

The Philosophy of Time

Lecture Four

From McTaggart to Presentism

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From McTaggart to Presentism

Introduction

Dummett's Defence of McTaggart

Objection (1): The Analysis of Tense

Objection (2): Indexicality

The Presentist Option

McTaggart's Argument for the Unreality of Time

- McTaggart's argument has three premises:
 - (1) The reality of time requires the reality of change
 - (2) The reality of change requires the reality of the A-Series
 - (3) But, the idea of a dynamic A-Series contains a contradiction, so there can be no real A-Series
- Last week we began looking at premise (3)
- McTaggart's argument was tricky, and we ended last lecture on a decidedly uncertain note

This Week

- This week, we are going to look at Dummett's attempt to make some progress on this problem
- Dummett suggests that McTaggart's argument is inherently bound up with the idea of a **complete description of reality**
- As we will see, this will lead to an interesting connection between McTaggart's argument and **presentism**
- **Spoiler:** the only way to save the reality of the A-Series from the Dummett-McTaggart attack is by endorsing presentism

Another Route to Presentism

- It is worth noting that this is not the only way in which we might try to draw a connection between McTaggart and presentism
- William Lane Craig offers a very interesting alternative way of reading McTaggart's argument
- For Craig, McTaggart's argument is a version of a problem now known as **the problem of temporary intrinsics**
- As Craig points out, when you understand the argument in this way, presentism offers a way out
 - For background on the problem of temporary intrinsics, see Lewis 1986, item 5 in the reading pack
 - For Craig's argument, see his 1998, item 7 in the reading pack

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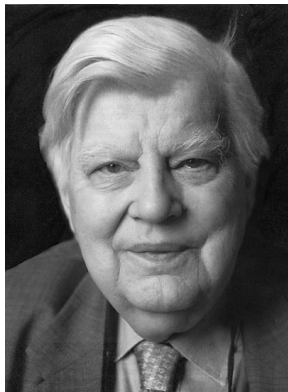
Objection (1): The Analysis of Tense

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Michael Dummett

- Michael Dummett was one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th Century
- He thought that McTaggart's argument was a good one
- But he thought that there was a hidden background assumption in the argument: that it is possible to give a complete description of the world



Michael Dummett

Warning: Dummett's paper is fascinating, but very difficult to follow. What follows is my best attempt to understand Dummett's reconstruction of McTaggart. This is speculative work, and I would be very interested to hear what you think!

A Complete Description of the World

- There are many, many truths about the world: dogs are mammals, humans are mortal, Jupiter is a planet...
- Clearly, there are too many truths for any human to know
- We are too stupid, our memories are too short, our sense organs are too limited, and we are stuck in our particular corner of the Universe

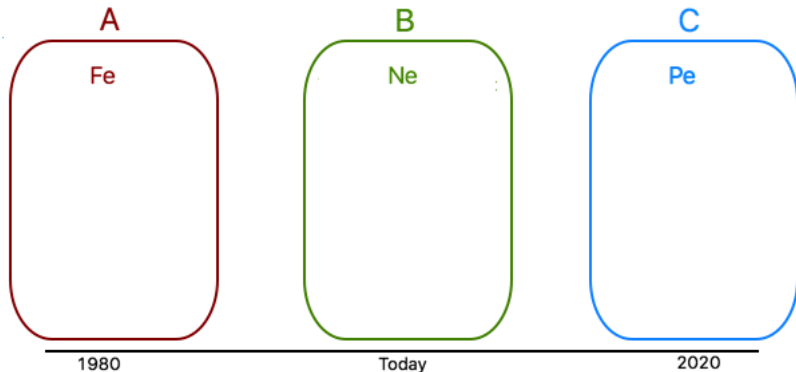
A Complete Description of the World

- Nonetheless, it seems natural to insist that there is such a thing as a complete description of the world: a complete list of all the truths
- Of course, this description would not be something any human could grasp, and so is an abstract, idealised description
- But philosophers are used to these idealisations — it is perfectly normal to talk about **propositions** which no human has ever expressed

A Complete Description of the World

- According to Dummett, McTaggart was tacitly assuming that this kind of idealised complete description of the world was in principle possible
- Now to be clear, all that is being assumed is that **at least one** completed description is possible
- There might be **more** than one
 - For example, it could be that there are two equally good fundamental physical theories, and that you can use these two different theories to frame two different complete descriptions of the world

Reconstructing McTaggart's Argument

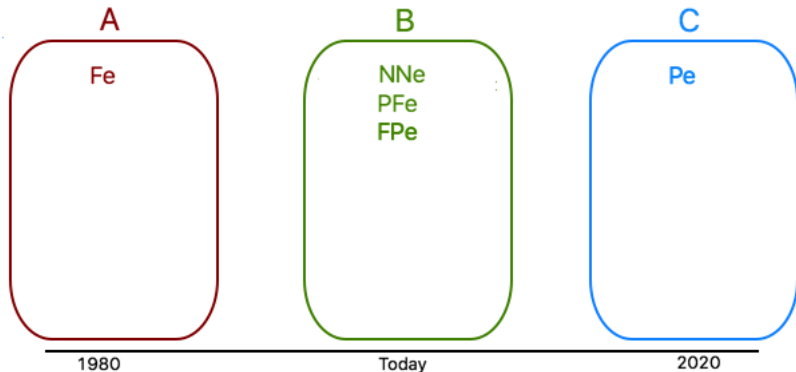


- Imagine three descriptions of some event e , all made at different times: A in 1980, B right now, and C in 2020

Reconstructing McTaggart's Argument

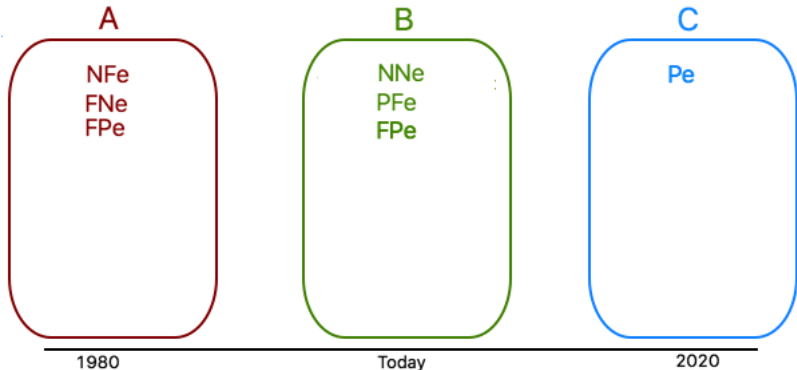
- A, B and C are all true descriptions of e
- So there should be a way of combining all of those descriptions into one big description of reality
- But if we just try conjoining them, we get something impossible:
 - Fe **and** Ne **and** Pe
- At this point we will want to reply that all this shows is that the way we tried to combine what A, B and C said is **stupid**

Reconstructing McTaggart's Argument



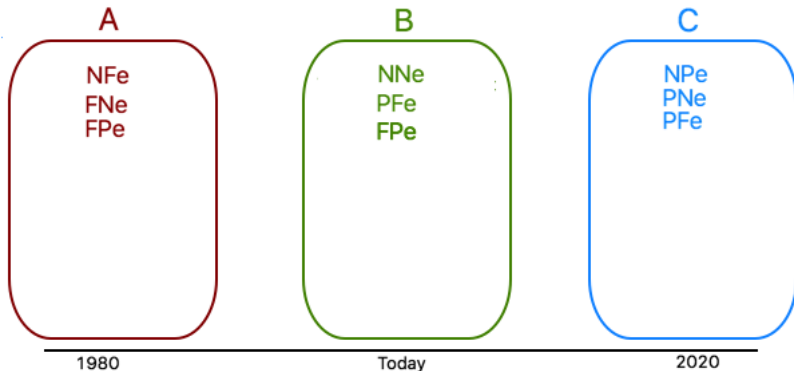
- If we want to combine what A and C said with what B said, we should say that e **was** future and **will be** past

Reconstructing McTaggart's Argument



- And we must make similar adjustments if we want to combine what B and C said with what A said

Reconstructing McTaggart's Argument

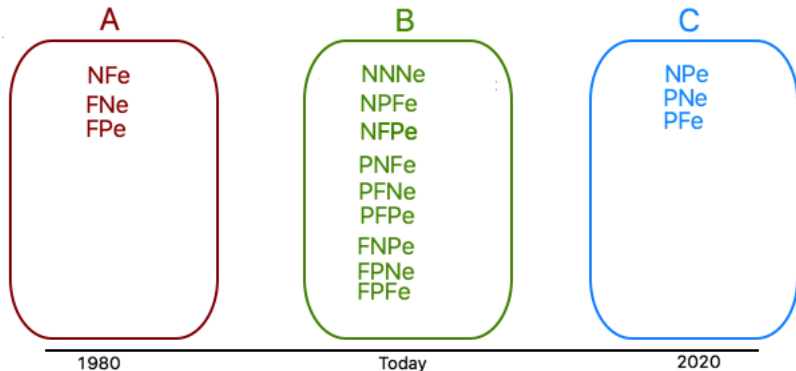


- And we similar adjustments if we want to combine what A and B said with what C said

Reconstructing McTaggart's Argument

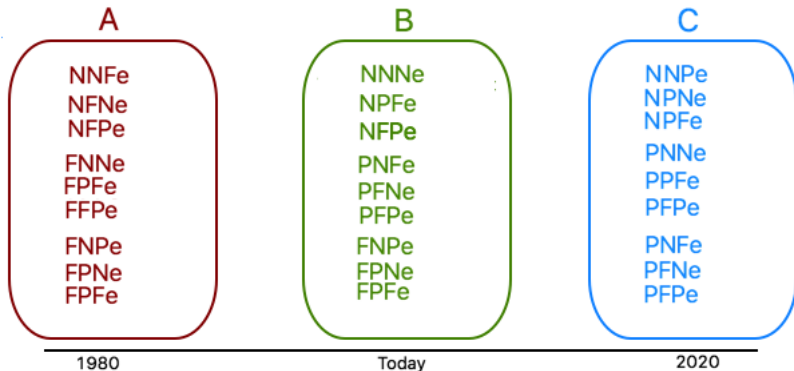
- Now we have three bigger true descriptions of e
- So there should be a way of combining all of those descriptions into one big description of reality
- But if we just try conjoining them, we still get something impossible:
 - NFe **and** NNe **and** NPe **and**...
- At this point we will want to reply that all this shows is that the way we tried to combine what A, B and C said is **stupid**

Reconstructing McTaggart's Argument



- We can now combine what A and C says with what B says like this

Reconstructing McTaggart's Argument



- And likewise with the other descriptions

Reconstructing McTaggart's Argument

- Now we have three **even bigger** true descriptions of e
- So there should be a way of combining all of those descriptions into one big description of reality
- But if we just try conjoining them, we still get something impossible:
 - $NNFe$ **and** $NNNe$ **and** $NNPe$ **and**...
- At this point it is clear that we are on an infinite regress

The Driving Force of the Regress

- The important thing to note is that on this way of understanding things, what is driving McTaggart's regress is his desire to combine all three descriptions of the world — A, B and C — into one big description
- Just sticking those descriptions together leads to something impossible, so we have to go one step up in McTaggart's regress
 - $Ne \Rightarrow NNe$
- But once we go up a level, we are confronted by **exactly the same problem**
- As a result, it seems fair to say that the regress is vicious
- So if we assume that it must be possible to give a complete description of the world, then we can conclude that the A-Series cannot be real

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Broad's Objection to McTaggart

- Last week we looked at Broad's objection to McTaggart's argument
- McTaggart's argument involved giving the following analysis of tensed claims:

a was F \Rightarrow a is F in the past

a is now F \Rightarrow a is F in the present

a will be F \Rightarrow a is F in the future

- Broad thought that McTaggart's argument was just a proof that we shouldn't analyse tense like that

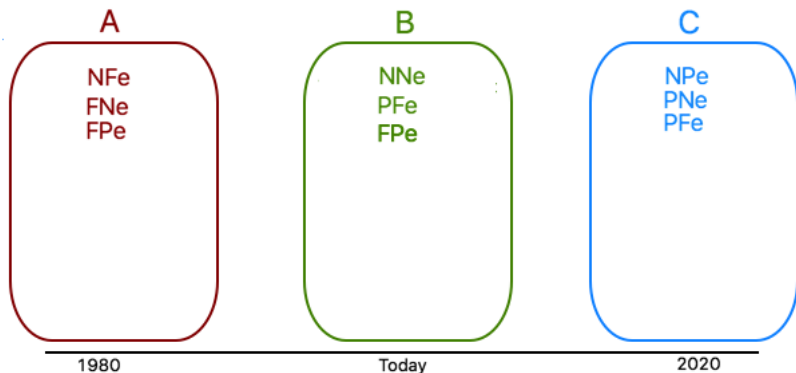
Broad's Objection to our Dummettian Reconstruction

- I used **exactly the same** analysis of tense in my Dummettian reconstruction of McTaggart's argument
 - I wrote 'e was in the future' as '*PFe*', which is shorthand for 'e is in the future in the past'
- Does this mean that Broad's objection applies to our reconstruction too?
- No!

Embedding A-Properties

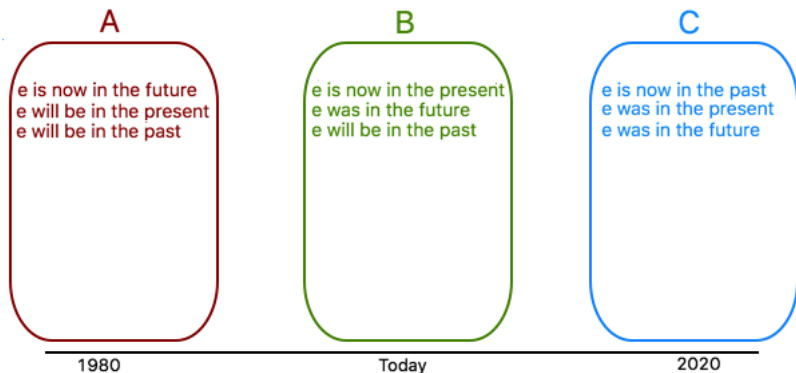
- The reason that I used McTaggart's analysis of tense is that it allows us to **embed** A-properties
- As well as saying that *e* is in the past, we can say that it is in the future in the past, or in the present in the future in the past, or...
- We can do this because we can always add the words 'in the past/present/future' to the end of a sentence
- Tense cannot be embedded in the same ways
- This matters, because it is only by embedding A-Properties that we have any chance of combining our different descriptions of the world

Staying Tensed



- Imagine that we did not give McTaggart's analysis of tense...

Staying Tensed



- ...and instead kept everything tensed

Staying Tensed

- As before, we have three descriptions of the world, but when we try to conjoin them, we end up with something impossible:
 - e is now in the future **and** e is now in the present **and** e is now in the past **and**...
- When we were using McTaggart's analysis of tense, we could **try** to deal with this problem by further embedding these descriptions in A-Properties
- But since we cannot embed tense, that option wouldn't be open here

Brushing off Broad

- In short, Broad is right that if we did not use McTaggart's analysis of tense, we would not get his regress
- But that just means that we would be confronted once and for all with the impossibility of combining A, B and C
- So whether or not we use McTaggart's analysis of tense, it would be impossible to give a complete description of the world if the A-Series were real

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Indexicals

- An **indexical** is a word whose meaning depends on the context it is used in
- 'Here' is indexical:
 - If you say 'I am here' while standing in London, you are saying that you are in London
 - If you say 'I am here' while standing in York, you are saying that you are in York
- It seems obvious that the words we use to express A-Properties — **in the past, in the present** etc. — are indexical too
 - If you had said 'The Moon Landing is in the past' in 1950, you would have said something false
 - If you say 'The Moon Landing is in the past' today, you will say something true

An Indexical Fallacy?

- It has been suggested that McTaggart's argument works by simply forgetting that A-Terminology is indexical
- This view was urged by Lowe in his 1987 article 'The Indexical Fallacy in McTaggart's Proof of the Unreality of Time', published in *Mind*

Translating Across Time

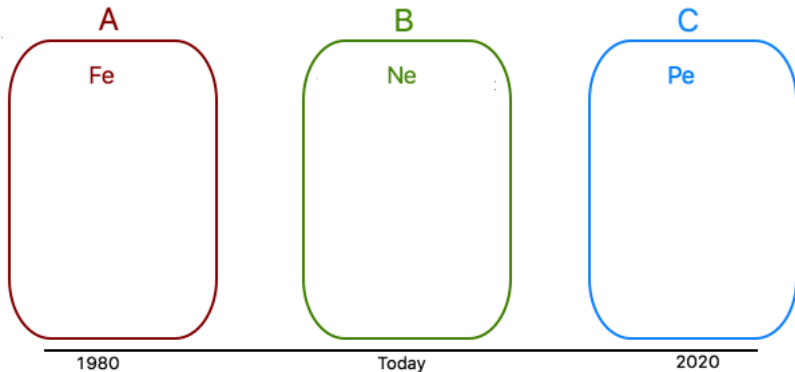
- Suppose A says 'e is 37 years in the future' in 1980
- Now suppose that B wants to re-express what A said in 2017
- How should B do that?
- B **should not** use the very same words as A, namely 'e is 37 years in the future'
 - '37 years in the future' is an indexical, and it means something different when it is used in 2017 from what it means when it is used in 1980
- Instead, B **should** say 'e is in the present'
 - When we utter 'e is in the present' in 2017, we express the very same thought that we would have expressed if we had uttered 'e is 37 years in the future' in 1980

Translating Across Space

- This is exactly the same as the following simpler, spatial case
- Suppose A is in London, and says 'The London Eye is here'
- Now suppose that B is 60 miles North of A, and B wants to re-express what A said
- Clearly, B **should not** say 'The London Eye is here'
- B should say 'The London Eye is 60 miles South'

- The case of 'in 37 years in the future' and 'in the present' is exactly the same
- It is just that A and B are in different temporal positions, rather than different spatial positions

The Supposed Indexical Fallacy



- Recall that on our current understanding, McTaggart's argument gets going by trying to combine these three descriptions

The Supposed Indexical Fallacy

- The trouble was meant to be that when we try to conjoin them, we get a something impossible:
 - *Fe and Ne and Pe*
- But now it seems that this was all a terrible mistake
- When someone in A's position tries to re-express what B meant by 'e is in the present', they should just say 'e is in the future'!
 - Because 'in the present' and 'in the future' are indexical, they mean different things when said at different times
- Similarly, when someone in C's position tries to re-express what B meant by 'e is in the present', they should just say 'e is in the past'
- In other words, A, B and C are all saying **exactly the same thing** about e, they are just using different words to say it

Disposing of the Fallacy

- This all seems **very** sensible to me: we **should** insist that A, B and C are all saying the same thing about *e*, right from the start
- But that does not in any way upset McTaggart's argument
- That's because someone who believed in a **real A-Series** couldn't say that A, B and C are all saying the same thing about *e*

Disposing of the Fallacy

- If the A-Series is a real thing, then the properties *past*, *present* and *future* are real properties of *e*
- In that case, it cannot be that A, B and C are all saying the same thing about *e* in different ways
 - A is saying that *e* has the real property *future*
 - B is saying that *e* has the real property *present*
 - C is saying that *e* has the real property *past*
- Now, McTaggart's proof was simply meant to show that the A-Series wasn't a real, objective feature of the world
- And if you think that the A-Series is real, then you cannot accuse his proof of making an indexical fallacy

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The Presentist Option

- When we understand it in this Dummettian way, McTaggart's argument presents us with two options:

Either reject the A-Series as unreal

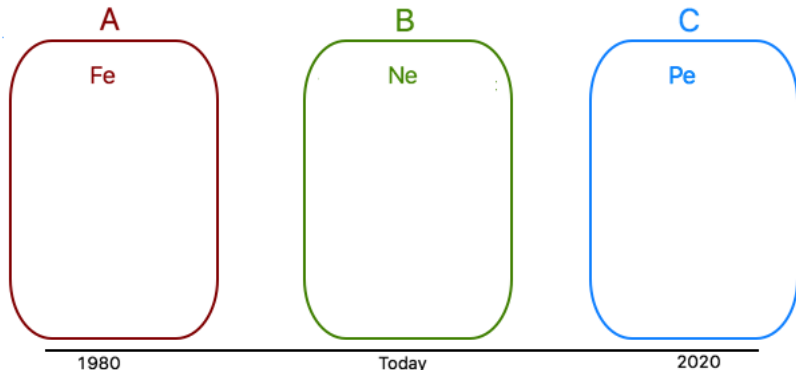
or deny that it is possible, even in principle, to give a complete description of the world

- At this point you might be wondering how to choose between these two options
- We will come back to that at the moment, but first I want to look at one last way of dodging the Dummett-McTaggart argument: **presentism**

Introducing Presentism

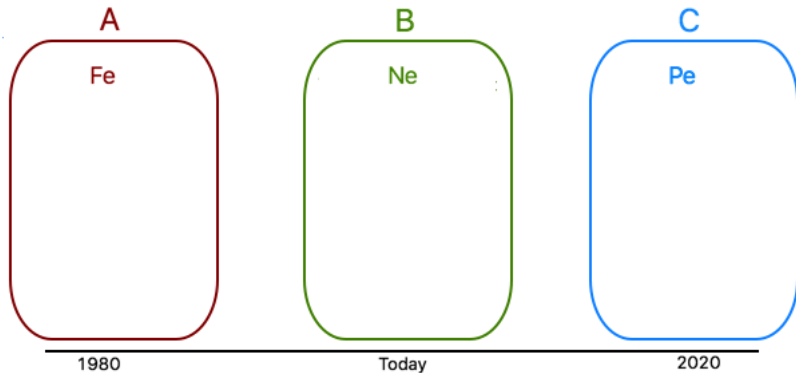
- **Presentism** is the doctrine that only the present moment is real
 - (This is just a first approximation — we will have to refine it in later lectures)
- Presentism is opposed by **eternalism**, according to which all times are equally real
- McTaggart was most definitely an eternalist
 - McTaggart just takes it for granted that events do not come in and out of existence
- But maybe we could dodge the whole argument by accepting presentism?

Three Descriptions



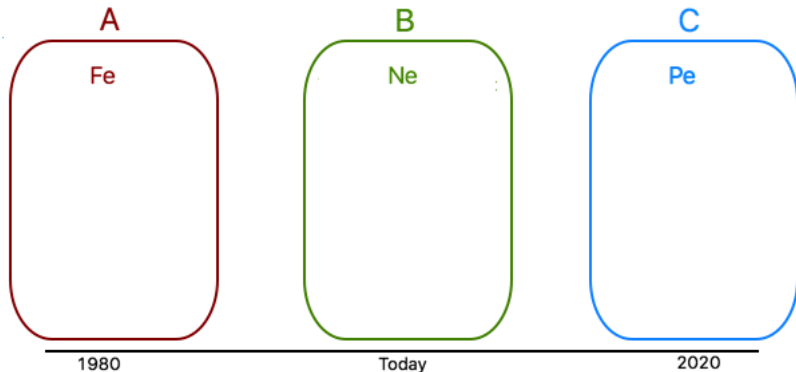
- Recall that on our current understanding, McTaggart's argument gets going by trying to combine these three descriptions

Three Descriptions



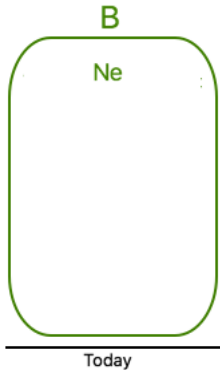
- We wanted to combine them because we wanted to make one complete description of reality

Three Descriptions



- But if we accept presentism, then we think that only the present moment is real

A Complete Presentist Description



- So our complete description of the world is just given by B alone

The Presentist Response to McTaggart

- If we are presentists, then this version of the McTaggart argument simply ends
 - A complete description of how the world is right now is a complete description of the world, full stop
- And I think we can go further too: presentism is the **only** way to save the reality of the A-Series

Worlds and Descriptions

- Recall that the Dummett-McTaggart argument was meant to give us just two options

Either reject the A-Series as unreal

or deny that it is possible, even in principle, to give a complete description of the world

- Why should we reject the A-Series as unreal, rather than simply deny the possibility of a complete description of the world?
- Simply put: what makes the world **one big world** is the fact that we can give a complete description of the whole thing

The Presentist Option, Again

- If we said that our three descriptions — A, B and C — just couldn't be added together, then that would amount to saying that they described three different worlds
 - A describes one world, in which e is future
 - B describes another world, in which e is present
 - C describes yet another world, in which e is past
- But saying **that** would just be the same as being a presentist
- We do not have one world made up of a succession of moments
- We have three possible worlds, each one moment long, and each utterly disconnected from the other

The Presentist Option, Again

- If all of this is right, then we are faced with just two options:
 - **Either** reject the A-Series as unreal
 - **or** accept presentism
- To figure out which one of these we should do, we need to look more at presentism
- That is what we will begin doing as of next week!

For Next Week

- Look at the following readings in the reading pack:
 - Crisp, Thomas (2003) 'Presentism', item 16 in the reading pack. Focus on section 2 (esp. subsections 2.1, 2.2, 2.4.1 and 2.4.3) and section 3 (esp. subsections 3.1 and 3.4)
 - Sider, Theodore (2001) 'Against Presentism', item 17 in the reading pack. Begin by looking at sections 1–3; pp. 25–7 are particularly useful and important. If you're really keen, pp. 35–42 are also worth looking at