

*Meeting of the Aristotelian Society at 55, Russell Square, London,  
W.C.1, on December 7th, 1931, at 8 p.m.*

### III.—McTAGGART'S PRINCIPLE OF THE DISSIMILARITY OF THE DIVERSE.

*By C. D. BROAD.*

McTAGGART held that it is evident on careful reflexion that no two particulars could be exactly alike. They might, for all we can tell, be exactly alike in all their pure qualities ; but, if so, they could not be exactly alike in all their relational properties. By a "relational property" is meant such a property as standing in a relation *R* to a term *t*. This principle he calls the *Dissimilarity of the Diverse*, and he thinks that it is what Leibniz meant by his *Identity of Indiscernibles*.

If there were any relation which every particular must have to itself and which no particular can have to another, the Dissimilarity of the Diverse would follow at once. For any particular, *A*, would have the relational property of standing in this relation to *A*, whilst no other particular would have this relational property. Now McTaggart regards identity as a relation which every term must have to itself, and which no term could have to another. It seems to me very doubtful whether the word "identity" in the phrase "*A* is identical with *A*" stands for a relation at all, and doubtful whether the phrase itself has any meaning ; so I should not be prepared to accept an argument for the Dissimilarity of the Diverse based on the alleged relation of "identity," if McTaggart had used such an argument. But in fact he is not content to rest his case on identity. He states his reasons rather obscurely in § 94 of the *Nature of Existence*. I think his meaning is as follows. He holds that there must be some dissimilarity between *A* and *B*

which is not a mere analytical consequence of the fact that A and B are two. Now the dissimilarity which consists in the fact that A has the relation of identity to A whilst B does not have the relation of identity to A is a mere analytic consequence of the fact that A and B are two particulars, and McTaggart insists that there must be some dissimilarity which is not analytically entailed by the mere fact of diversity.

It appears then that the full statement of McTaggart's principle is that any two particulars must be dissimilar in some respect which is not a mere analytical consequence of the fact that they are two. Is this principle true? I shall try to show that it is not. And first I will explain what is needed in order to disprove the principle.

When a proposition asserts something to be necessary, as this one does, there is no need to produce an *actual* exception to it in order to refute it. It is enough to show that exceptions to it are *possible*, whether they actually occur or not. It must be remembered that McTaggart counts as "substances" both what most people would call "occurents" and what most people would call "continuants," and that he never draws any clear distinction between the two. I have therefore substituted for his word "substance" the neutral word "particular," and I shall now consider in turn particulars which most people would not call "substances" and those which most people would call "substances." All my examples would be counted as "substances" by McTaggart, and therefore if any of them constitute an exception to his principle the latter is upset.

I will begin with sensibilia, which McTaggart certainly regards as substances. No doubt it is obvious that any two sensibilia which are sensed by one and the same mind must be dissimilar in sensible quality, or be spatially separated in the sense-field, or be temporally separated. Now either spatial or temporal separation involves dissimilarity. For A cannot stand in the relation of spatial or temporal separation to A,

whilst, by hypothesis, B does stand in one or other of these relations to A if they be alike in sensible quality and be sensed by the same mind. Two such sensibilia then must be dissimilar ; and their dissimilarity will not be a mere analytic consequence of the fact that they are two. But now consider two sensibilia which are sensed by different minds, *e.g.*, two noises. Plainly they might be exactly alike in sensible quality, *i.e.*, in pitch, loudness, and tone-quality. As regards their temporal relation it might be held either that they stand in no temporal relation to each other or that they do. On the first alternative they *cannot* have temporal dissimilarity. On the second alternative they *need* not have temporal dissimilarity, for there is plainly no reason why they should not be simultaneous. As regards their spatial relations it seems clear that they would have none to each other, and therefore that they would not have spatial dissimilarity. There is no ground for saying that a noise heard by you and a noise heard by me are themselves spatially separated or spatially coincident. If any one thinks that there is, he is confusing the sensibilia themselves with certain physical events of which they are supposed to be manifestations. It is then logically possible that there should be two sensibilia which were exactly alike in sensible quality ; which had either no temporal relations or were simultaneous ; and which had no spatial relations, and therefore could not be spatially dissimilar. It is also logically possible that these should have been the only sensibilia that there ever were, and therefore that they were not dissimilar in their relations to other sensibilia.

The only dissimilarity left between them is that one is sensed by the mind X and not by Y and that the other is sensed by the mind Y and not by X. Now I can see that it is impossible that two such sensa as I have been describing, *if sensed at all*, should be sensed by one and the same mind. But it is not logically impossible that there should be unsensed sensibilia. There may be good reasons for doubting whether there are *in fact*

any unsensed sensibilia, but I do not think that it can reasonably be maintained that the occurrence of an unheard squeaky noise or an unseen red flash is *logically* impossible. If this be admitted, the supporters of the Dissimilarity of the Diverse will have to assert the following proposition: "Although no single sensible need be sensed, yet of any two sensibilia which were otherwise exactly alike one would have to be sensed and the other not, or each would have to be sensed by a different mind." Now I cannot see that this proposition is true. When I remove in thought from my two otherwise exactly similar sensa the characteristic of being sensed I do not find that I have any difficulty in still thinking of them as two. To put the matter in another way. The positive similarity which consists in *both* being sensed does require some kind of dissimilarity between two sensibilia. But the negative similarity which consists in *neither* being sensed seems to be compatible with complete similarity in other respects.

It seems to me then to be logically possible that there should have been two sensibilia which had no kind of dissimilarity that was not a mere analytical consequence of their diversity. If so, McTaggart's principle that there *could* not be two such particulars is false, though it may be true that there *are not* and never have been and never will be.

The only objection that I can think of to this conclusion is the following. It might be said that, if A and B have parts, there must be some parts of A which are not parts of B or some parts of B which are not parts of A. Now McTaggart holds that every particular must have parts which are themselves particulars. Would it not follow that A must always be dissimilar to B, at least in the respect that it contained a part P which B did not contain or that B contained a part P which A did not contain? Certainly from the premise that every particular must have parts it does follow that any two substances must be dissimilar in this respect. But does this help McTaggart?

I do not think it does. For this kind of dissimilarity is simply an analytic consequence of the fact that A and B are two particulars, whilst he maintains that there must be some further dissimilarity which is not inferrible from this fact.

Let us next consider what most people would call "continuants." Continuants have states, and most people distinguish states from parts, though McTaggart himself holds that the states of continuants are parts of it. It is evident that, even if the continuants could have *some* states in common (which McTaggart would deny) they could not have *all* states in common. It is therefore true that any two continuants A and B must be dissimilar in the respect that A has some state S which is not a state of B, or that B has some state S which is not a state of A. But this kind of dissimilarity is simply an analytic consequence of the fact that A and B are two continuants, and is therefore irrelevant to McTaggart's principle. The question then is whether it is logically possible that there should be two continuants A and B which were dissimilar in no respect except that one has parts which are not parts of the other and one has states which are not states of the other. It seems clear to me that this is logically possible. It is logically possible that there should have been just two minds A and B and no bodies, and that there should have been no other continuants but these two minds. Now, is there any logical impossibility in supposing that these two minds should have existed through exactly the same period of time, and that every state of one should have been exactly like the contemporary state of the other in every respect except that of being states of different minds? We can imagine each of them to be wholly occupied in following precisely the same chain of argument, *e.g.*, Lindemann's proof that  $\pi$  is a transcendental number, at exactly the same rate and in precisely the same order. And we can imagine that the emotions of A at any stage in the argument are precisely similar to those which B feels when he reaches that stage of the argument.

I can see nothing logically impossible in this supposition. It is then possible that there should have been two continuants A and B such that the only dissimilarity between them is that A has states which are not states of B, and conversely. And it is possible that the only dissimilarity between the contemporary states of A and B is that one occurs in A and not in B, whilst the other occurs in B and not in A. Now McTaggart maintains that two particulars must be dissimilar in some respect which cannot be inferred from the fact that they are two. We have already seen that this principle is false as applied to occurrents; we now see that it is also false as applied to continuants. Nevertheless it may well be true that every pair of continuants that there are, or have been, or will be, are *in fact* dissimilar in other respects beside those which are analytical consequences of their diversity.

McTaggart argues in § 95 that the denial of the *Dissimilarity of the Diverse* is closely connected with an invalid distinction which many people try to draw between the "individuality" of a particular and its nature. It is not at all clear to me that this is so. A person who denies the Dissimilarity of the Diverse is saying that it is logically possible that the same nature N should be the nature of several particulars  $P_1$   $P_2$ , etc.; *e.g.*, that it is logically possible that there should be several precisely similar noises or minds. A person who tries to distinguish the "individuality" of a particular P from its nature N presumably means that it is logically possible that P, which in fact has the nature N, should instead have had some different nature  $N^1$ ; *e.g.*, that I might have been born in Rome in B.C. 55, or that the Albert Memorial might have been a volcano. Now of course the first proposition does not imply the second, and therefore is not refuted by the fact that the second is almost certainly false. And the second does not imply the first; for it might well be that, although every particular might have had a different nature from that which it in fact has, no two particulars could

have precisely the same nature. I do not wish to deny that some people may have believed the second, and may have thought that the first followed from it. But my reason for believing the first is that it seems on inspection to be true.

We pass now to McTaggart's doctrine that every particular must have a "sufficient description." By a "description" of a term McTaggart means any characteristic of it. By an "exclusive description" of a term he means any characteristic which belongs to it and no other term, or any set of characteristics which all belong to it and do not all belong to any other term. Such a description need not be a "complete" description of the term, for a selection of its characteristics may suffice to distinguish it from all other terms. Now a description of a term may contain characteristics which refer to particulars which are merely designated by proper names. Thus, if Julius Cæsar be described as the first Roman invader of Britain, the description involves a reference to a certain particular, viz., Britain, which is merely named or designated. If an exclusive description of a term refers to no merely designated particular, but consists wholly of terms which are universal, it is called a "sufficient description."

Now if the principle of the Dissimilarity of the Diverse were admitted it would follow at once that every particular must have an *exclusive* description. For, if A were the only particular that there is, *any* characteristic of it would be an exclusive description of it. And, if there be other particulars beside A, no two of them can be exactly similar, so that the complete description of any of them would necessarily be an exclusive description of it. And of course a selection from the complete description might be an exclusive description in the case of some or of all these particulars. The question that remains is whether every particular must have a *sufficient* description. McTaggart contends that this must be so, and he professes to prove it from the premise that every particular

must have an *exclusive* description. Of course he does not pretend that any sufficient description is known to us in the case of most particulars. But he holds that there must be such a description in every case, whether we happen to know one or not.

McTaggart begins by distinguishing several possible forms of sufficient description of various degrees of complexity. But he does not follow any systematic order in his exposition. I think that we can state exactly what kinds of sufficient description are theoretically possible. Let A be a particular. Then there are four and only four possible sufficient descriptions of the "first order" for A. They are the following: (1) A might be the only particular that has a certain set of original qualities  $\phi$ . (2) A might be the only particular which has a certain relation R to *itself*. (3) A might be the only particular which has R to *at least one* particular. (4) A might be the only particular which has the relation R to *every* particular. Now, corresponding to each of these four possibilities, there are three possible sufficient descriptions of the "second order." Thus, corresponding to (1) there will be the following: (1.1) A might be the only particular which has a certain relation S to *the* particular which has  $\phi$ . (1.2) A might be the only particular which has S to *at least one* particular which has  $\phi$ . (1.3) A might be the only particular which has S to *every* particular which has  $\phi$ . It is plain that (2) and (3) each give rise to those possibilities analogous to (1.1), (1.2), and (1.3). Thus there are twelve and only twelve possible kinds of sufficient description of the second order. It is plain that these must be exactly  $4 \times 3^{n-1}$  possible kinds of sufficient description of the *n*th order.

In § 105 McTaggart argues that, unless there were in every case a sufficient description, there could not be in every case an exclusive description. I will first try to show by an example that a case is conceivable in which there was an exclusive description and yet no sufficient description. Imagine a universe



consisting of just three minds: A, B, and C. We will suppose that neither of them can be sufficiently described by its original qualities or in any of the ways which McTaggart enumerates. Suppose it were the case that A is jealous of B on account of C, that B is jealous of C on account of A, and that C is jealous of A on account of B. Then I maintain that each of these particulars would have an exclusive description, though none would have a sufficient description. A would have the characteristic of being jealous of B on account of C. Call this  $\phi$ . B could not have this, since no one could be jealous of himself. C could not have this, since no one could be jealous *on account* of himself. Hence B has the characteristic  $\bar{\phi}$  and C has the characteristic  $\bar{\phi}$ . Now take the characteristic of being jealous of C on account of A. Call this  $\psi$ . B has  $\psi$ , and for similar reasons to those mentioned before A has  $\bar{\psi}$  and C has  $\bar{\psi}$ . Finally, if we denote the characteristic of being jealous of A on account of B by  $\chi$ , C has  $\chi$  and A and B have  $\bar{\chi}$ . Hence A has  $\phi\bar{\psi}\bar{\chi}$ , B has  $\bar{\phi}\psi\bar{\chi}$  and C has  $\bar{\phi}\bar{\psi}\chi$ . Thus A is the only particular in this universe, which has  $\phi$ , B is the only particular in it which has  $\psi$ , and C is the only particular in it which has  $\chi$ . By hypothesis A, B, and C are the only particulars in this universe. So each of these particulars has an exclusive description, although none of them has a sufficient description.

It is quite plain then that there must be something wrong with McTaggart's argument in §105, since it claims to prove something which is in fact false. The argument is very obscurely stated, but I am afraid that there is no doubt that the following is what McTaggart had in mind. Let A be any particular. Then A must have an exclusive description. If possible, suppose it has no sufficient description. Then (a) every exclusive description of A must describe it by a certain relation R in which it stands to a certain *other* substance B. And (b) this other substance B must itself have no sufficient description. For if B had a sufficient description  $\phi$ , A could be *sufficiently* described

as the particular which has R to the particular which has  $\phi$ . But B in turn must have an exclusive description. Since this cannot be a sufficient description B must be exclusively described by a certain relation S in which it stands to a certain *other* substance C. And C cannot have a sufficient description. For, if it had, B could be sufficiently described as the particular which has S to the particular which has  $\psi$ . And then A could be sufficiently described as the particular which has R to the particular which has S to the particular which has  $\psi$ . By repeated application of the same consideration we arrive at the following conclusion. If every particular has an exclusive description, and A had no sufficient description, there would have to be an unending series of particulars B, C . . ., such that none of them has a sufficient description. McTaggart thinks that the endlessness of this series would entail that A had no *exclusive* description. And so the compound supposition that every particular has an exclusive description whilst A has no sufficient description entails the conclusion that A has no exclusive description. It thus entails a conclusion which contradicts itself. It therefore cannot be true. Therefore the proposition that every particular has an exclusive description entails the proposition that every particular has a sufficient description.

This is McTaggart's argument, stated fully and formally. It contains no less than three gross logical fallacies : (1) McTaggart assumes that if A has no sufficient description its exclusive description must describe it by a certain relation to a certain *other* substance B. This is not so. The relation might be to A itself. Suppose, *e.g.*, that the universe consisted of two minds A and B, each of which respected itself and despised the other. Then the property of respecting A would belong to A and to nothing else. It would therefore be an exclusive description of A. Similarly the property of respecting B would be an exclusive description of B. Thus A could be exclusively described without reference to B and B without reference to A.

It is true, of course, that if A has the property of respecting A it also has the property of respecting *itself*. And this involves no reference to any merely designated particular. But then it also does not constitute an *exclusive* description of A, since it is equally true that B respects himself. Consequently it does not constitute a *sufficient* description of A. So it cannot be contended that the exclusive, but insufficient description "respecting A" could be replaced by "respecting itself," and that this would be a sufficient description. The old description fails to be sufficient because it contains the merely designated particular A; the new description avoids this defect, but fails to be sufficient by failing to be exclusive.

(2) McTaggart assumes that, if A has to be described by reference to a particular B which is other than A, and B has to be described by reference to a particular C which is other than B, C must be other than A. This is, of course, quite fallacious. B might be other than A and C other than B, and yet "C" might be simply another name for the particular of which "A" is a name. Thus, even if the series must start, there is no need for it to be endless, except in the sense in which a circle is "endless." My example of a universe consisting of three persons—A, B, and C—of whom A is jealous of B on account of C, B is jealous of C on account of A, and C is jealous of A on account of B, illustrates this possibility. The exclusive description of each particular involves a reference to the other designated particulars, but there are only three particulars altogether.

(3) Even if the series had to start, and had then to continue without end and without recurrence, McTaggart's conclusion would not follow. The conclusion is that A would have no exclusive description. But this is a complete *non-sequitur*. A has the exclusive description of being the only particular which has R to B. How could this be affected by the fact that B has no sufficient description; that its exclusive description must be a property of the form "having S to C"; and that the same

is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of C and of every substance in an unending non-recurrent series? The only conclusion that could legitimately be drawn, even if we accepted both false premises which McTaggart tacitly assumes, is that, if every particular has an exclusive description, then if any particular lacks a sufficient description there must be an unending and non-recurrent series of particulars which all lack sufficient description. Of course, if you object to such an unending and non-recurrent series of particulars *as such*, you will be justified in concluding that, if every particular has an exclusive description, no particular can lack a sufficient description. But McTaggart does not object to such a series because it is endless and non-recurrent. His argument is that its non-recurrent endlessness will prevent A from having an exclusive description. And this is simply false.

To sum up (1) There is no reason to accept the principle of the Dissimilarity of the Diverse. (2) Therefore there is no reason to accept the premise that every particular must have an *exclusive* description. (3) Even if every particular had an *exclusive* description this would not entail that every particular must have a *sufficient* description. So McTaggart's assertion that every particular must have a sufficient description is nothing but a fallacious inference from a doubtful premise. It may, of course, be in fact true; but not the faintest ground has been given for accepting it. And to find equally bad arguments in an equally great thinker it must be necessary to go back to Kant's Antinomies.

---