Idealism

Last week we discussed a few arguments which aimed to show that we do not know the things about external objects that we ordinarily take ourselves to know. These arguments did not have the conclusion that the external world does not exist -- only that we cannot **know** that it does.

But many philosophers throughout history have attempted to show something much more surprising. These philosophers have tried to show that the world of material objects, existing in space and time, which we take ourselves to inhabit is not real, but is a mere appearance.

Many of these philosophers have also held the view that what **is** real are mental things: minds, and their experiences. This combination of views -- that the material world is ultimately, in some sense, and illusion, and that the fundamental reality is mental -- is called **idealism**.

In a sense, you can think of this sort of view as the opposite of materialism. **Materialism** says that mental things are, in the end, fundamentally physical. **Idealism** says that material things are, in the end, fundamentally mental. Materialism and idealism are both forms of monism, since they both hold that there is only one fundamental kind of thing in the world; they just disagree about what this kind of thing is. **Dualism** is opposed to both, and says that there are two fundamentally different kinds of things, the mental and the physical.

How would one go about arguing for idealism? What needs to be proved is that our view that there are non-mental material things is a mistake. Traditionally, idealists have tried to show this by trying to show that the existence of non-mental material things would lead to some sort of absurdity.

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How would one go about arguing for idealism? What needs to be proved is that our view that there are non-mental material things is a mistake. Traditionally, idealists have tried to show this by trying to show that the existence of non-mental material things would lead to some sort of absurdity.

To do this, they have often focused on two of the main supposed attributes of material things: that they exist in space, and that they exist in time. If it can be shown that space and time are illusions, that would provide a very strong argument for idealism.

Our reading for today is an example of this kind of argument; McTaggart, aims to show that time is unreal. (The optional reading, from Kant, aims at an analogous conclusion about space.)

Here is McTaggart's statement of his view about time.

> I believe that nothing that exists can be temporal, and that therefore time is unreal.

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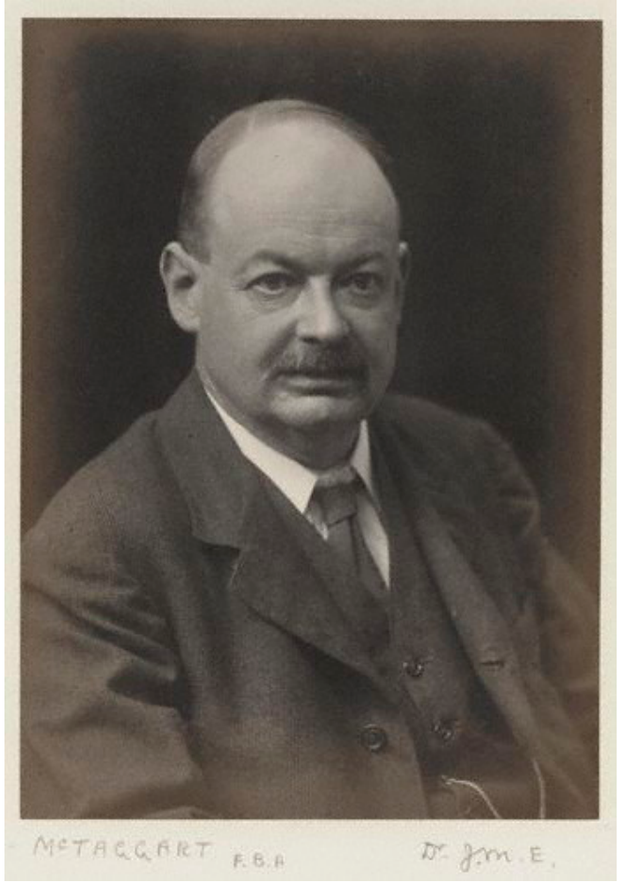

This view is, even if surprising, pretty straightforward. McTaggart says that nothing *could* exist in time; this indicates that he must think that there is some impossibility involved with things existing in time. If he can show this, this would support idealism, by an argument of the following sort.

1. If there were material objects, they would exist in time.
2. Nothing can exist in time.

C. There are no material objects.

McTaggart's argument is, in effect, a defense of premise 2. His aim is to show that the idea of something existing in time involves a contradiction.

To understand this argument, a first step is to understand McTaggart's distinction between two kinds of properties involved with time, which he calls the A-properties and the B-properties.

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> **305.** Positions in time, as time appears to us *primâ facie*, are distinguished in two ways. Each position is Earlier than some and Later than some of the other positions. To constitute such a series there is required a transitive asymmetrical relation, and a collection of terms such that, of any two of them, either the first is in this relation to the second, or the second is in this relation to the first. We may take here either the relation of "earlier than" or the relation of "later than," both of which, of course, are transitive and asymmetrical. If we take the first, then the terms have to be such that, of any two of them, either the first is earlier than the second, or the second is earlier than the first.
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> In the second place, each position is either Past, Present, or Future. The distinctions of the former class are permanent, while those of the latter are not. If M is ever earlier than N, it is always earlier. But an event, which is now present, was future, and will be past.

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Here McTaggart says that the first class of properties he is interested in -- which he later calls the **B series properties** -- includes "earlier than" and "later than" and is **permanent**, in this sense: if X is earlier than Y, then X is **always** earlier than Y.

The second class of properties -- which he later calls the **A series properties** -- includes "past", "present", and "future." These properties are **not permanent**: if an X is future, this does **not** imply that it will always be future.

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A-series properties

B-series properties

McTaggart lived **before** you were born.

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The Bush administration is **in the past**.

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A-series properties

The Bush administration is **in the past**.

B-series properties

McTaggart lived **before** you were born.

The Bush administration is **in the past relative to March 30, 2009**.

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The Reds' last World Series win is **more recent than** the Cubs'.

To understand this argument, a first step is to understand McTaggart's distinction between two kinds of properties involved with time.

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Though you likely have never thought about this before, I think that two things are clear: McTaggart is right that there is a genuine distinction between these two classes of properties, and in our ordinary thought about time, we do think that some events really have both kinds of properties.

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Using this distinction, McTaggart’s argument can be thought of as of the following form:

1. Nothing really has any A-series property.
2. If nothing really has any A-series property, then nothing exists in time.

C. Nothing exists in time.

Let’s turn first to his argument for premise 1.

McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time

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Here is what McTaggart says:

> **329.** Past, present, and future are incompatible determinations. Every event must be one or the other, but no event can be more than one. If I say that any event is past, that implies that it is neither present nor future, and so with the others. And this exclusiveness is essential to change, and therefore to time. For the only change we can get is from future to present, and from present to past.
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> The characteristics, therefore, are incompatible. But every event has them all[1]. If *M* is past, it has been present and future. If it is future, it will be present and past. If it is present, it has been future and will be past. Thus all the three characteristics belong to each event. How is this consistent with their being incompatible?

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The idea here seems to be this: if any event has one of the three basic A-series properties of past, present, and future, it has all of them. (Let's forget for now about the possibility of a first and last moment of time; they would have just two of these three properties.) But this is impossible, since these properties are, as he says, incompatible. So no event ever has any of these properties.

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We can put this in argument form as follows:

1. If any event has one of the following properties -- being past, being present, being future -- then it also has the others.
2. No event can have more than one of the following properties: being past, being present, being future.

C. No event has any of the following properties: being past, being present, being future. (1,2)

This is a valid argument; it is of the form: (1) If p then q, (2) not-q, therefore (C) not-p.

The only question we need to ask about this defense of premise (1) of McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time is: are its premises true?

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As McTaggart is aware, this argument is open to an obvious objection. (As he puts it, "it has been impossible to state the difficulty without almost giving the explanation.") The objection might be put like this:

> McTaggart's argument rests on an ambiguity. Every event has all of the A-series properties **at some time or other**; but what is impossible is that any event have all of these properties **at the same time**. We can't just talk simply about events having these properties -- being past, present and future -- we have to talk about them having these properties **at times**. And when we do that, we see that there is no way to make McTaggart's argument work.

Let's call this **the obvious objection**. McTaggart thinks that the obvious objection fails. To see why, we have to ask: what does it mean for an event to have one of these three properties **at a time**?

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Here is one thing we might mean: perhaps no event simply has the properties of being past, present, and future. Instead, it has these properties: will be past, is present, was future. So instead of our three simple A-series properties--

past
present
future

We should really be talking about these nine second-level A-series properties:

was past	is past	will be past
was present	is present	will be present
was future	is future	will be future

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was present	is present	will be present
was future	is future	will be future

Or, in other words:

past in the past	past in the present	past in the future
present in the past	present in the present	present in the future
future in the past	future in the present	future in the future

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The problem is that just as our three initial A-series properties (past, present, future) are both incompatible and such that every event that has one has them all, the same can be said of our new nine A-series properties.

9 second level A-series properties

past in the past
present in the past
future in the past
past in the present
present in the present
future in the present
past in the future
present in the future
future in the future

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Could one make the obvious objection again, and say something like this:

> No, it simply is not true that every event has each of these nine A-series properties; each event has all of these properties **at some time**. While it is true that event event which **is** present in the present **was** future in the present and **will be** past in the present, no event has each of these properties **at the same time**.

This objection suggests that we can't talk simply about events having one or more of our 9 second-level A-series properties; instead, we should talk about them having one or more of the 27 third-level A-series properties.

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past in the past
present in the past
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To see that this will not help, it is sufficient to note that among the 27 third-level A-series properties will be:

past in the present in the present
present in the present in the present
future in the present in the present

which are, again, incompatible.

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past in the present
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future in the present
past in the future
present in the future
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which are, again, incompatible.

Let's sum up. The obvious objection to McTaggart's defense of premise (1) of his argument was that we can't just talk about events having the A-series properties of past, present, and future, but rather must talk about whether an event **is present** or **was future**. This amounted to a switch from first-level to second-level A-series properties; but we saw that this does not avoid the contradiction. And this contradiction will remain at the third level, the fourth level, and so on. So the obvious objection does not seem to remove the contradiction in the A-series.

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At this point, the obvious objector might change strategies, and say something like this:

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The obvious objection, version 2

When I said that events don't simply have or not have the A-series properties but only have them at a time, I didn't mean to replace past, present, and future, with second-level A-series properties like being past in the present. What I meant was that the properties that events really have are properties like

past relative to 3/31/09

and these properties don't seem to lead to any contradiction, since it is simply not true that every event which has this property also has, for example, the property of being future relative to 3/31/09.

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What is wrong with version 2 of the obvious objection, from the point of view of someone who wants to object to premise (1) of McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time?

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So far, we have been discussing McTaggart's defense of premise (1) of his argument for the unreality of time, which is his argument that the A-series properties involve a contradiction, so that nothing can ever really have any A-series property. We saw that the contradiction can be avoided, but only at the cost of replacing A-series properties with B-series properties like "being future relative to 1975."

At this point, you might wonder: why would this be so bad? Why not think that events have B-series properties, but don't really have A-series properties? Why think, as McTaggart's premise (2) says, that if we give up on the A-series properties we have to give up on the idea that objects exist in time at all?

McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time

1. Nothing really has any A-series property.
2. If nothing really has any A-series property, then nothing exists in time.

C. Nothing exists in time.

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Here is what McTaggart says about this idea:

What is his argument? Why would this show that time can't exist unless objects have A-series properties?

> Take any event—the death of Queen Anne, for example—and consider what changes can take place in its characteristics. That it is a death, that it is the death of Anne Stuart, that it has such causes, that it has such effects—every characteristic of this sort never changes. "Before the stars saw one another plain," the event in question was the death of a Queen. At the last moment of time—if time has a last moment—it will still be the death of a Queen. And in every respect but one, it is equally devoid of change. But in one respect it does change. It was once an event in the far future. It became every moment an event in the nearer future. At last it was present. Then it became past, and will always remain past, though every moment it becomes further and further past[1].
>
> Such characteristics as these are the only characteristics which can change. And, therefore, if there is any change, it must be looked for in the *A* series, and in the *A* series alone. If there is no real *A* series, there is no real change. The *B* series, therefore, is not by itself sufficient to constitute time, since time involves change.

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Whether or not we accept McTaggart's argument that time requires change and that change requires the A-series, there certainly are some odd consequences of giving up on the reality of A-series properties. (In what follows, I will use **the B-theory** as a name for the theory that time exists and that events have B-series properties, but that events don't ever really have any A-series properties.

Consider, first, the idea that time **moves** in a certain direction. This idea is certainly part of our commonsense view of time, but it is hard to see how someone who does not believe in A-series properties can explain this. Isn't the movement of time just the movement of "the present" -- the change in which time has the property of being present? But this is an A-series property, and hence a property that the B-theorist does not think that any events really have.

However, perhaps this is not so bad for the B-theorist, since it is not clear that the idea that time moves really makes sense. It seems that if time moves, it must move at a certain speed. But what could be the speed at which time moves? It does not seem that there is any good answer to this question.

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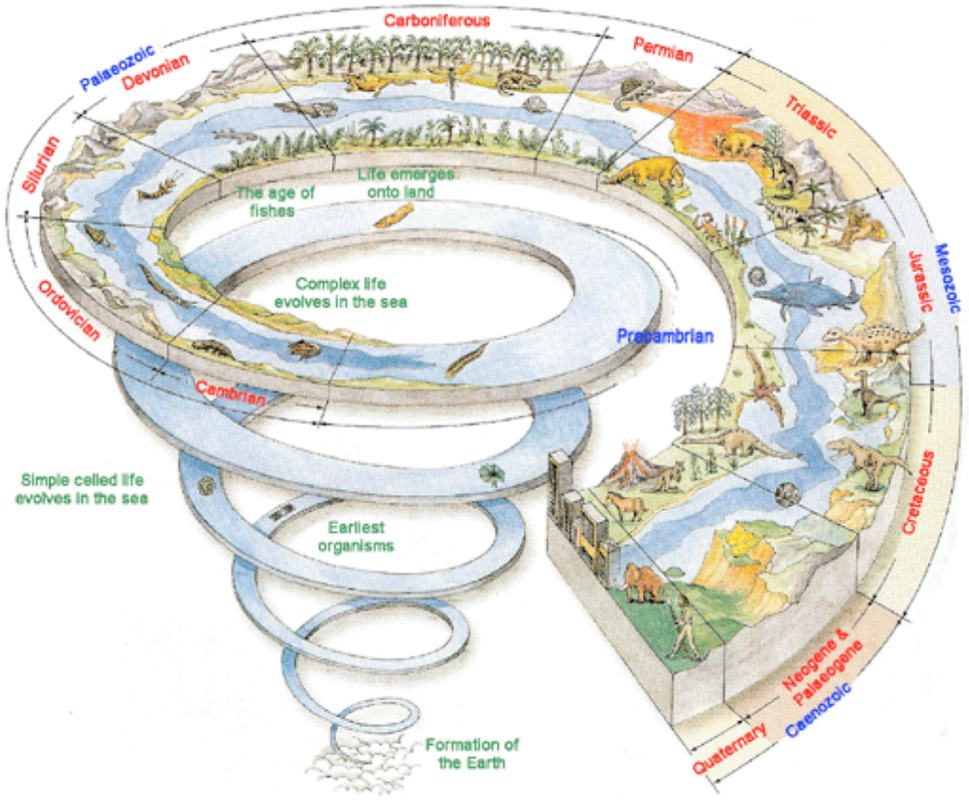
Perhaps the most striking consequence of the B-theory, though, the is status that it assigns to the present moment.



Suppose that you have complete amnesia, and are presented with a series of books which detail the whole history of planet earth -- past, present, and future. You might think that when you finish reading the books, you will still have one question which in unanswered: namely, Which moment is the present moment?

There is a sense in which the B-theorist thinks that this question has only a trivial answer: each time is present relative to itself, and no event is PRESENT, period, since no event has any A-series properties. But this seems odd. Isn't the present time fundamentally different than other times?

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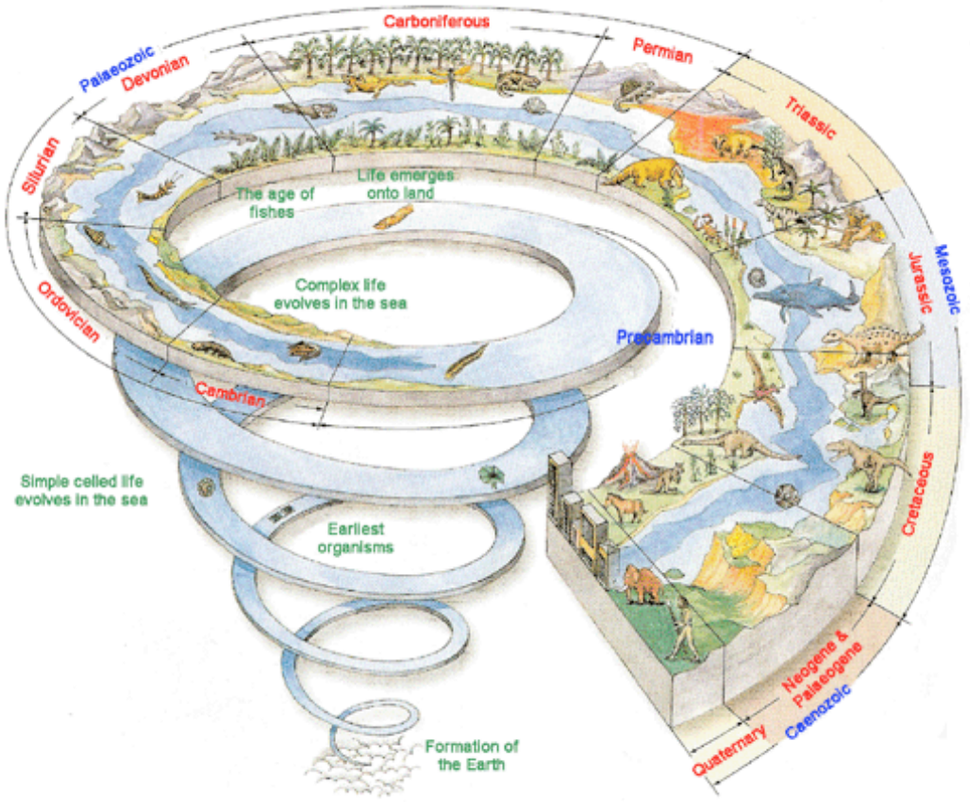

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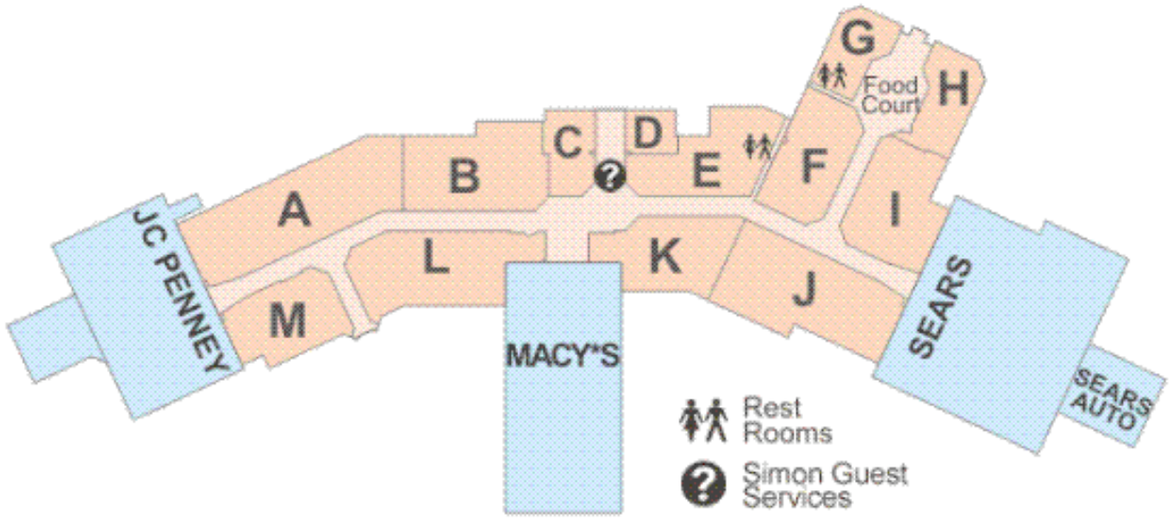
The B-theorist must think of our question, “Which moment is present?” as analogous to the question one might ask when presented with the information at right.

In general, the B-theorist will think of time as analogous to space; just as there is no objective property of HERE-NESS, so there is no objective property of NOW-NESS; there are only the properties of being here, or now, relative to particular things or events.



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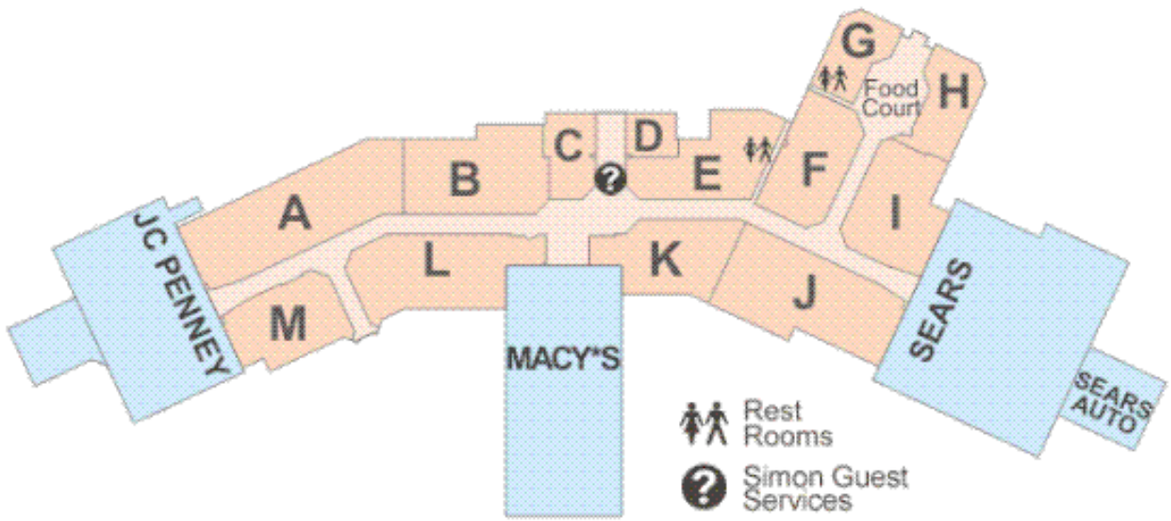

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When thought of in this way, you might think that the B-theorist’s view of time -- even if cannot make sense of our ordinary views that time passes, and that the present moment is fundamentally different than other times -- receives some support from contemporary physics, and in particular from Einstein’s theory of relativity. According to that theory, after all, space and time are thought of as connected in fundamental ways, and there is no such thing as the absolute present.