

## Why Time is Unreal: From Buddhism To J.E. McTaggart\*

### ทำไมเวลาจึงไม่มีจริง: แนวคิดจากพุทธศาสนาถึงเจ.อี.แมคแทกการ์ท

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#### Abstract

It is an exercise of a curious mind to investigate into the conceptual thought from two opposite side of the globe-J. E. McTaggart from the Western world and Theravada Buddhist philosophy from the east. McTaggart is famous for his 1908 controversial writing, The Unreality of time, which has been widely opposed by a number of physicists, scientists and philosophers. However, his conclusion that time is unreal resembles what has been claimed 2,500 year ago by Lord Buddha. This study will try to examine if their arguments on the concept of time show any similarities or it is merely their conclusion that is accidentally identical.

#### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เป็นการทดลองการใช้ความคิดวิเคราะห์และเปรียบเทียบแนวคิดเกี่ยวกับเวลาจากสองซีกโลก คือแนวคิดของเจ.อี.แมคแทกการ์ทจากโลกตะวันตกและแนวคิดของพุทธศาสนาจากโลกตะวันออก บทความที่มีชื่อเสียงของแมคแทกการ์ทซึ่งเขียนขึ้นในปี 1908 เรื่อง "ความไม่มีจริงของเวลา" ได้ถูกคัดค้านและเป็นที่ถกเถียงกันอย่างกว้างขวางโดยนักฟิสิกส์ นักวิทยาศาสตร์และนักปรัชญาหลายท่าน แต่ข้อสรุปของเขาคือว่าเวลาไม่มีจริงนั้นสอดคล้องกับสิ่งที่พระพุทธเจ้าตรัสไว้เมื่อ 2,500 ปีก่อน บทความนี้จะพยายามพิจารณาเหตุผลที่นำมาสนับสนุนแนวคิดที่ว่าเวลาไม่มีจริงของทั้งสองฝ่าย ว่ามีความคล้ายคลึงกันหรือไม่ หรือเพียงแค่วิวทัศน์ที่บังเอิญเหมือนกัน

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บทความนี้เป็นข้อสังเกตส่วนหนึ่งที่ได้จากการค้นคว้าเอกสารที่เกี่ยวข้อง(Literature review) เพื่อเขียนข้อเสนอโครงการวิจัย เรื่อง The Concept of Time in Philosophy: A Comparative Study Between Buddhist and Henri Bergson's ซึ่งได้รับทุนวิจัยจากมหาวิทยาลัยมหิดล ภายใต้โครงการ Talent Management ปี 2558

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## I. INTRODUCTION

My objective in this paper, is rather metaphysical than a general philosophical work. I shall try principally to determine whether or not the relation in which John Ellis McTaggart treatment of time and his conclusion of time as unreal, actually stood in similitude to the Theravada Buddhist concept of time. The relation logically follows from the main principles of McTaggart's treatment of time which is famously recognized as the A-series, the B-series and the C-series theories.

I assume it will be found, however, that, on the question about the unreality of time at least, his conclusion is quite consistent with Buddhist fundamental concept of time. In the course of this enquiry I shall quote from both McTaggart's work and Theravada Buddhist's primary and secondary texts, relevant to the concept of Time. Nevertheless, I would ask the reader to look on these quotations rather as illustrations of my interpretation than as attempts to prove whether it is 100 percent correct. For such a purpose, short and isolated quotations must always be inadequate. If I were to quote all that is relevant in this way, I should have to transcribe much more pages into this article. Thus, names of the reference materials are given at the end of this article for further and more deliberate study.

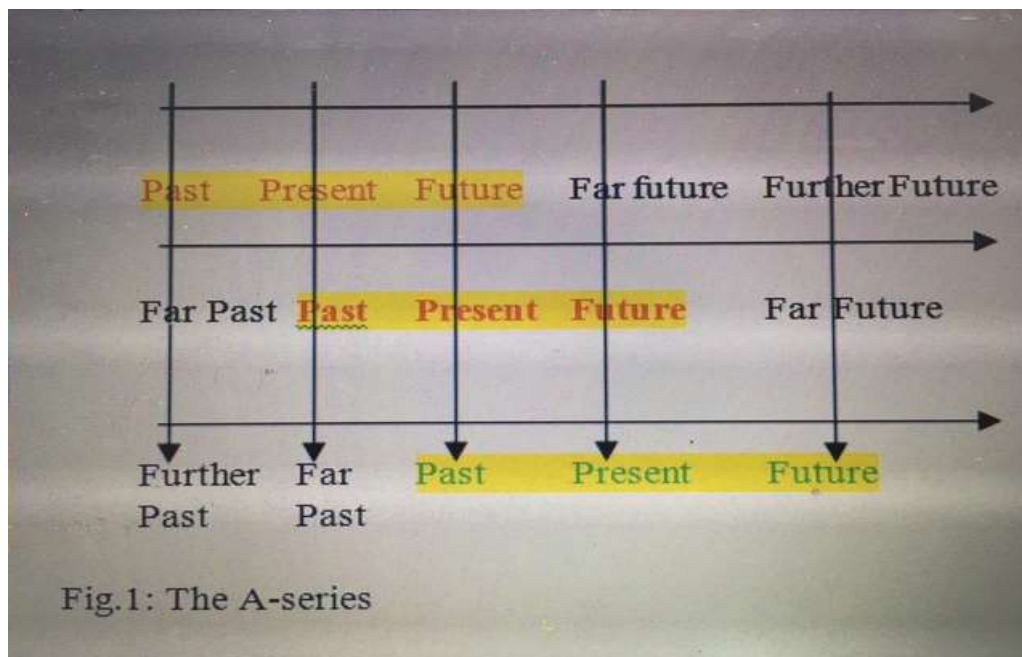
## II. THE UNREALITY OF TIME: METAPHYSICAL TREATMENT BY MCTAGGART

John E. McTaggart distinguished between ways that events are believed to be positioned in time and claimed that they implied three quite different ontological conceptions of time, which he has called the A-, B- and C- series theory.

### A. The A-series Theory

The first concept is that events are perceived to be either future, present or past and this gives us a conception of a series of positions that runs from the far future to the present, and from the present to the distant past, or conversely, this is what McTaggart called the A-series. It might seem strange to describe the A-series as to run from future to past or conversely, therefore it should be noted that it is not the positions that change positions through space, but the situation is that the events in time do change their temporal sequences.

Fig 1



The A-series refers to the temporal properties that are not permanent such as the past, the present and the future. An event which is now present, was in the future and will be the past. McTaggart explained that

*“..I shall speak of the series of positions running from the far past through the near past to the present, and then from the present to the, near future and the far future, as the A series”* (McTaggart, 1908:458)

We perceive events in orderly manners as past, present, or future (the A-series), and furthermore, according to McTaggart, it is not possible for us to perceive events without perceiving them as in the A-series.

### B. The B-series Theory

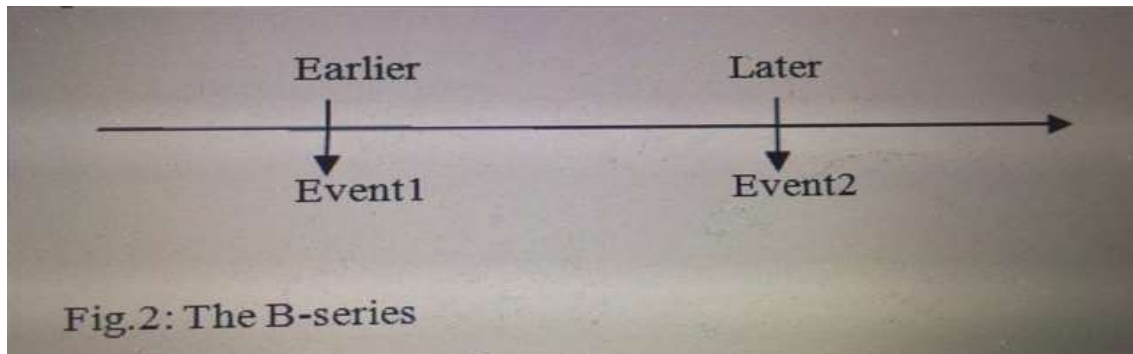
The second concept of time is that the way events are perceived to be simultaneous with certain events, earlier than some other events and later than the rest, gives us a conception of a series of positions that runs consecutively like beads on a string from earlier to later or conversely, that is what McTaggart called the B-series. He explained that

*“The series of positions which runs from earlier to later I shall call the B series. The contents of a position in time are called events. The contents of a single position are admitted to be properly called a plurality of events....A position in time is called a moment”* (McTaggart, 1908:458)

McTaggart claimed that events in the B-series, hold permanent positions in terms of being earlier than and later than each other, while events in the A-series were continuously changing their positions in terms of being first future, then present, and finally past. It can be

understood that both ways imply a conception of time as being constituted by a series of positions.

Fig.2



### C. The C-series Theory

Let us consider a simple ordered list of events, 1, 2, 3, 4, if the list were perceived from the bottom upwards 4,3,2,1 the items would occur in a different succession in time from perceiving them from top to bottom. McTaggart called this list the "C Series". Nevertheless, this list of events, the "C" Series, has no definite ordering in time and therefore, not temporal. For if the C-series has a notion of time involve such as before or after, it would turn into the B-series. He explained that,

*“But this other series-let us call it the C series-is not temporal, for it involves no change, but only an order. Events have an order. They are, let us say, in the order M, N, O, P. And they are therefore not in the order M, O, N, P, or O, N, M, P, or in any other possible order. But that they have this order no more implies that there is any change than the order of the letters of the alphabet, or of the Peers on the Parliament Roll, implies any change. And thus those realities which appear to us as events might form such a series without being entitled to the name of events, since that name is only given to realities which are in a time series. It is only when change and time come in that the relations of this C series become relations of earlier and later, and so it becomes a B series” (McTaggart, 1908:461-462)*

Fig.3

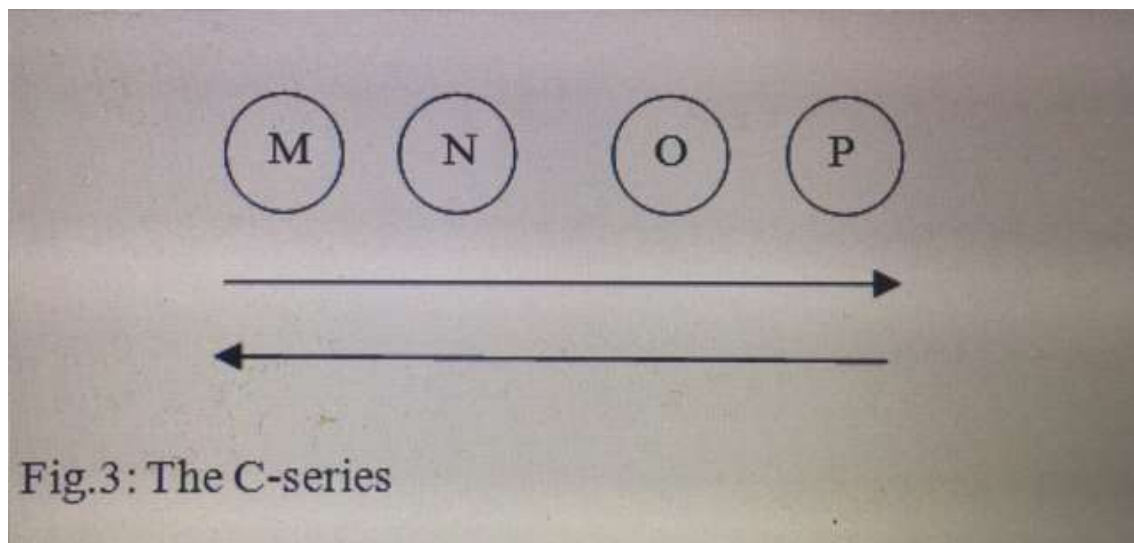


Fig.3: The C-series

This is an implication that while the C-series determine orders, it does not determine the direction toward which way the C-series would run since there is no change or other temporal factors to direct which way it would go.

#### D. The argument to prove that time is unreal

In his argument for the unreality of time McTaggart says that the B series properties which includes “earlier than” and “later than” is permanent, in the sense that if an event has a certain B-series property, it always does. For example, if Event1 is earlier than Event2, then Event1 is and always is earlier than Event2.

On the other hand, the A series properties includes notions of “past”, “present”, and “future.” These properties are not permanent because they involve change in their temporal orders. For example, Event2 is an event in the future but it does not indicate that it will always be the future.

The fundamental difference between the A- and B- series are that while events appear to change their positions in respect of A-series positions, from future, to present and to past, their positions in terms of B-series positions are always permanent and do not change such as Event1, which is at one time earlier than Event2 and at another time cannot be later than that Event2.

Furthermore, McTaggart assumed that time is universally believed to involve change, and because he could not detect any change in the B-series, he concluded that it could not properly be called temporal. The A-series at least appears to involve change since it exhibits the transition of events from the future to the present and into the past. He continued to the non-temporal but permanent quality of the C-series that

*“The C series, however, is as ultimate as the A series. We cannot get it out of anything else. That the units of time do form a series, the relations of which are permanent, is as ultimate as the fact that each of them is present, past, or future. And this ultimate fact is essential to time. For it is admitted that it is essential to time that each moment of it shall either be earlier or later than any other moment; and these relations are permanent. And this-the B series- cannot be got out of the A series alone. It is only when the A series, which gives change and direction, is combined with the C series, which gives permanence, that the B series can arise” (McTaggart, 1908:464).*

However, McTaggart noted that the reality of time demands the reality of the A-series since he considered that change is essential to time and the B-series does not involve change. It follows that if the A-series is unreal, so would be the B-series and thus, time itself would be unreal.

He suggested that future, present, and past are clearly relations and not qualities. Principally as all relations, they generate relational qualities in the entities they relate. But he could not determine as to what entity specifically the events stood in these relations and accordingly to what they changed their relations to. McTaggart began to look for this change in the relations that hold between the events in the series but concluded that it is not to be found there. Every event in the A-series is changing its positions uniformly in the same direction, which can be seen by the permanence of their B-series relations that there is no event which is at first future, then present and finally past in relation to another event. McTaggart claimed that the same problem arises when saying that it is relations to moments of time or positions of time that change, if these are taken as separate entities, because these are entities that themselves must acquire their temporal properties through a relation.

McTaggart came to the conclusion that the A-series is dependent on some thing outside the series to which the entities in the series, whatever they may be, events or moments of time, change their relation to, but which itself does not change. He stated that it would not be easy to find such a term, but there must exist one if the A-series is real. But even if the existence of such an entity was granted, and thereby the reality of the relational properties of future, present and past there remains another contradiction he claimed. Future, present and past are then taken as relational properties that events possess by holding a relation to something unknown. They are however incompatible temporal positions because nothing can be future, present and past in relation to the same thing all at once. And yet in time as a whole every event has them all, and this, McTaggart claimed, makes the A-series paradoxical and thus, time is unreal.

Another analogy could be of a cursor that could be placed on an item in a list of events, is read and the items below the cursor called "past" and those ahead of the cursor called "future" with the cursor being in the present (A-Series). The way of ordering events is closest to the way that we think of the passing of time. McTaggart noticed that if the cursor moves up the list it is not a part of the list but creates a new list, with different relations between past, present and future, at every point that it cross. This would create the infinite sets of past, present and future events. If the lists are regarded as events distributed in time then the changes that give events the labels "past", "present" or "future" cannot be in time. Therefore, the A-series is unreal, as well as time. (Weinert, 2013; Dyke,2002; Meller,1998)

### III. THERAVADA BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF TIME

Concept of Time in Theravada Buddhist philosophy can be explained in relation to Buddhist epistemology, in other words, the process of knowing (or perceiving the world) is directly connected to the concept of time according to Buddhist philosophy (Santaya Leelawai, 2001:88-89). Time appears in our consciousness during the process of knowing which consists of

1. The existence of matter
2. The interaction between matters
3. Functions of our consciousness (our senses)
4. The process of knowing that occur in our consciousness
5. Feeling that occurs in our consciousness.

Time therefore, is subjective because its existence depends upon our consciousness to acknowledge it. Time is relative to our consciousness through our perceptions of the world via our senses.

### IV. WHY TIME IS UNREAL ACCORDING TO THERAVADA BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

Time is unreal according to Theravada Buddhist Philosophy based on reasons which are as follow:

#### **A. Time is only a concept and does not have real existence.**

Buddhist philosophy suggested that time is only a concept with no inherent existence because it belongs to the relative truth of the world of experience from our consciousness. Each of our consciousness (or thought-moment) according to Abhidhamma (Narada Maha Thera, 1997:215) consists of three phases which are

1. Occurring or genesis (uppada)
2. Change or development (thiti)
3. Cessation or dissolution (bhanga)

Fig.4

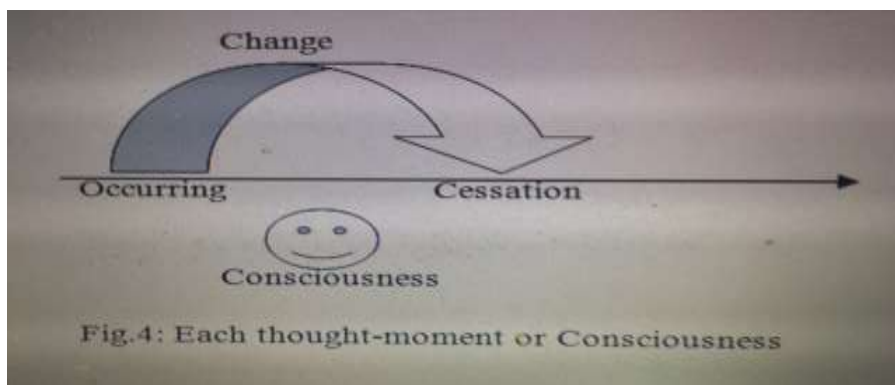
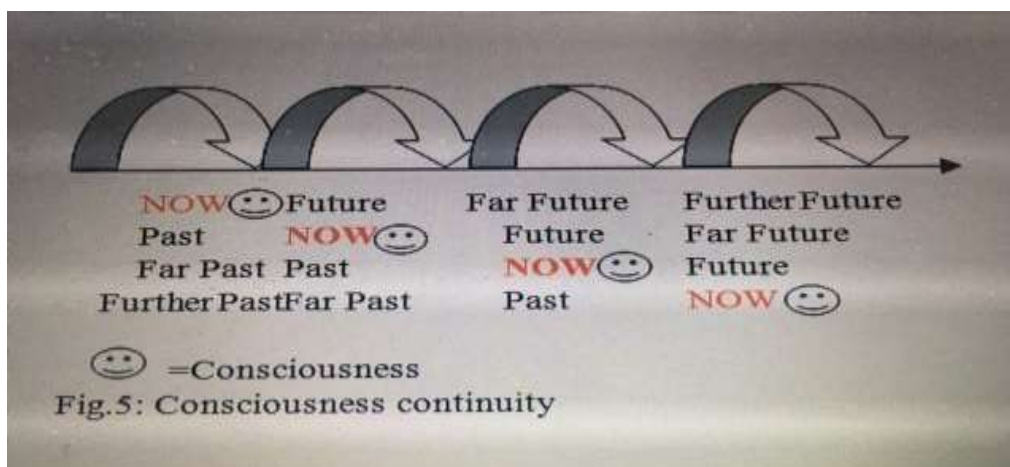


Fig.5



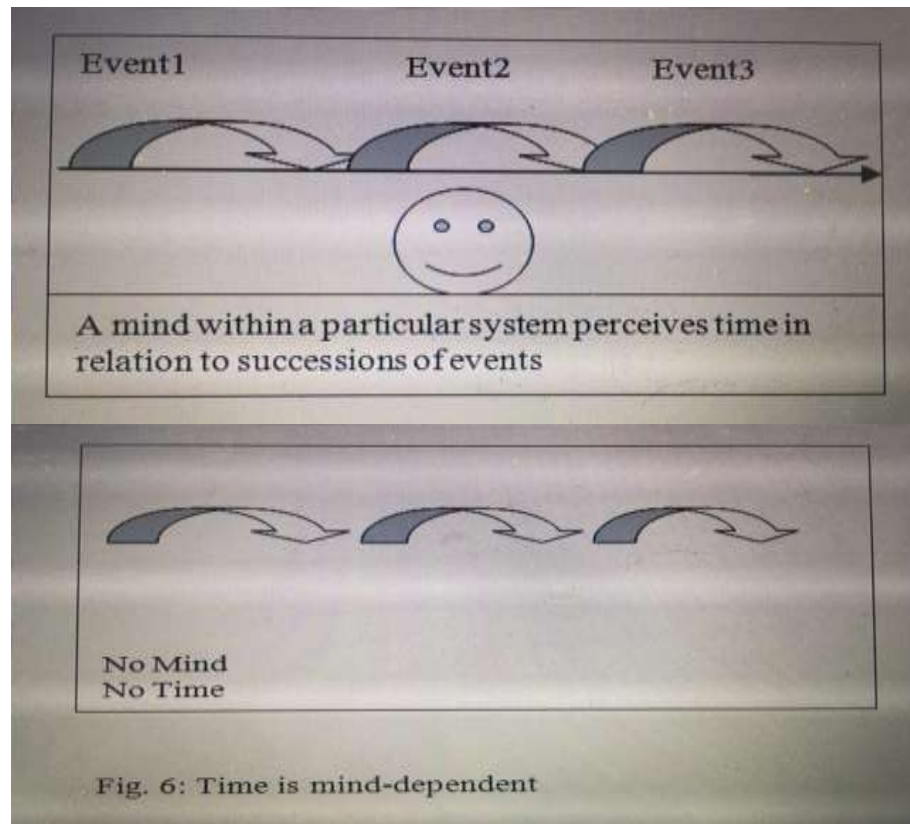
One consciousness is followed by another. The past is gone; the future has not yet to come. We live only for the moment of **Now** which is, thus, the transitional stage from the future to the past. Buddhist scripture stated clearly that *“Time is a concept derived from this or that phenomenon. And it does not exist by nature, it is merely a concept”* (Narada Maha Thera, 1997:216)

### B. Time is mind-dependent

According to Buddhist philosophy, time has no existence outside of phenomena and their observers. Time must be perceived by a mind (consciousness) in relation to successions of events that occur to a particular system (i.e. Planes of existence such as heaven, earth, or hell) (Somparn Promtha, 1988:54-60) It follows that without a mind to observe the changes of the conditioned things, the perception of time cannot be realized.



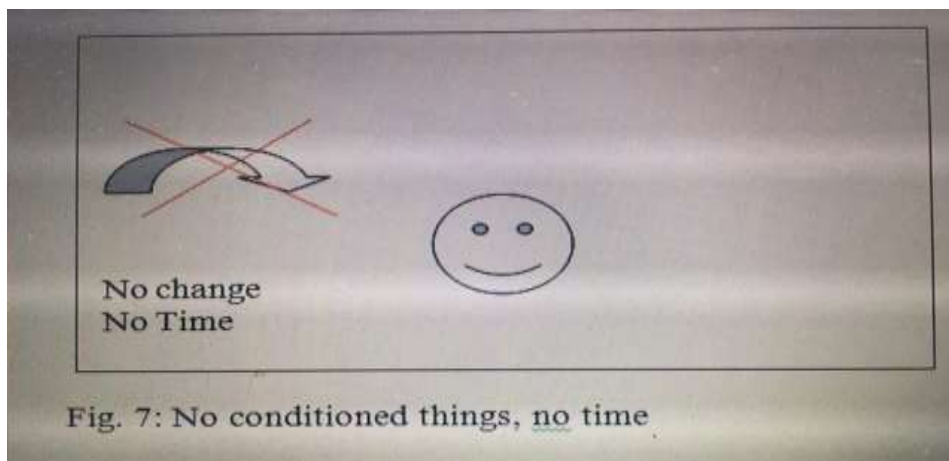
Fig.6



### C. Without the conditioned things, there will be no concept of time

According to Buddhist philosophy, time does not exist apart from the conditioned things because the conditioned things related to time as witness of their unstable and changing condition. This relationship does not mean that time is a quality of the conditioned things but time is only a concept invented by consciousness from perceiving the becoming process of the conditioned things. It follows that without the becoming process of the conditioned things, there is no time and without time there is no past, present and future. The only existence would be only the unconditioned things that exist beyond the concept of time (Somparn Promtha,1988:59).

Fig.7



## V. COMPARISON BETWEEN BUDDHIST AND MCTAGGART'S UNREALITY OF TIME

Before they came into the conclusion that time is unreal there are similarities and differences in their arguments of time in the following aspects

1. Time and epistemological process.
2. Time and its direction.

### 1. Time and Epistemological Process

The similarities between Buddhist and McTaggart's argument appear to be that firstly, they both agree that time is successive, but with different explanations. While McTaggart argued for the succession of events in which each event is characterized by its quality in relation to time in the past, time in the present and time in the future as the A-series, Buddhism, on the contrary, acknowledged the succession of events in time (past, present and future) as not related to the quality of time but related to our mind or our consciousness process of knowing (epistemological process). We can note an observation from a famous Buddhist monk, the Venerable Narada Maha Thera who explained that time is the necessary condition of the secession of mental states when he wrote,

*"Past is defined as that which has gone beyond its own state or the moments of genesis, development and cessation. Present is that which on account of this and that reason enters, goes, exists above the moments of genesis. Future is that which has not yet reached both states.....Time is thus the sine qua non of the succession of mental states"* (Narada Maha Thera, 1997:215).

Secondly, they both agree that time is perceived as being continuous. McTaggart's argued for the continuity of time as past, present and future in the infinity of the A-series while Buddhism acknowledged the continuity of the process of knowing (epistemological process) by our consciousness (Chitta) in relation to time. Lord Buddha described that the continuity of

Chitta (our consciousness) in time occur as the result of reaction to defilements (Greed, Anger and Desire) in accordance with the causal principle that stated,

*“When this exists, that exists or comes to be; on the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not exist or come to be; on the cessation of this, that ceases”* (Kalupahana,1974:182)

## 2. Time and Its Direction

Regarding the direction of time, they both agree that time progresses in the forwarding direction. McTaggart argued that the present is moving forward in the A-series since the process that the future becomes the Now is always forwardly ongoing, not the other way around. (Theravada) Buddhist philosophy also focuses on the importance of the Now which is the ongoing process into the future, never into the past. It is evidenced by progress of the present that always takes us from birth to death, never goes backward.

*“Matter, which also constantly changes, endures only for seventeen thought-moments, being the time duration for one thought-process. Past is gone. Future has not come. We live only for one thought-moment and that slips into the irrevocable past”* (Narada Maha Thera, 1997:216).

Finally, it can be concluded here that both McTaggart and Buddhist concept of time agree to the idea that although time displays its quality as being successive, being continuous and moves in the forwarding direction, time itself is unreal. While McTaggart support his arguments by trying to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of time with the A-, B-and C-theories, Buddhist philosophy simply postulated that time would not exist if everything is permanent and nothing changes. Time is not real because it is only a concept that our consciousness perceive from the changes of our surrounding world. It suffices to say that both McTaggart’s and Buddhist concept of time concur to the observation that time is actually unreal.

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