Being in Time: The Nature of Time in Light of McTaggart's Paradox, by David J. Farmer. Lanham: University Press of America, 1990. Pp. 223.

The terms "Past", "Present", and "Future" are mutually exclusive: if an event or moment is past, it is not also present or future; if present, it is not also past or future, etc. However, if it is true that time flows in the sense that what was once present is constantly receding further and further into the past, then every event and moment is past, present, *and* future. But this is a contradiction, so we have to give up talk of past, present and future, and admit that time is unreal.

This, in a very small nutshell, is J.McT.E. McTaggart's famous proof of the unreality of time. How utterly unconvincing it seems on first sight, and yet it has been the starting point of many discussions of the nature of time. It has provoked published responses from philosophers who have not otherwise written about time, and anyone tackling the subject seriously now has to wade through an enormous amount of complex literature. This David Farmer has done, producing (as far as I know) the first monograph exclusively devoted to McTaggart's argument. No stone is left unturned. Well over thirty discussions of the paradox are examined, implicit premises are made explicit (even those that might be thought to be implicit in *any* reductio, for example, the Law of Non-contradiction), and there are a few straw men to deal with too. The result is a picture of enormous com-

plexity, with Farmer's reconstruction of McTaggart's argument running to thirteen premises (some of which have two or three parts).

Some commentators have used McTaggart's paradox to argue, not for the unreality of time, but for the unreality of *tense*: that is, they take McTaggart to have (unintentionally) shown that past, present and future mark only relational distinctions: for example, an event is only present relative to a particular time or token judgement. This disposes of the paradox as there is no contradiction in asserting that E is present at t_1 but past at t_2. In this respect, tensed terms are like "here" and "there". Consequently there is no more a flow of time than there is a flow of space. In contrast, Farmer's professed view is that McTaggart's argument (and any reconstruction) *fails* to establish the unreality of tense. However, rather than focussing on the issue of the relationality/non-relationality of tensed distinctions, Farmer casts the debate in terms of ontology: either you believe that all times are equally real or you believe, with Farmer, that some times (e.g. future ones) are unreal. This does not map precisely onto the other debate. It would seem at least coherent to think of all times as being equally real, and yet insist on the non-relationality of tense. However, what one *cannot* sensibly do is to combine the doctrine that tensed distinctions are purely relational with the denial of the view that all times, past, present and future, are equally real.

What puzzles me, given this, is that Farmer's response to the paradox seems to be exactly that of someone who *doesn't* believe in real tense. He says that "There is a sense in which the contradiction that McTaggart describes is real; there is an equally important sense in which it is unreal". The sense in which it is unreal is that there is no contradiction just in the assertion that an event is future in the past, present in the present and past in the future. The contradiction only arises once one adds the further proposition that moments *change* from being future to being past. So a moment of future time is equally a moment of past time. This is the sense in which the paradox is real. But since McTaggart's argument contains *both* of these premises, to say that together they generate a real contradiction is surely to say that the argument succeeds. Farmer, however, has a solution to the paradox: "I cannot predicate presentness *simpliciter*; I can predicate the property of being present at t_1, if the property is present at t_1". Now if Farmer means by this that "x is present" is true at t if and only if x occurs at t, then he is providing *tenseless* truth-conditions for tensed statements, which is neither more nor less than the denial of real tense. Yet Farmer insists that tense *is* real in the sense that (*i*) there exists the non-relational property of being present *simpliciter* and (*ii*) all times are *not* equally real.

What are we to make of this position? To begin with, there is something very odd in the notion that, although there exists the property of being present *simpliciter*, we can only predicate the relational property of being present at a certain time. If by this Farmer means that there is a truth about tense which we cannot, for fear of contradiction, articulate, then he is simply indulging in a piece of Wittgensteinian obscurantism. On (*ii*), the obvious response is that reality, unlike

tense, is not a relational matter: a time cannot be unreal relative to t_1 but re- -rel-ative to t_2.

Although I believe Farmer's own approach to the paradox to be inconsistent, its exposition only takes up a small amount of the book. The rest is devoted to discussions of other commentaries and reconstructions. Many of the points are perceptive. Farmer succeeds in clearing away a number of red herrings that have attached themselves to the argument, and one is certainly left with a deeper conception of the paradox. But I still can't help feeling that the best service to McTaggart is to *simplify* the argument as far as possible: an argument with thirteen premises just isn't digestible. Many people would be frightened and bewildered by Farmer's McTaggart, and come away with their impression confirmed that time is an intractable field to be approached only by formal logicians and theoretical physicists.

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