

MacBEATH'S SOLUBLE ASPIRIN*

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I agree with most of Murray MacBeath's (1983) discussion of my (1981) article, and write chiefly to acknowledge that his solution to Prior's (1959) 'Thank goodness that's over' puzzle supersedes my own. The puzzle is to say what, in saying 'Thank goodness that's over', one thanks goodness for. No doubt that that — a headache, say — is over, i.e. past. But a headache's being past is a tensed fact, and I believe time to be tenseless. Do I not therefore need a tenseless equivalent of this tensed fact, i.e. a tenseless translation of 'That's over'? If so, I am stumped, since it has no such translation, as I admitted in my *Real Time* (1981a) though not in my article. And since many still think that time could only be tenseless if tensed truths had tenseless translations, I should have made clear, as MacBeath does, that this is not so.

When I call time tenseless, what I mean, following McTaggart (1908; 1927, ch.33), is that there are no A-series facts. That is, nothing ever has any A-series position: neither temporal presence nor any degree of pastness or futurity. I say 'nothing' because McTaggart ascribed A-series positions to events, and many think his famous argument against them ineffective when A-series predicates are construed not as adjectives of events but as sentential operators. But that just turns A-series positions into properties of present-tense facts, so that (e.g.) the pastness of a death becomes the pastness of the fact that someone is now dying. And as I remark in *Real Time* (p. 95), this dodge has no effect on McTaggart's argument, that A-series properties cannot be ascribed without contradiction: that is true whatever they are properties of. Present-tense facts are no better at both being and not being past, present and future than events are. Whatever its elements, there is no real A-series.

But (*pace* McTaggart) there is still real time, in the form of a tenseless B-series of things and events, ordered by the relations of simultaneity and of the varying degrees of earlier and later. In *Real Time* I show how, without recourse to the A-series, one can get a real B-series that meets McTaggart's test for temporality by being the dimension of change. So things and events can indeed be simultaneous with each other, or more or less earlier or later, even

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though none is really past, present or future.

These tenseless temporal relations can then be used to give token-reflexive truth conditions for tensed sentences. A token of 'That's over', for instance, will be true if and only if it is later than whatever the token 'That' refers to. Similarly for other tensed sentences. A tenseless sentence, on the other hand, is not temporally token-reflexive: the truth of its tokens does not depend on when they occur. But the truth of tokens of a tensed sentence generally does: thus, tokens of the sentence '*e* is past' which are later than *e* are true, while earlier ones are false. Replacing them with tokens of any tenseless sentence would therefore mean replacing some true tokens with false ones or *vice versa*. But translations obviously must at least preserve the truth or falsity of the translated tokens. So tensed sentences generally have no tenseless translation. In short, tenseless time does *not* imply that tensed sentences have tenseless translations: on the contrary.

But what then does someone saying 'Thank goodness that's over' after a headache thank goodness for? Not the A-series fact that the headache is past, for there is no such fact, nor any tenseless equivalent of it. And as Prior remarks, one certainly doesn't thank goodness for the tenseless facts that make the token true. In my (1981) article I claimed that one doesn't literally thank goodness at all. 'Thank goodness', I said, just expresses relief, and usually accompanies 'That's over' because relief is usually caused by the end of painful experiences and thus occurs when 'That's over', said of them, is true; and I added that conjoining 'That's over' with 'Thank goodness' also expresses *inter alia* one's awareness of this causal connection.

To this MacBeath raises two objections. The first is to my arguing from the existence of masochists that relief can accompany pain and hence that nothing *a priori* can prevent it doing so. In particular, the *a priori* fact that experience is always present, so that past pain is no pain at all, cannot be what makes relief usually follow pain. And *a posteriori* we can explain the tenseless fact, that relief usually follows pain, as readily (e.g. by evolution) as the tensed fact that relief usually occurs when pain is past. I concluded that we have no reason to prefer the tensed description of this phenomenon, nor therefore to suppose that pains not only generally precede relief but also become past.

MacBeath tries to deprive me of this argument by changing the example from pain to 'disvalued experience', which he thinks relief cannot accompany (masochists not being counter-examples, merely people who value pain). If this were indeed a necessary truth, there might be an *a priori* reason for it, e.g. that relief cannot be felt until a disvalued experience is past. But that reason appeals to tensed facts

(namely, experiences being past), which would thus have to be admitted after all.

But relief surely *can* accompany disvalued experience. Consider a lusty but inexperienced Puritan relieved to be tasting forbidden fruit at last. An awareness of doing wrong — of enjoying a ‘disvalued experience’ — may well accompany his relief, indeed add zest to it. Only an implausibly restrictive definition of ‘disvalued’ would rule out that possibility. And the restriction would be no more implausible if it were tenseless, i.e. if it prevented relief being simultaneous with disvalued experience rather than preventing it occurring while the experience is present. So either way, relief’s habit of following disvalued experience no more suggests the existence of tensed facts than its habit of following pains does.

MacBeath’s first objection can thus be met. But not the second. My solution to Prior’s puzzle requires ‘Thank goodness’ to express a feeling, relief, that is not about anything, and so in particular not about the tensed fact that my headache is past. The solution therefore would not work if someone really believed in Goodness and wanted to thank it, i.e. as MacBeath says, ‘if someone were to say — and mean it — “Thank God that’s over”’ (p. 84). Here, as in MacBeath’s other examples, we have ‘an emotional response to a tensed fact or to the tensedness of a fact’ (p. 85), a response whose fitness or otherwise I have not at all explained.

But MacBeath has. Tensed facts figure only in our responses to tensed facts, and what our responses require is not the facts themselves but beliefs about them, i.e. tensed beliefs. But both the content and the truth of tensed beliefs can be fixed as MacBeath says by purely tenseless facts. Thus I thank goodness my headache is over not because it is over but because I believe it to be over: and the content of this belief is fixed by its token-reflexive truth condition (that the belief occur after the headache), and its truth by the tenseless fact that the condition is satisfied. The alleged tensed fact that my headache is over is not needed after all. Having brought my Emeritus headache back as a veritable migraine, MacBeath has cured it again, using ingredients all of which are in *Real Time*: and I am duly grateful.

In my article, and in *Real Time*, I drew on my solution of Prior’s puzzle to account tenselessly for the feeling that experience occurs essentially in the present. Though MacBeath doesn’t discuss it, I should remark in conclusion that his solution improves my account considerably. I had located the feeling in a belief, accompanying an experience, that the experience is present — a belief that is of course a token-reflexive tautology. But since beliefs aim only at truth, and this

truth is trivial, so (arguably) is the belief, which the felt presence of experience seems not to be. Beliefs, moreover, are not feelings, as I argue in my (1977). For both these reasons, my account was not really adequate. It explained the presence of experience being truly believed, but not its being seriously felt.

MacBeath now enables me to do better, since he has shown how to account tenselessly for tensed feelings and emotions. First, I can now allow the presence of experience to be felt, not just believed. Secondly, since feelings and emotions aim at more than truth, the feeling need not be as trivial as the the belief it is based on. If my belief that I live in the present makes me glad to do so, my gladness may be serious even though my belief is only trivially true.

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