

The viciousness of McTaggart's regress

McTaggart (1927) thought that if there was temporal passage, then it must be described as events having different 'A-properties' (being past, present, future) at different times, which would lead to an infinite vicious regress. One objection against McTaggart is to accept the regress, but deny that it is vicious (Smith 1986). I agree with Smith, but argue that the regress should be rejected on other grounds.

My argument consists of two premises:

- (1) Relational changes necessarily depend on non-relational changes to bring them about.
- (2) There is no non-relational change that can bring about the relational changes that constitute temporal passage.

Conclusion: Temporal passage, as McTaggart conceives it, is impossible.¹

McTaggart understands A-properties as *relational properties* that events and times have with respect to other times (McTaggart 1927:19), such as 'being present at a future time'. For now it suffices to understand relational properties such that

- (i) the having of relational properties depends on something distinct of the object that has them.²
- (ii) two objects that are qualitatively exactly alike can differ in terms of them.

If A-properties are relational properties, then change of A-properties must be relational change.³ I call changes of A-properties 'A-changes', and relations of pastness, presentness and futurity 'A-relations'. For McTaggart, temporal passage consists in times and events undergoing relational A-change.

¹ Note that there are alternative ways to understand temporal passage which are not vulnerable to the argument. For this paper, I will concentrate on McTaggart's temporal passage.

² There are some exceptions to this rule: if one thinks that 'identity with one self' is a relation, then the property of 'being identical with oneself' does not depend on any object distinct from the bearer of the property. I will not consider these cases for the talk.

³ Some people (e.g. Mellor 1998) do not believe in relational properties; for the purpose of this paper I will assume (in line with McTaggart) that there are relational properties, thus will not go into the debate of whether or not bearing a relation to some thing entails the having of a relational property.

There seems to be something that is essential to non-relational changes that is lacking in relational changes. The intuition is that relational changes are not ‘real’ changes; subjects change relationally in virtue of being related to another subject that changes, but they do not suffer from alteration (cf. Lombard 1977:67pp). Consider an oak, growing taller than the elm next to it. The elm changes relationally, because the oak grows taller than it; but no feature of the elm changes when the relation between oak and elm changes.⁴ At the heart of this intuition is that relational changes are ontologically dependent entities: in order to occur, they *necessarily* need other changes to bring them about (cf. Lombard 1977:74).⁵

McTaggart conceives of temporal passage as constituted by A-changes. Now, if an event *e* becomes present, *e* changes from ‘bearing a futurity relation to a time *t*’ to ‘bearing a presentness relation to *t*’. The only plausible candidate to bring *e*’s change about is *t*’s becoming past.⁶ My sending of this abstract, say, becomes present, in virtue of some present time becoming past. The present time’s becoming past has to be analysed in the same way- as relational change that occurs in virtue of another change, the only candidate being another A-change. The notorious regress ensues, as each A-change occurs in virtue of another A-change.

One way to put the intuition that relational changes are not real changes is to say that they are not among the basic constituents of reality. This suggests that relational changes must *ultimately* depend on *non-relational* changes to bring them about. After all, if none of the changes in a chain of relational changes is constitutive of reality, then how can the whole chain be? Call this claim (RC):

(RC) *Necessarily, relational change (ultimately) depends on non-relational change to bring it about.*

(RC) is a problem for McTaggart’s temporal passage. As temporal passage is conceived as an infinite chain of relational changes, there is at no point a real, non-relational change that brings the relational changes about in the first place.

⁴ The oak changes intrinsically *and* relationally, whereas the elm changes merely relationally.

⁵ I use the sentence ‘*x* brings *y* about’ interchangeably with ‘*y* occurs in virtue of *x*’. I am not sure whether this is entirely unproblematic, but I hope that I can leave any related problematic issues aside for the present discussion.

⁶ Note that the dependency relation between the event and the time is symmetric: *e*’s becoming present depends on *t*’s becoming past, just as *t*’s becoming past may be said to depend on *e*’s becoming present.

Following Lewis (1986), relations that supervene on the intrinsic properties of their relata (such as ‘taller than’) are ‘internal relations’ and changes of internal relations ‘internal relational changes’, where intrinsic properties are properties that all qualitative duplicates must share. External relations, such as ‘two meters apart from’, do not supervene on the intrinsic properties of the relata. External relational changes are problematic for (RC). Consider a cube and a sphere, in an otherwise empty space, moving away from each other. This change is an external relational change, because it doesn’t depend on the intrinsic natures of the relata. According to (RC), it must be brought about by some non-relational change. However, there is no such change, as the only change that occurs in that universe is the moving of the two objects. So according to (RC), it is impossible for the objects to move, but this seems absurd. Therefore, so the objection, (RC) must be false.

The cube/sphere objection can be easily applied to McTaggart’s regress. A-relations, such as ‘being past/present/future at’ are external relations- they don’t depend on the intrinsic properties of their relata. Consequently, A-changes don’t depend on intrinsic changes of the relata. In a chain of A-changes, there is no non-relational change to bring the relational changes about. But if it is plausible to reject (RC) in one case of external relational change, then why not in other cases of external relational change.

If (RC) is false for external relational change, then McTaggart’s infinite chain of A-changes might not be problematic after all. There is however a way for defenders of (RC) to concede that external relational changes do not depend on intrinsic changes of the relata, without giving up on (RC).

For Lewis (1986:62), external relations supervene on changes in the intrinsic nature of the *whole* composed of the relata. We can apply a ‘Lewisian solution’ to McTaggart: the chain of relational A-changes is necessarily brought about by a non-relational change of the whole, composed of the relata; in this case, the time-series itself. If the Lewisian solution works, then McTaggart’s temporal passage does constitute a regress, but not a problematic one. This depends upon whether a plausible, non-relational change can be found. If no such change can be found, then the regress becomes impossible, because it is a necessary condition for relational change that it is brought about by non-relational change.

I reject some objections against the Lewisian solution, and then argue that the only plausible change of the whole time-series is a relational change. Therefore McTaggart's temporal passage constitutes a regress that is impossible.

References:

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