

# TENSE AND TRUTH CONDITIONS

By GRAHAM PRIEST

## I INTRODUCTION

IS tense, that is, pastness, presentness and futurity, an objective feature of reality, or is it merely a subjective 'epiphenomenon'. This thorny subject has been the locus of a great deal of philosophical debate. A notable and recent instalment in the debate is Hugh Mellor's book *Real Time* (Cambridge U.P., 1984; all page references are to this). The book contains discussion of many issues, but the heart of it is the argument, with its dénouement in chapter 8, that tense is unreal. The chapter starts by using McTaggart's famous argument to try to show this. I do not think the discussion here adds significantly to the topic, and I doubt whether those unpersuaded by McTaggart will be persuaded by Mellor (in particular, no A-theorist who is awake will accede to the claim, p. 93 (2), that every event is past, present and future when the 'is' is significantly tensed). The second part of the chapter (pp. 98-102) gives a somewhat different argument for the same conclusion. According to Mellor this is just a modern re-working of McTaggart. I confess that this is less than clear to me, and I suspect that Mellor is unduly modest. At any rate, the argument can be formulated and discussed without any reference to McTaggart. It is this argument I wish to discuss and, I hope, show to be wrong. I will put the argument in my own terms without, I trust, doing Mellor any injustice.

## II THE ARGUMENT

Is tense real? Like many philosophical issues, much of the problem is getting the question in a definite enough form to be able to say something intelligent about it. Mellor glosses the question (in a way of which I thoroughly approve) as follows. Consider the set of true sentences (of, say, English). What makes these true are the facts. We do not have to reify facts as traditional correspondence theorists did. The facts are just whatever make claims true if they are true. Reality is constituted by the facts. Hence, if we can account for the truth of all true sentences without appealing to a certain notion, such is not a part of reality. We say what makes a sentence true, if it is, by giving its truth conditions. Thus, if we can spell out the truth conditions of all sentences (true and false) without mentioning a notion, that notion is certainly not part of reality. A sufficient condition for something's being unreal is, therefore, that it is irrelevant to the truth conditions of all sentences. Applying this:

tense is unreal if we can give the truth conditions of all sentences without using tensed sentences. (It is, I suppose, possible to object to this test for reality that there might be parts of reality that are not the truth makers for any sentences, and thus are ineffable. We need not enter this debate here. For tense is certainly quite effable.)

The next question is whether we can give the truth conditions of all sentences of, say, English without invoking the notion of tense. To this Mellor gives the answer 'yes'. There are two relevant cases to distinguish here depending on whether the verb of the sentence is significantly tensed or not. It will be absolutely crucial that we distinguish between tensed and untensed verbs, especially the copula. I will therefore henceforth italicize all and only tensed verbs. Thus I will write, e.g., 'The Battle of Waterloo *occurred* in 1815', but 'The Battle of Waterloo occurs in 1815' where both sentences are thought of as stating truths. Now, to give the truth conditions of untensed sentences without employing tensed sentences is simplicity itself. The homophonic T-scheme will do. Thus, for example:

- (1) 'The Battle of Waterloo occurs in 1815' is true iff the Battle of Waterloo occurs in 1815.

For tensed sentences we have to be a little more cunning. Mellor employs a well known device. It now becomes important to decide of what sort of thing truth is to be predicated. Mellor elects the class of utterances (or better, utterance-event-tokens). The temporal location of an utterance can then be used in the relevant truth conditions. Thus, suppose that *u* is an utterance of 'The Battle of Waterloo *occurred* in 1815'. The appropriate instance of the T-scheme is:

- (2) *u* is true iff the Battle of Waterloo occurs in 1815 and 1815 occurs before *u*.

A similar dodge can obviously be performed with present and future tenses, and, as Mellor notes (p. 42ff), with compound tenses.

We have seen that the truth conditions of all sentences, tensed and untensed, can be given without using tensed sentences at all. Tense, therefore, is not a part of reality. As Mellor puts it (p. 102):

The sole function of tensed facts is to make tensed sentences and judgements true or false. But that job is already done by the tenseless facts that fix the truth-values of all tensed sentence and judgement tokens. Provided a token of '*e* is past' is later than *e*, it is true. Nothing else about *e* and it matters a jot: in particular, no tensed fact about them matters. It is immaterial, for a start, where *e* and the token are in the A series; and if that is not material, no more *recherché* tensed fact can be. Similarly for tokens of all other tensed types. Their tenseless truth conditions leave tensed facts no scope for determining their truth values. But these facts by definition determine their truth values. So in reality there are no such facts.

The argument against tense does not, however, have to depend on an appeal to Ockham's razor. For the supposition that there are tensed facts, that is, that tensed notions are to be used to give truth conditions, leads to contradictions. Thus suppose we try to use them to give the truth conditions of tensed sentences, obviously the most favourable case. Let *u* be any utterance of 'The Battle of Waterloo *occurred* in 1815.' Then the appropriate instance of the T-scheme would be:

(4) *u* is true iff the Battle of Waterloo *occurred* in 1815.

Then, applying (4) and using our knowledge of history, we can infer that *u* is true. However, (4) was equally applicable in 1800 (assuming that reference can be made to future events – an assumption that we need not here challenge). Moreover, since then the Battle of Waterloo *had not happened*, *u* is false. Thus *u* is both true and false. This contradiction is, according to Mellor, essentially the same as that which eventuates in McTaggart's argument. Whether or not that is so, it is a contradiction, and therefore the assumption that there are tensed facts is incorrect. To quote Mellor again (p. 100):

... giving any tensed sentence non-token-reflexive truth conditions, tensed or tenseless, always leads to contradiction. ... (such truth conditions) would give all tokens of the same type the same truth-value, regardless of their date, thus inevitably contradicting the truth value of some tokens of the tensed sentence, which differ from date to date. ... Since the truth-value of tensed tokens is never independent of their A-series position, giving them now all the same truth value will inevitably make some past or future tokens both true and false.

### III THE REPLY

The argument is wrong. To explain why it is wrong, I will start by giving a parallel argument. To see what this is, note first that in the truth predicate used in Mellor's argument the 'is' of 'is true' is *not* significantly tensed. (I have, according to my convention, not, therefore, italicized it.) If this is not clear, merely note that in the argument of the last paragraph, if the possession of truth were significantly tensed, all that we could conclude is that *u* is true now but *was* false in 1800. It would therefore follow that a numerically unique utterance can change its truth value over time. But this is no more problematic than its changing its colour (say, because of fading). Now, suppose that instead we take the truth predicate to be significantly tensed. Then we may argue exactly as Mellor does, except, this time...

We can prove that *tenselessness* is not a part of reality. We do this by showing that the truth conditions of all sentences can be given in tensed terms. How to do this for tensed sentences is entirely obvious. The homophonic T-scheme will do. Thus, for example:

- (5) 'The Battle of Waterloo *occurred* in 1815' *is* true iff the Battle of Waterloo *occurred* in 1815.

The truth value of the utterance will change over time: the utterance, whenever it is made, *is* true in 1986 and *was* false in 1800, since then the Battle of Waterloo *had not happened*; but as I noted, this is unproblematic.

To state the truth conditions of untensed sentences we have to employ a little more cunning — but not much. Let us define, for any verb 'to *v*' another verb 'to eternally *v*' thus: '*x* eternally *v*'s' is '*x* has *v*'ed or *x* *v*'s or *x* will *v*'. The important thing about a sentence whose verb is an eternal one is, as the name implies, that if it is true at any time it is true at all times. The truth conditions of untensed sentences can now be given in eternal terms. Thus for example:

- 'The Battle of Waterloo occurs in 1815' *is* true iff the Battle of Waterloo *eternally occurs* in 1815.

This is perfectly correct. Though both sides of the biconditional are significantly tensed, both sides have the same truth value, namely true, at all times. Since the truth conditions of all sentences can be given in tensed terms, tenselessness is not a part of reality.

So far this argument, with its diametrically opposed conclusion, would seem as good, or as bad, as Mellor's. But Mellor's argument did not end there. The supposition that there are tensed facts actually leads to contradiction. But now that we have significantly tensed the truth predicate, the supposition that there are untensed facts leads to contradiction. Suppose, for example, that *u* is an utterance (at any time) of the sentence 'The Battle of Waterloo *occurred* in 1815', and we try to use an untensed sentence to give its truth condition thus:

- (6) *u is* true iff the Battle of Waterloo occurs in 1815

Then applying this now, we infer that *u is* true. However, the truth conditions were equally applicable in 1800, and applying them then, it follows that *u was* then true. But this contradicts the plain fact that it *was* not. (Imagine that *u* was uttered in 1800.) Nor will it help to give token reflexive truth-conditions *à la* Mellor. For then the truth conditions are:

- (7) *u is* true iff the Battle of Waterloo occurs in 1815 and 1815 occurs before *u*.

Applying (7) now we infer that *u is* true; but, as before, (7) was equally applicable in 1800, and applying it then we conclude that *u was* true in 1800, which contradicts the fact that it *was* not.

The problems that the rival truth conditions run into are, in fact, nothing to do with the reality, or otherwise, of anything, but merely reflect the fact that whether one takes truth to be tensed or

untensed it is possible for an imbalance to arise in the T-scheme. If one can produce an instance of the T-scheme that has one side significantly (and not eternally) tensed, while the other side is not, then applying it at times other than the present will produce trouble. In the case of Mellor's argument the left-hand side of (4) is not tensed whilst the right-hand side is. In the case of the dual argument, the left-hand sides of (6) and (7) are significantly tensed (because of the tensed truth predicate) whilst their right-hand sides are not.

We see then that Mellor's argument against the reality of tense does not work; the conclusion is merely the result of a silent assumption that truth is untensed. The tensedness of truth is, of course, exactly what someone who takes tense to be part of reality is likely to claim. It would appear, then, that Mellor's argument tacitly begs the question.

#### IV CONCLUSIONS

The next obvious question is whether one can give an independent argument for the claim that the notion of truth used in giving truth conditions must be untensed. Logicians, it is true, usually talk in tenseless terms. For example the papers comprising the burgeoned literature on truth conditions would seem to make this assumption. (And this maybe explains why Mellor makes the assumption without apparent question.) This would seem, however, to be an accident. For as we have just seen, one can give truth conditions quite adequately whether truth is taken to be tensed or to be untensed. The approaches are not logically equivalent. On the tenseless approach utterances have a truth value fixed for all time; and if the sentence is tensed, this truth value will be determined in part by the date of the utterance. On the tensed approach a numerically unique utterance – even one which exists for only a moment – may change its truth value over time; and the date of utterance will be irrelevant to this truth value (unless, of course, the utterance is to the effect that it does or does not occur at a certain date). However, there seems to me to be no particular reason for preferring one of these approaches to the other. You can think of things in either way provided that you are clear about how it is that you are thinking about them, and do not, of course, equivocate. Maybe this is wrong and there are decisive reasons for adopting one approach rather than the other. However, unless and until this is shown the argument from truth conditions goes nowhere.