

McTaggart's argument for the internality of relations

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We've already seen Bradley's statement of the view that 'the Absolute is not many; there are no independent reals.' One of his principal arguments for this view was that (i) relations are not real, and (ii) if there were multiple things, they would have to stand in relations, so (iii) there are not multiple things.

A more subtle kind of argument for monism comes from the arguments which were given for the 'doctrine of internality': the view that all relations 'enter into the being of' the things they relate. This view, as we'll see, can be used to argue that the nature of any one thing depends on every property of every other thing. This seems to go naturally with the idea that there are not *really* any independent things; that the analysis of reality into distinct things is a kind of intellectual illusion.

Bradley seems to endorse the doctrine of internality in an appendix to the 1893 edition of *Appearance and Reality*. We'll follow the discussion in McTaggart's *The Nature of Existence*, which was published a bit later. The most important sections of this book for our purposes will be the sections on 'Derivative Characteristics' and 'Determination.' Some of the main theses are as follows:

1 *Any change in an object implies a change in the relations in which every other object stands*

A background claim required by the argument. Every object stands in some relation to every object; every object stands in some relation to every change in every other object.

2 *Any change in the relations in which an object stands implies a change in its qualities*

McTaggart writes,

"The occurrence of any relation involves the occurrence of a quality in each of its terms — the quality of being a term of that relation." (§85)

The distinction between relations and relational qualities, and why standing in any relation involves having at least one relational quality.

3 Any change in an object's properties implies a change in its nature

In §108, McTaggart says the following about the properties of a thing and its nature:

“If now we enquire what A is, a complete answer must be given by giving the nature of A , and this consists of its qualities. X , Y , and Z are taken as a complete list of these, and thus the nature of A is X , Y , Z . Let us suppose any of the qualities altered, either by addition or subtraction or substitution, so that the complete list would be represented by W , X , Y , Z , or by X , Y , or by W , X , Y . Thus the nature of the substance which had such qualities would be different from the nature of A . Therefore the substance in question could not be A .”

The conclusion is that an object's being the object that it is depends on each of its qualities. Why would McTaggart think this?

One reason might be a prior commitment to the idea that a thing just is the set of all of its qualities standing in some relation.

A second, more persuasive reason has to do with Leibniz's Law, sometimes called the “Indiscernibility of identicals.”

Leibniz's Law

Necessarily, if x and y have different properties, $x \neq y$.

This principle seems clearly to be true; nothing could have a property which it lacks. But this principle says that difference in properties entails numerical distinctness. And isn't a property part of a thing's nature just in case, if it lacked that property, it would not be the thing that it is? So Leibniz's Law — which is as uncontroversial as principles in metaphysics get — seems to lead directly to the idea that any change in a thing's properties implies a change in its nature.

4 Putting the argument together

So far we have laid out three theses which McTaggart seems to endorse, and given arguments for each. But if we put these three theses together, we get what looks like a valid argument for the view that every object's nature is dependent on every property every other object has:

1. Any difference in the qualities of one object implies a difference in the relations in which every other object stands.
 2. For any object, a difference in the relations in which that object stands implies a difference in that object's qualities.
 3. A difference in an object's qualities implies a difference in its nature.
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- C. Any difference in the qualities of one object implies a difference in the nature of every other object.

Since to say that the nature of an object changes is just to say that the object ceases to be the object that it is, the conclusion of this argument appears to be another way of stating the view that the being of every object depends on every property of every other object. No object could be what it is without every other object being just the way it is.

One way to express this conclusion is to say that no relations are external. The distinction between internal and external relations and properties is just another way of talking about the distinction between essential and accidental properties, or between these properties without which a thing would not be what it is, and properties without which a thing could still be what it is.