 'the fall of a sand-castle on the English coast changes the nature of the Great Pyramid'.)
 3. 'But what characteristics of an event can change? It seems to me that there is only one class of such characteristics. And that class consists of the determinations of the event in question by the terms of the A series' (§311, see also §317). What would McTaggart say to the following two objections: (i) 'There are lots of other ways for events to change! For example, the Vietnam War was an event which changed, becoming *more intense* as time went on.' (Hint: I don't think that McTaggart is using 'events' in such a way that things like the Vietnam War would count.) (ii) 'Even if I grant that *events* can never change, it does not follow, as you seem to think, that *nothing* can change: for all kinds of things that are not events—e.g. people—can and do change' (c.f. §315)
 4. In the course of explaining Russell's theory (an early version of what in class I called the "B-theory" of time), McTaggart says the following: 'If there were no consciousness... nothing would be in any sense past, present, or future. And if there were events earlier than any consciousness, those events would never be future or present, though they could be past.' These seem like strange things to say. Is there any reason why a proponent of the B-theory would have to say them?
 5. What is Russell's theory of what it is for a poker to change, and what is McTaggart's objection to it? (§315–316)
 6. Why does McTaggart, in the central argument in §329, say that 'all the three characteristics [of pastness, presentness and futurity] belong to each event'? What should a believer in the reality of the A-series say about this step?
 7. Try to restate the argument on §329 using A-sentences like 'I am sitting' and 'I am standing' in place of claims about pastness, presentness, and futurity. Does this make the argument look better or worse?
 8. McTaggart seems to be positing an ambiguity in the word 'is' in §331: 'And what is meant by "is," when, as here, it is used with a temporal meaning, and not simply for predication.' (Cf. Bill Clinton, 'It depends what "is" means.')
- How is the ambiguity supposed to work? Should someone who believes in

the reality of the A-series agree with McTaggart that there is or could be such an ambiguity?

9. Is McTaggart's conclusion that time is unreal (§333) completely crazy, or is it the option of agreeing with McTaggart something that deserves to be taken seriously?