

On Fine's McTaggartian Argument

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(Content taken from 'As Time Goes By', written with Sven Rosenkranz.)

<i>Realism</i>	Reality is constituted (at least, in part) by tensed facts.
<i>Neutrality</i>	No time is privileged, the tensed facts that constitute reality are not oriented towards one time as opposed to another.
<i>Absolutism</i>	The constitution of reality is an absolute matter, i.e. not relative to a time or other form of temporal standpoint.
<i>Coherence</i>	Reality is not contradictory, it is not constituted by facts with incompatible content.

We take the Absolutist to have a notion of time-relative constitution defined as follows: a fact constitutes reality at a time t iff it constitutes reality *simpliciter*.

We take Realism to imply that some facts constitute reality at the present time, and Neutrality to say that some fact constitutes reality at some time distinct from the present time.

We then take Coherence to be: at no time is reality constituted by facts with incompatible contents. (In case Absolutism is taken for granted, this can be simplified as: reality is not constituted *simpliciter* by facts with incompatible contents.)

Fine's McTaggart argument purports to show that Realism, Neutrality, Absolutism and Coherence cannot all be true together. If this is so, realists about tense can be:

- Non-neutralists = Fine's standard realists = presentists
- Neutralists non-absolutists = Fine's relativists
- Neutralists absolutists non-coherentists = Fine's fragmentalists

The argument:

- (1) There are tensed facts that constitute reality at the present time, e.g. the fact that presently, I am standing.
- (2) There are some tensed facts that constitute reality at a time distinct from the present time, e.g. 2 days hence.
- (3) If (2) holds, reality is not boring but variegated over time.
- (4) Given (2) and (3), it can be assumed that some tensed fact f that constitutes reality 2 days hence is such that f and the fact that presently, I am standing have incompatible contents.
- (5) Given (4), one example of such a fact would be the fact that presently, I am sitting.
- (6) If (5) holds, then reality is absolutely, and hence presently, constituted by both the fact that presently, I am standing and the fact that presently, I am sitting.
- (7) But if so, Coherence will be violated.

Comments: (1) is an expression of Realism. (2) is an expression of Neutrality. Something like (3) is explicitly assumed by Fine. (4) is OK (we take it to follow from what 'variegated' means).

Then? What is it for two facts to have *incompatible contents*?

Incompatible-Content: Two facts f and f' have incompatible contents \equiv df there are two times t and t' , and a p and a q such that, at t , f is the fact that p and, at t' , f' is the fact that q and it is impossible that $p \ \& \ q$.

Strongly-Incompatible-Content: Two facts f and f' have strongly-incompatible contents at t \equiv df there is a p and a q such that, at t , f is the fact that p and f' is the fact that q and it is impossible that $p \ \& \ q$.

We suggest that 'incompatible contents' in (4) be understood according to the first definition, and that in Coherence it should be understood according to the second: there are no facts f and f' and no times t such that at t , f and f' constitute reality and have strongly incompatible contents.

Back to the argument.

Given (4) we may assume that there is a fact f which, at the time t 2 days hence, constitutes reality and is the fact that presently, I am sitting.

By Absolutism both the fact that presently, I am standing and f constitute reality now.

We get a violation of Coherence IF we assume that now, f is still the fact that presently, I am sitting.

We can block the argument at that point.

Use 'n days from the present' for 'presently' in case 'n' refers to 0, for '(-n) days ago' in case 'n' refers to a negative number, and for 'n days hence' in case 'n' refers to a positive number.

Two views about factual content:

FIXED-CONTENT: If at t , f is the fact that n days from the present, p , then at t' m days from t , f is the fact that n days from the present, p .

SHIFTY-CONTENT: If at t , f is the fact that n days from the present, p , then at t' m days from t , f is the fact that $n-m$ days from the present, p .

We get a violation of Coherence if Fixed-content is in place: f is now the fact that presently, I am sitting. With Shifty-content instead, f is now the fact that 2 days hence, I will be sitting.

Neutralists absolutists need not be fragmentalists. Accepting Fixed-content leads to fragmentalism, accepting Shifty-content allows one to preserve Coherence.