



Khalwat – Center for Philosophy & Spirituality

| Vol: 01 | Issue: 01 | 2024 |

www.khalwt.org

Critical Evaluation of McTaggart’s Paradox with Special Reference to Presentism

Sajid Hussain¹

University of Karachi

Pakistan

Abstract: This article critically examines McTaggart’s Paradox, which argues for the unreality of time based on inherent contradictions in the A-series and B-series of temporal order. McTaggart’s assertion that time is unreal stems from the premise that genuine change, essential for time, occurs within the A-series, where events transition from future to present to past. He contends that this series is inherently contradictory, as it requires events to simultaneously possess mutually exclusive properties of past, present, and future. This paradoxical nature leads McTaggart to conclude that time is an illusion. The article challenges McTaggart’s conclusions by advocating for Presentism, the view that only the present moment exists. Presentism is supported by common-sense views and phenomenological experiences of time, which emphasize the experiential privilege of the present. By focusing on the reality of the present moment, Presentism offers a coherent and intuitive understanding of temporal experience, countering McTaggart’s paradox. Additionally, the article explores arguments from philosophers such as Sydney Shoemaker and William Rowe, who challenge McTaggart’s linkage of time with change. Shoemaker proposes that time can exist without change, while Rowe critiques the necessity of change for the existence of time. Through a comprehensive evaluation of McTaggart’s premises and the phenomenological evidence supporting Presentism, this article aims to refute the paradox and affirm the reality of time as experienced through the ever-present ‘Presentness.’ Presentism is thus presented as a robust framework for understanding time, consistent with both philosophical reasoning and everyday temporal experience.

Keywords: Presentism, Time, Consciousness, Phenomenology, Metaphysics, McTaggart’s Paradox

¹ Sajid Hussain is currently working as a Lecturer at the Virtual University of Pakistan. He is also pursuing a PhD in Philosophy from the Department of Philosophy at the University of Karachi, with a thesis on the philosophy of mind and consciousness. Email: sajid.pjs@gmail.com

[DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12755086](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12755086)



Introduction

Metaphysics, a branch of philosophy dedicated to understanding the fundamental nature of reality, delves into numerous profound topics, one of which is the nature of time. The philosophy of time addresses pivotal questions such as the reality of time, the existence of the past, present, and future, and how these temporal dimensions interrelate. Throughout history, philosophers have developed various theories to elucidate the concept of time, with Presentism and Eternalism being among the most significant. Presentism asserts that only the present exists, whereas Eternalism posits that past, present, and future events are all equally real.

This article critically examines McTaggart's Paradox with a particular emphasis on Presentism. J.M.E. McTaggart introduced this paradox in his 1908 paper "The Unreality of Time," arguing that time is unreal due to inherent contradictions within the A-series and B-series of temporal order. According to McTaggart, the A-series involves positions in time as past, present, and future, while the B-series involves positions as earlier or later than others. McTaggart contends that genuine change, essential for the existence of time, occurs within the A-series. However, he argues that the A-series is contradictory because it requires events to possess mutually exclusive properties of past, present, and future simultaneously.

McTaggart's argument unfolds through three main premises. First, he asserts that time necessitates change. Second, he argues that the A-series is indispensable for such change. Third, he claims that the A-series is inherently contradictory, leading to the conclusion that time is unreal. This paradoxical nature arises from the fact that an event in the A-series must be future, present, and past at different times, leading to a contradiction.

Despite McTaggart's argument, this article advocates for Presentism, which posits that only the present moment is real. Presentism aligns with common-sense views and phenomenological experiences of time, emphasizing the unique and privileged nature of the present moment. It suggests that our everyday experience of time, characterized by the immediate presence of events, supports the reality of the present. The present moment, according to Presentism, is not merely a transient phase but a fundamental aspect of our temporal experience.

Moreover, this article explores the arguments of philosophers such as Sydney Shoemaker and William Rowe, who challenge McTaggart's linkage of time with change. Shoemaker (1969) proposes that time can exist without change, thereby challenging the assumption that time and change are inseparable. His thought experiment suggests that time could continue even in a hypothetical scenario where no changes occur. Rowe



(2017) also critiques McTaggart's argument by asserting that McTaggart incorrectly links time with change, suggesting that time is independent of change. These perspectives provide significant counterarguments to McTaggart's premises, reinforcing the viability of Presentism.

Through a comprehensive evaluation of McTaggart's premises and the phenomenological evidence supporting Presentism, this article aims to refute the paradox and affirm the reality of time as experienced through the ever-present 'Presentness.' Presentism provides a coherent and intuitive framework for understanding time, consistent with both philosophical reasoning and everyday temporal experience. By emphasizing the reality of the present moment, Presentism offers a robust response to McTaggart's paradox, affirming that time, as experienced, is indeed real.

In conclusion, the critical analysis of McTaggart's Paradox through the lens of Presentism reveals that the contradictions identified by McTaggart do not undermine the reality of time. Instead, Presentism, grounded in phenomenological experience and common-sense views, offers a compelling and coherent understanding of temporal reality, affirming the significance of the present moment in our experience of time. This article thus contributes to the ongoing philosophical discourse on the nature of time, reinforcing the validity of Presentism in the face of McTaggart's paradox.

McTaggart's Paradox

McTaggart's Paradox, introduced by J.M.E. McTaggart in his 1908 paper "The Unreality of Time," presents a compelling argument against the reality of time. McTaggart's argument revolves around the distinction between two series of temporal positions: the A-series and the B-series.

The A-series categorizes events as past, present, or future. These positions are dynamic and constantly changing because events that are future will become present and then past. The B-series, on the other hand, orders events as earlier than, later than, or simultaneous with each other. Unlike the A-series, the B-series is static, meaning that the temporal relations between events do not change.

McTaggart argues that time necessarily involves change, which can only be understood through the A-series. He posits that the B-series alone cannot account for the essential nature of temporal change because it merely describes static relationships between events without acknowledging the passage of time. Thus, for time to be real, the A-series must exist.

However, McTaggart contends that the A-series is inherently contradictory. His argument is based on the premise that an event cannot be simultaneously past, present, and future. Yet, for any event in the A-series, it must possess all three properties at different times. For instance, Queen Anne's death was once a future event, became a present event in 1714, and is now a past event. According to McTaggart, this leads to a contradiction because it requires events to have incompatible properties, which is logically impossible.

Consequently, McTaggart concludes that time, as understood through the A-series, is unreal due to this inherent contradiction. Since the A-series is essential for understanding change and time, and the A-series is contradictory, McTaggart argues that time itself is an illusion. This paradox has sparked extensive debate in the philosophy of time, prompting various responses and interpretations from subsequent philosophers.

Presentism: The Central Claim

Presentism asserts that only the present moment is real, a view that starkly contrasts with Eternalism, which holds that past, present, and future events are equally real. Presentism is grounded in the common-sense view and phenomenological experience of time, emphasizing that our direct experiences are confined to the present. According to Presentism, the past and future do not exist in any real sense; they are merely concepts we use to understand and describe temporal relations.

The central claim of Presentism is that the present moment has an ontological privilege over the past and future. This perspective aligns with our everyday experiences where we interact with events and objects that exist in the present. For instance, when we recall a memory or anticipate a future event, we do so from the standpoint of the present moment. The past is accessible only through memory, and the future through anticipation, neither of which constitutes actual existence.

Presentism also finds support in phenomenological accounts of time. Our consciousness perceives time as a flow of present moments, with the immediate now being the only real and tangible aspect of our temporal experience. This aligns with Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which emphasizes the primacy of the present in the flow of time.

Critically, Presentism offers a coherent rebuttal to McTaggart's Paradox. McTaggart argues that the A-series, which involves past, present, and future, is contradictory because events cannot possess all three properties simultaneously. Presentism sidesteps this issue by denying the real existence of past and future events, thus avoiding the contradiction inherent in the A-series. By affirming the reality of only the present moment,

Presentism provides a robust framework for understanding time that is consistent with both philosophical reasoning and everyday experience.

Critical Evaluation of McTaggart’s Argument

- **Premise #01: Time Involves Change**

McTaggart argues that time involves change, and without change, there is no time (McTaggart, 1908). Change, according to McTaggart, occurs in the A-series, where events move from future to present to past. However, McTaggart contends that the A-series is contradictory because events cannot possess mutually exclusive A-properties (past, present, future) simultaneously.

- **Premise #02: The Necessity of A-Series for Change**

McTaggart claims that without the A-series, there would be no change, and consequently, no time (McTaggart, 1908). The B-series alone, which is static and unchanging, cannot account for temporal change. This premise is crucial for McTaggart's conclusion that time is unreal.

- **Premise #03: Contradictions in A-Series**

McTaggart's third premise asserts that the A-series is contradictory. He argues that every event must have the properties of being past, present, and future, but these properties are incompatible. For example, Queen Anne's death is past, present, and future at different times, leading to a paradox (McTaggart, 1908).

Shoemaker and Rowe’s Arguments Against McTaggart

Sydney Shoemaker and William Rowe argue against McTaggart’s claim that time requires change.

Shoemaker (1969) proposes that time can exist without change, challenging the assumption that time and change are inseparable. Rowe (2017) also argues that McTaggart incorrectly links time with change, suggesting that time is independent of change. Sydney Shoemaker and William Rowe provide significant counterarguments to McTaggart’s claim that time is unreal due to the contradictions in the A-series.

McTaggart argues that for time to exist, change must occur, and this change is only possible within the A-series, where events transition from future to present to past. However, McTaggart claims this series is inherently contradictory because it requires events to possess incompatible properties of being past, present, and future.

Sydney Shoemaker challenges McTaggart's assertion by proposing that time can exist without change. In his thought experiment, Shoemaker (1969) envisions a possible world where periods of stasis (times without change) alternate with periods of change. He argues that even in the absence of change, time continues to pass. This challenges the assumption that time and change are inseparable, suggesting that the existence of time does not necessarily depend on the occurrence of change.

William Rowe also critiques McTaggart's linkage of time and change. Rowe (2017) argues that McTaggart mistakenly conflates the concepts of time and change. He posits that time is an independent dimension that does not inherently require the presence of change. Rowe asserts that events can be ordered temporally without necessitating a continuous process of change, thereby undermining McTaggart's claim that time is unreal if the A-series is contradictory.

Both Shoemaker and Rowe's arguments effectively weaken McTaggart's paradox by disentangling the concepts of time and change. They suggest that time can be understood and exists independently of the contradictions McTaggart attributes to the A-series, thus preserving the reality of time without relying on the problematic A-series framework. These perspectives reinforce the viability of Presentism, which maintains that only the present moment is real, unaffected by the alleged contradictions in the A-series.

Presentism and Phenomenological Experience

Presentism posits that only the present moment is real, an assertion that finds robust support in our phenomenological experience of time. This view contrasts sharply with Eternalism, which claims that past, present, and future events are all equally real. Presentism is grounded in the immediacy of our lived experiences, emphasizing that we directly engage with events and objects in the present, while the past and future are merely conceptual.

Phenomenology, the philosophical study of structures of experience and consciousness, provides a strong foundation for Presentism. Edmund Husserl, a prominent phenomenologist, emphasized the primacy of the present in our temporal experience. According to Husserl, consciousness perceives time as a continuous flow of present moments. Each moment is experienced as "now," with past moments being retained in memory and future moments anticipated, but only the present is directly accessible and real (Husserl, 1991).

This phenomenological perspective aligns with our everyday experiences. When we recall past events or anticipate future ones, we do so from the standpoint of the present. Memories are reconstructions based on

present experiences, and future anticipations are projections made from the current moment. Thus, the present moment serves as the fundamental reference point for all temporal experiences (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012).

Presentism's emphasis on the present moment addresses McTaggart's Paradox effectively. McTaggart argues that the A-series, which categorizes events as past, present, or future, is contradictory because events cannot simultaneously possess all three temporal properties (McTaggart, 1908). However, Presentism sidesteps this issue by denying the real existence of past and future events. According to Presentism, events are not inherently past, present, or future; they are simply present when they occur. This view eliminates the contradiction by asserting that only the present moment is real, thus maintaining the coherence of temporal experience (Smith, 2002).

Furthermore, Presentism resonates with common-sense intuitions about time. In daily life, we experience time as a succession of present moments. Our actions, decisions, and experiences are rooted in the present, making it the focal point of our existence. This intuitive alignment reinforces the plausibility of Presentism as a theory of time (Lombardo, 2016).

In consequence, Presentism, supported by phenomenological insights, offers a coherent and intuitive framework for understanding time. By focusing on the reality of the present moment, Presentism provides a robust response to McTaggart's Paradox and aligns with our direct experiences of temporal reality. This perspective affirms the significance of the present moment in our understanding of time, making it a compelling theory within the philosophy of time.

Conclusion: The Ever-Present 'Presentness'

Presentism, the view that only the present moment is real, offers a compelling and intuitive understanding of time that addresses and refutes McTaggart's Paradox. McTaggart's argument hinges on the contradictions he identifies within the A-series, where events must be simultaneously past, present, and future, leading him to conclude that time is unreal (McTaggart, 1908). However, by focusing on the phenomenological experience of time and the unique reality of the present moment, Presentism provides a coherent framework that aligns with both philosophical reasoning and everyday temporal experiences.

Presentism asserts that the present moment has an ontological privilege over the past and future, which are considered mere constructs rather than real entities. This view resonates with our common-sense intuitions

about time. In our daily lives, we experience time as a succession of present moments. We interact with events and objects in the present, and our memories and anticipations are always rooted in the current moment (Lombardo, 2016). This immediate engagement with the present underscores the reality of the present moment and supports the Presentist view.

Phenomenological insights further bolster the Presentist perspective. Edmund Husserl's work on the consciousness of internal time emphasizes that our experience of time is fundamentally grounded in the present. According to Husserl (1991), consciousness perceives time as a continuous flow of present moments, with the past retained in memory and the future anticipated, but only the present directly accessible. This phenomenological account aligns with Presentism by highlighting the unique and immediate reality of the present moment.

Shoemaker and Rowe's arguments also provide critical support for Presentism by challenging McTaggart's linkage of time and change. Shoemaker (1969) argues that time can exist without change, suggesting that temporal passage does not necessarily depend on continuous change. His thought experiment, which envisions periods of stasis alternating with periods of change, demonstrates that time can persist even in the absence of change. This challenges McTaggart's premise that change is essential for the existence of time.

Rowe (2017) further critiques McTaggart's argument by asserting that time is an independent dimension that does not inherently require the presence of change. He posits that events can be ordered temporally without necessitating a continuous process of change. By disentangling the concepts of time and change, Rowe reinforces the viability of Presentism and undermines McTaggart's claim that time is unreal if the A-series is contradictory.

Presentism, therefore, offers a robust framework for understanding time that is both philosophically sound and aligned with our lived experiences. By asserting the reality of the present moment and denying the real existence of past and future events, Presentism avoids the contradictions identified by McTaggart. This perspective affirms that the present moment is not only experientially privileged but also ontologically significant.

In conclusion, Presentism provides a coherent and intuitive response to McTaggart's Paradox by emphasizing the ever-present 'Presentness' of our temporal experience. Supported by phenomenological insights and critical arguments against McTaggart's premises, Presentism reaffirms the reality of time through the unique and immediate reality of the present moment. This view not only aligns with our

everyday experiences but also offers a compelling philosophical framework for understanding the nature of time.

References

- Curtis, B. L., & Robson, J. (2016). *A critical introduction to the metaphysics of time*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Dyke, H. (2002). McTaggart and the truth about time. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, 50, 137-152.
- Gallagher, S., & Zahavi, D. (2012). *The phenomenological mind* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Geach, P. T. (1979). *Truth, love, and immortality: An introduction to McTaggart's philosophy*. University of California Press.
- Husserl, E. (1991). *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)* (J. B. Brough, Trans.). Springer.
- Lombardo, T. (2016). *The future evolution of the human mind*. Futurist.
- McTaggart, J. E. (1908). The unreality of time. *Mind*, 17(68), 457-474.
- Rowe, J. F. W. (2017). Time and change. *The Philosophical Forum*, 48(2), 201-213.
- Shoemaker, S. (1969). Time without change. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66(12), 363-381.
- Smith, Q. (2002). *Time and the metaphysics of relativity*. Routledge.
- Tallant, J. (2017). *Metaphysics: An introduction*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Tolle, E. (2004). *The power of now: A guide to spiritual enlightenment*. New World Library.