McTaggart “The Unreality of Time”

**A series** Positions are either past, present, or future, and positions can change in these respects.

**B series** Permanent; positions are (temporally) related as earlier than, and later than each other.

**C series** Permanent, and only gives a (non-temporal) ordering of events (seems to be a partial ordering that McTaggart has in mind).

According to McTaggart, the relations of the C series only become temporal when assuming time and change, and only on those assumptions does it become the B series. For McTaggart; since the A series is essential for time, the A series is necessary for the B series (page 461). As far as I can see; Mctaggart thinks that time is given by the A series plus the C series (page 461-462). He argues for the unreality of time, and the argument has the following structure:

**Argumentative structure**

| P1 | The A series is essential (necessary) for time |
| P2 | The reality of time requires the reality of the A series |
| P3 | The A series is contradictory, and thus not real |
| C  | Time is not real |

**Why think P1?**

A universe in which nothing whatever changed (including the thoughts of the conscious beings in it) would be a timeless universe. (page 459)

The only sense in which events change is by changing their temporal properties of being past, present or future. As in the example of the death of Queen Anne (page 460), according to McTaggart:

… in every respect but one it is equally devoid of change. But in one respect it does change. It began by being a future event. It became every moment an event in the nearer future. At last it was present. Then it became past, and will always remain so, though every moment it becomes further and further past. (page 460)

Since this is the only kind of change for events, the A-series is essential to time, since such changes requires the A series relations.

**Why think P3?**

Contradiction:

“… the characteristics of the A series are mutually incompatible and yet all true of every term.” (page 470)

According to the A-series, the very same event can be (at different times) both past, present and future, but these claims are contradictory unless they are relativized to times. However, such a relativization requires the postulation of a further time series (A-series) and so can’t
solve the contradiction because this requirement will iterate, and therefore leads to a vicious regress. Why is that?

**Vicious regress**

The initial argument for the contradiction involved in the A series is straightforward:

- **P1** Past, present, and future are incompatible determinations. Every event must be one or the other, but no event can be more than one. This is essential to the meaning of the terms. (page 468)
- **P2** But every event has them all. (page 468)
- **C** Contradiction

One might suggest that past, present, and future are compatible determinations since they are somehow time-indexed. An event might be present, and then it will be past, and has been future. According to McTaggart, this won't work since:

1. The suggestion resolves the contradiction by introducing a series; events have their presentnesses, pastnesses, and futurenesses relative to a temporal order, and not per se.
2. But this requires an additional ordering.
3. This ordering is itself an A series, involving the relations of past, present, and future.

**C** Therefore, the contradiction cannot be resolved, but only iterates, and forms a vicious regress.

You can never get rid of the contradiction, for, by the act of removing it from what is to be explained, you produce it over again in the explanation. And so the explanation is invalid. (Page 469)

**For discussion**

This is how I understand his line of thought, is that reasonable? And does the argument work? What about P2 in the original argument, is that entirely unproblematic?

**Relativity**

Notice that McTaggart does not (naturally) discuss the relation between relativity theory and time. And sometimes his claims seem to be in conflict with relativity, for example when he says:

And this ultimate fact is essential to time. For it is admitted that it is essential to time that each moment of it shall either be earlier or later than any other moment; and these relations are permanent. (page 464)