

An Eternal Society without Paradox

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Is it possible for something to have always existed, or does everything require a beginning or cause? Has the universe always existed, or did it begin when an event such as the Big Bang caused it? In his paper, “An Eternal Society Paradox,” Tisthammer defines a society with an eternal past as one that has existed in every previous year with no first year and no circumstance beforehand to cause it. He argues that such a society allows a paradox to occur, which suggests that an eternal past is not possible. I argue that Tisthammer’s paradox only emerges because he equates the actual performance of an action with the statement that the action has been performed. Tisthammer could still use his example to argue against an eternal past if he highlighted the strangeness that the example implies rather than arguing that it creates a paradox, but this would require more elaboration on the strangeness of his scenario.

Tisthammer’s Eternal Society and Possible Paradox

Tisthammer presents a scenario in which a society with an eternal past supposedly creates a paradox. In Tisthammer’s Eternal Society, the people flip a coin every year. If they get heads, they do a chant, but only

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if they have never done the chant before. If the coin comes up tails, or if they have done the chant before, they do not perform the chant that year (Tisthammer 54). This means that the society must do the chant the first time the coin comes up heads, and it cannot do the chant in any year other than the first year in which the coin comes up heads. Tisthammer's society has the technological capabilities of modern society, so they have no problem transmitting to future years whether or not they have done the chant previously. For instance, they could easily create a website that says whether or not the chant has occurred (54).

Tisthammer proposes the following scenario: "The Eternal Society has the aforementioned Annual Coin Flipping Tradition, but the coin comes up heads each year of the infinite past" (55). This means that in any given year, it is true that in the previous year, the coin came up heads. In this scenario, has the society ever performed the chant?

Intuitively, yes. In any given year, the coin will come up heads, and Tisthammer explains that the only reason the society would not perform the chant would be because they see on their website that the chant had previously been performed. Nevertheless, Tisthammer continues that in no year can this society do the chant "because no matter which year one points to, there is a prior year in which they would have done the chant had they not done the chant before" (55). The chant is only performed once, and in any given year, the chant would have already been performed in a previous year, so it cannot be performed in the given year. Thus, the paradox supposedly presented in Tisthammer's scenario is that the society must have performed the chant but cannot ever have performed the chant (55). Tisthammer argues that because a society with an eternal past can create such a paradox, a society with an eternal past cannot exist.

We can reconstruct Tisthammer's argument borrowing the structure he used for his reconstruction of Pruss' Grim Reaper argument (Tisthammer 53):

- P1: If an eternal past were possible, Tisthammer's Eternal Society scenario would be possible.
- P2: Tisthammer's Eternal Society scenario results in a paradox.
- P3: Scenarios that result in a paradox cannot be possible.
- C1: An eternal past cannot be possible.

Argument against a Paradox in Tisthammer's Eternal Society

P2 is not correct because Tisthammer's Eternal Society scenario does not result in a paradox. The supposed paradox is that (a) the society must have done the chant but (b) the society can never have done the chant. While (b) is true, (a) is not the case; it is true that the society could never have performed the chant, but it is not true that the society must have performed the chant.

Tisthammer equates the society having *done* the chant in a previous year to the society *being informed* that the chant was done in a previous year. The first is indeed impossible, but Tisthammer's scenario requires only the second. Let us reexamine Tisthammer's justification for part (b) of his paradox: "No matter which year one points to, there is a prior year in which they would have done the chant had they not *done* the chant before" (55; emphasis added). A more accurate description would be that, "no matter which year one points to, there is a prior year in which they would have done the chant had they not *been informed* that they had done the chant before" (55).

This society has never done the chant, but it has always existed as though it had. In every year, the society has received the message that they have done the chant in a previous year, despite the fact that they have never actually done it. Doing the chant represents a marker of the beginning of this scenario, but the point of the scenario is that it does not have a beginning—it has an eternal past. Intuitively, it seems the society must have done the chant, just as it intuitively seems everything must have a beginning. However, if we can accept that no catalyst caused any other part of this society to spring into existence, then it seems no less plausible to accept that no catalyst caused a website to spring into existence, which informs the society that they have done the chant. If the society could have always existed without being caused by a Big Bang, it seems equally plausible that the website could have always existed without being caused by the actual performance of the chant.

Another Possible Use for Tisthammer's Eternal Society

Tisthammer could try to restructure his example so that he more specifically requires that the society must do the chant before they can know not to do it in future years. Perhaps instead of a website with verbal information, the society must play a video of the chant that was previously done. Even so, one could argue back that the video need never have been filmed. The video could have always existed, just as the society has.

Of course, Tisthammer could accept this and still argue that his scenario provides evidence against the possibility of an eternal past, because it highlights the strangeness of causeless events. Tisthammer could present an argument in the form of Mackie's famous Argument from Queerness, such as the following (Mackie 28):

P1: If an eternal past were possible, Tisthammer's Eternal Society scenario would be possible.

P2: Tisthammer's Eternal Society scenario would be very strange.

P3: Very strange things are unlikely to be possible.

C1: An eternal past is unlikely to be possible.

This argument has potential, although it would require more defense regarding P2. It would need an explanation of what exactly is so strange about the situation. As is, Tisthammer's scenario is strange, but no stranger than the general concept of an eternal past, so the argument does not provide any additional reason to doubt the prospect of an eternal past.

Conclusion

Tisthammer's argument against an Eternal Society falters because it hinges upon whether his scenario contains a paradox, and it does not contain such a paradox. Tisthammer says the society cannot have done the chant, which is true, but he also says the society paradoxically must have done the chant, which is not true. The society only must receive evidence that they have previously done the chant, which does not require that the chant was ever actually done. Tisthammer could still utilize his example by arguing that although not paradoxical, the scenario would be very strange. This approach has merit, although more work would need to be done to explain the extent and nature of the strangeness.

Works Cited

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Work Consulted

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