22. THE LOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE DEBATE ABOUT MCTAGGART'S PARADOX

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ABSTRACT. This short article aims to illustrate the mutually ques-
tion-begging arguments that are often presented in debates between
opponents and defenderss of McTaggart's "proof" that A-properties
(pastness, presentness and futurity) are logically incoherent. A sam-
ple of such arguments is taken from a recent debate between L. Na-
than Oaklander (a defender of McTaggart) and myself (an opponent
of McTaggart) and a method of escaping the impasse that is often
reached in such debates is suggested.

I

A central issue in the philosophy of time is whether the tensed theory of time is true or false. According to this theory (in the version of it I prefer), events not only possess relations of earlier, later and simultaneity but also monadic and mind-independent properties of pastness, presentness and futurity. If the tensed theory of time is false and the tenseless theory true, then time consists merely of the relations of simultaneity, earlier and later.

A major area in which the debate between the tensers and detensers has been conducted involves the argument known as McTaggart's paradox. McTaggart's paradox, simply put, is that each event possesses incompatible properties of futurity, presentness and pastness and that appeals to different times at which the event possesses these properties merely reintroduce the incompatible possession of these prop-erties at a higher level. The debate between tensers and detensers about the sound-ness of McTaggart's paradox has been going on for over 50 years now and there is no sign that a resolution is in sight. Indeed, a reader of the literature on McTaggart's paradox might well come away with an impression of futility, a sense that the debate repeatedly ends in the same impasse, with the tensers predictably making a certain move and the detensers predictably responding with a certain countermove. Tensers typically respond to McTaggart's argument by claiming that there is a certain logical maneuver M that enables the contradiction deduced by McTaggart to be avoided. Detensers typically respond to the tensers maneuver M by claiming that M merely

reintroduces the contradiction in a new guise. Tensers then respond that the same maneuver M can be applied to the detensers response so as to render their imputation of the reintroduced contradiction ineffective. The detensers then deny this and the see-saw continues, with no apparent resolution in sight.

My aim in this paper is to uncover the logical structure of this see-saw between the tenser's maneuver M and the detenser's countermove and to suggest a way out of the seeming impasse. I shall illustrate this logical structure and possible resolution in terms of a recent debate between L. Nathan Oaklander (on the detenser's side) and myself (on the tenser's side).[1] I shall formulate the logical structure and resolution of the debate in terms drawn from our debate, but it should be kept in mind that this structure and resolution could be formulated in suitably different ways so as to apply to other discussions of McTaggart's paradox, for example, the recent discussions by D.H. Mellor, R. Le Poidevin, E.J. Lowe, F. Christensen, G. Schlesinger, J.M. Shorter, P. Horwich and others.[2]

II

The first move in the debate about the soundness of McTaggart's argument is made by the tenser and is a criticism of one of the premises of McTaggart's argument. The premise is that if the tensed theory of time is true, then for each event E it is true that

(1)   Event E is past, present and future.

According to McTaggart, (1) is self-contradictory, since the three properties are incompatible. Note that this evaluation requires (1) to be understood as predicating the three properties nonsuccessively, since only in this case would (1) be self-contradictory. This is admitted by McTaggart: "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*".[3] But there is some ambiguity about (1)'s nonsuccessive predication of the three properties. If (1) predicates the three properties nonsuccessively, then it predicates them either *simultaneously* or *timelessly*. If (1) predicates them simultaneously, it is self-contradictory since E cannot be past, present and future at one and the same time. If (1) attributes the three properties to E both nonsuccessively and nonsimultaneously, then it attributes them to E timelessly, which is self-contradictory since E cannot be timelessly past, present and future. McTaggart is not perfectly clear as to which of these two interpretations of (1) he adopts, and I will leave this issue undecided since it will not affect the argument of this paper.[4] It suffices to say that McTaggart regards (1) as self-contradictory since it predicates the three properties *nonsuccessively* of E.

McTaggart proceeds to argue that the contradiction in (1) cannot be eliminated by moving to a higher level at which the properties are possessed successively. The expansion of (1) into

(2)   E is past at a future moment, present at a present moment, and
        future at a past moment,

is unsuccessful since it is true of each of these moments M that

    (3)   Moment M is past, present and future.

(3) is no less self-contradictory than (1), since M cannot be nonsuccessively past, present and future.

       The response by the tenser to this argument is to question McTaggart's original assumption, that the tensed theory of time implies that (1) is true of each event E. This response seems warranted, since McTaggart provides no justification for this assumption. He simply asserts it. As I have stated, McTaggart admits that "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*". But he goes on to claim that the tensed theory of time is incoherent since the contradiction expressed in (1) cannot be eliminated by (2), since (2) entails the contradiction (3). Due to the reappearance of the contradiction, "the first set of terms [the events] never escape from contradiction at all".[5] But this claim is warranted *only if it has already been assumed* that the tensed theory of time entails that the terms possess the three properties nonsuccessively. Without this initial assumption, there is no contradiction in the first set of terms that needs to be escaped. The tenser of course rejects this initial assumption; according to him, the tensed theory of time entails not (1) but:

    (4)   E will be past, is now present, and was future; or E is now past
          and was present and was (still earlier) future; or E is now
          future and will be present and will (still later) be past.

(4) is consistent since the properties of pastness, presentness and futurity are ascribed to E at different times. For example, the first disjunct says that E possesses pastness in the future, presentness in the present, and futurity in the past. This implies an infinite regress, but the regress is not the vicious infinite regress that McTaggart assumes to obtain. Consider, for example, the clause "E is now present". According to my analysis, this asserts that the property of presentness inheres in the event E and also in its own inherence in E. This analysis may be understood as a way of responding to the question, "When does the property of presentness inhere in E"? Manifestly, if E is present this property does not inhere in E in the past or the future, but in the present. This means that presentness, not pastness or futurity, inheres in the inherence of presentness in E. A similar question can be raised about the latter inherence. When does presentness inhere in its own inherence in E? The answer is: at present. This means that presentness not only inheres in E and its inherence in E, but also in its inherence in its inherence in E. This regress continues infinitely but in a benign manner, since at no stage in the regress is there a contradiction. This regress is also compatible with the other regresses that obtain if E is present. We need only consider one of them, that implied by "E will be past". If E *is now* present, then it *will be* past. This latter clause means that futurity inheres in the pastness of E. But when does futurity inhere in the pastness of E? The answer is already implicit in the present tense of "inheres" in the statement that "futurity inheres in the pastness of E". Futurity *now* inheres in the pastness of E. "E will be past" implies that "E *is now* such that it will be

past". In terms of property-inherences, this means that presentness inheres in the inherence of futurity in the inherence of pastness in E. But when does presentness inhere in the inherence of futurity in the inherence of pastness in E? At present, since it is *right now* that the pastness of E is now future. The rest of this regress, it is apparent, is a regress of the inherences of presentness in its own inherences. This bespeaks of the predominance of presentness in the regresses, which is to be expected, since if anything is past or future it is *presently* past or future and if anything is present it is present *at present*. Despite the complexity of these regresses, I think it is intuitively clear that the two regresses described are compatible with each other and can obtain simultaneously:

> *First Regress* (implied by "E is now present"): Presentness inheres in E, and in its own inherence in E, and in its own inherence in its inherence in E, and so on infinitely.

> *Second Regress* (implied by "E will be past"): Pastness will inhere in E, and futurity inheres in the inherence of pastness in E, and presentness inheres in the inherence of futurity in the inherence of pastness in E, and presentness inheres in its own inherence in the inherence of futurity in the inherence of pastness in E, and presentness inheres in its own inherence in its own inherence in the inherence of futurity in the inherence of pastness in E, and so on infinitely.

III

Let us pause at this juncture and recall that it is my intent in this paper to uncover the underlying logic of the tenser/detenser debate about McTaggart's paradox. I have illustrated in Section II the first move in the debate, which is the maneuver *M* the tenser makes to avoid the contradiction imputed by McTaggart. The second move is that of the detenser, which is to claim that the maneuver *M* reintroduces the very problem it was designed to avoid. We find that this is in fact the move made by Oaklander in his response to my above-outlined maneuver *M*. Oaklander writes:

> . . . 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* . . . Thus, the notion of succession, analyzed in terms of the tensed inherence relations, does not really avoid the contradiction of something being past, present and future since it rearises at the level of inherence.[6]

Note that Oaklander regards the contradictory and nonsuccessive possession of the three temporal properties to be a simultaneous rather than a timeless possession. This interpretation may be adopted for the sake of responding to Oaklander's argument.

Let me point out, to begin with, that this passage is misleading insofar as it suggests that I *claimed* that the inherence of a temporal property is simultaneously past, present and future, since a perusal of my earlier paper will show that this claim is nowhere made. But this passage can be more charitably interpreted as meaning merely that my theory *implies* that the inherence is simultaneously past, present and future, even though I did not make this claim myself. Interpreted in this way, this passage may be taken as illustrating the second move made in the tenser-detenser debate, the assertion that the tenser's maneuver M implies the original contradiction, although in a new guise.

Let me pass immediately to the third move in the debate, the counterassertion made by the tenser to the detenser's assertion that maneuver M reintroduces the contradiction. The third move is that the detenser's assertion is itself invalidated by the very maneuver M the tenser had introduced. This is, in fact, my response to the above-quoted passage from Oaklander's article. Oaklander's assertion that the contradiction rearises at the level of inherence is itself based on the unjustified assumption originally made by McTaggart, that the tensed theory of time entails that pastness, presentness and futurity are possessed nonsuccessively (simultaneously, in Oaklander's reading). Oaklander assumes that

(5) The inherence of presentness in E is now present

entails

(6) The inherence of presentness in E is simultaneously past, present and future.

The fact that Oaklander assumes this is evinced by his assertion that "if inherence is present, then it must be past and future as well",[7] which Oaklander regards as implying that "the first order inherence relation has incompatible temporal properties simultaneously".[8] *But Oaklander gives no justification for this assumption.* Like McTaggart, he simply *asserts* that whatever possesses the three temporal properties must possess them nonsuccessively. By importing this unjustified and foreign assumption into the tensed theory of time, Oaklander, like McTaggart, proceeds to deduce the incoherence of the tensed theory. But this assumption is not a part of the tenser's theory of time. According to this theory, something possesses the three incompatible properties only successively. If the inherence of presentness in E is present, that does not imply the self-contradictory sentence (6) but the self-consistent sentence

(7) The inherence of presentness in E is *now* present, *was* future and *will be* past.

If my account of the logical structure of the tenser-detenser debate about McTaggart's paradox is sound, then I should be able to predict Oaklander's future response to this criticism, which would amount to the fourth move in the debate. I predict that his response will be that I have merely asserted, without argument, that (5) does not entail (6) and that (7) is self-consistent. If he makes this response, he will be right. For I have not *argued* that (5) does not entail (6); I have merely claimed, with-

out argument, that (5) does not entail (6) and that Oaklander has merely claimed, without argument, that (5) entails (6). Are we then at an impasse, each of us asserting without argument the contradictory of what the other asserts without argument?

IV

Russell once wrote that sometimes "one is confronted by one of those difficulties that occur constantly in philosophy, where you have two ultimate prejudices conflicting and where argument ceases".[9] But I believe that the point we have reached in the debate does not represent one of these difficulties and that there is a way out of the impasse. We can resolve the debate about McTaggart's paradox in one of two ways. In the first way, we can *stipulate* that tensed copulas and the predicates 'past', 'present' and 'future' have a certain meaning and draw the consequences of this stipulation. This would resolve the conflict, for the detenser could stipulate that the meaning of sentence (5) is such that (5) entails (6) and the tenser could stipulate that the meaning of (5) is such that (5) does not entail (6) but does entail (7). If this sentence is stipulated by the two different parties to have two different meanings, there can be no disagreement, for stipulations cannot be true or false.

The second way to resolve the conflict is to argue that the empirical evidence about the use of (5) in natural languages is evidence that (5) possesses a certain meaning and that this meaning corresponds, as the case may be, to the tensers or detensers theory. For example, the tenser would argue that tensed sentences as they are used in natural language do not entail that the temporal predicates are possessed nonsuccessively and that this fact counts in favor of the tenser's theory of time. This way of resolving the conflict is of considerably more philosophical interest than the first way, since this resolution enables a decision to be made between tenser's and detenser's theories of time. If the tenser could successfully make his case about these temporal predicates, this would contribute to establishing that the following argument is sound:

(8)   Tensed sentences in their ordinary uses ascribe to events properties of futurity, presentness and pastness.

(9)   It is a rule of the ordinary uses of these sentences that these properties are ascribed to events in a compatible manner, i.e., successively rather than nonsuccessively.

(10) Some utterances of these tensed sentences are true.

(11) Therefore, events possess, in a compatible manner, properties of pastness, presentness and futurity.

Clearly (11) is a philosophically significant claim, since it is just the claim that the tensed theory of time is true. Thus if we pursue this second way of resolving the conflict, we may be in a position to accomplish much more than we could ever hope to accomplish by pursuing the first stipulative manner of resolution.

Let me begin by presenting some linguistic evidence that supports (9). Suppose a person P uttered, 'The lightning stroke is now past', a few seconds after a stroke hit the ground. If the detenser's thesis endorsed by Oaklander were true of ordinary uses of tensed sentences, then it would be a rule of use of this sentence that if this sentence is true then it is also true that the stroke is simultaneously present and future. But imagine a person Q responding to P: "I agree that the stroke is now past. This implies, naturally, that the stroke is also present. And this very stroke, the one that just passed away, is in addition in the future. As we all know, the stroke is *simultaneously* past, present and future". This response is of course an outrage. Q would be regarded by P as either joking or insane. It is *obvious* that the rule of the ordinary use of this sentence does not imply that the stroke, if past, is *simultaneously* present and future. It is equally obvious that this rule does not imply that the storm, if past, is *timelessly* past, present and future. It is a rule of the ordinary use of temporal predicates that they are satisfied successively by events, not simultaneously or timelessly.

But this conclusion is far from entailing that the tensed theory of time is true. The detenser could admit that the three predicates as ordinarily used obey the rule that they are satisfied by events successively, but deny that these predicates are ordinarily used to ascribe properties of presentness, pastness and futurity. The detenser could argue that these predicates, and tensed locutions in general, are ordinarily used to ascribe dyadic properties of earlier, later and simultaneity. For example, he could claim that "E is past" means "E is earlier than this utterance". Thus, the next step the tenser needs to take is to argue that the linguistic data about the ordinary uses of these predicates and other tensed locutions is consistent only with the hypothesis that they are used to ascribe properties of futurity, presentness and pastness. I have presented some arguments on behalf of this thesis in other writings[10] and believe, on the basis of these arguments, that the tenser's explanation of the use of these locutions is preferable. But I will acknowledge that even if this thesis is true, it does not entail that the tensed theory of time is true. For the ordinary uses of tensed sentences might one and all be false.

Thus I need the additional premise that "some utterances of tensed sentences (in their ordinary use) are true". I have not directly presented any arguments for this premise[11] and will not offer any here; I will simply point out the consequences of denying it. If it is denied, then it can never be uttered with truth that 'I am now thinking', 'The storm is past', and 'I will go to the library tomorrow'. Given the choice between this extreme scepticism and the tensed theory of time, I think that even the most die-hard detenser might embrace the temporal phenomenon he most fears, the moving *Now*.[12]   □

ENDNOTES

1   *Vide*, Quentin Smith, "The Infinite Regress of Temporal Attributions", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986) 383-96, and L. Nathan Oaklander, "McTaggart's Paradox and the Infinite Regress of Temporal Attributions: A Reply to Smith", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 25 (1987) 425-31.

2   *Vide*, R. Le Poidevin and D.H. Mellor, "Time, Change, and the 'Indexical' Fallacy", *Mind* 96 (1987) 534-38; E. J. Lowe "The Indexical Fallacy in McTaggart's Proof of the Unreality of Time" *Mind* 96 (1987) 62-70, and "Reply to Le Poidevin and Mellor", *Mind* 96 (1987) 539-42; F. Christensen, "McTaggart's Paradox and the Nature of Time", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1974) 289-99; G. Schlesinger, *Aspects of Time* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1980), Chapter III; J.M. Shorter, "The Reality of Time", *Philosophia* 14 (1984) 321-39; P. Horwich, *Asymmetries in Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), Chapter 2.

3   J.M.E. McTaggart, "Time", in *The Philosophy of Time*, ed. Richard Gale (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 96. My italics.

4   It is arguable that he implicitly adopts the simultaneous interpretation, for he mentions this one (e.g., "the characteristics are only incompatible when they are simultaneous", McTaggart *op.cit.*, 95) and not the timeless one. In Smith, *op. cit.*, I adopted the simultaneous interpretation and Oaklander also adopts it in Oaklander, *op. cit.*. However, the choice between the simultaneous and timeless interpretations does not affect the soundness of McTaggart's argument and I will leave both alternatives open in this paper.

5   *Ibid.* For an analysis of the invalid inference that seems to motivate McTaggart's assumption, see Smith, *op. cit.*, 383-86. This analysis assumes the simultaneity interpretation but a similar analysis can be constructed that uses the timeless interpretation.

6   Oaklander, *op. cit.*, 430.

7   *Ibid.*, 429.

8   Ibid., 430.

9   Bertrand Russell, *Logic and Knowledge* (New York: Putnam, 1956) 181.

10   *Vide*, Quentin Smith, "The Mind-Independence of Temporal Becoming", *Philosophical Studies* 47 (1985) 109-19; "The Impossibility of Token-Reflexive Analyses", *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 25 (1986) 757-60; "Sentences About Time", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1987) 37-53; "Problems With the New Tenseless Theory of Time", *Philosophical Studies* 52 (1987) 371-92; "The Phenomenology of A-time", *Dialogos* (Puerto Rico) 52 (1988), forthcoming; "Tensed States of Affairs and Possible Worlds", *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 32 (1988), forthcoming; "Temporal

Indexicals", *Erkenntnis*, forthcoming; "The Multiple Uses of Indexicals", *Synthese* 78, No.2, forthcoming.

[11]   In *The Felt Meanings of the World: A Metaphysics of Feeling* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1986), section 20, ii, 131-34, I implicitly argued for this premise.