



A Comparative Analysis of the Phenomenology of Time in the Works of John McTaggart and John Mbiti

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ABSTRACT

The issue of time remains a topic of ongoing discussion in both theological and philosophical literature. Currently, within the field of theology, there is a significant focus on the concept of time, which is the subject of disputes regarding the nature of God's eternity. These discussions involve inquiries into whether God exists outside of time or within it. Philosophical discussions often centre around the ontology and metaphysics of time, exploring whether time is characterised by a static or dynamic nature. This paper did not delve into the controversies surrounding God's eternity. However, it focused on the phenomenology of time as discussed by two contrasting theorists, namely John McTaggart (1866-1925) and John Mbiti (1931-2019). McTaggart, an English philosopher, contends that time is unreal. According to the African scholar Mbiti, time is indeed real, but it moves in a reverse direction instead of the forward direction generally perceived in Western tradition. Consequently, Mbiti refutes the existence of the future. As far as is known, there are no existing comparison studies on these two experts. Therefore, the objective of this paper was to address this vacuum. The paper utilised comparative lenses to assess the metaphysical claims of these two thinkers about the phenomenology of time, intending to gain a deeper comprehension of time from their respective viewpoints. The process was executed in three sequential stages. It first analysed McTaggart's explanation of time, and then proceeded to investigate Mbiti's notion of time. Finally, a comparative examination was conducted before concluding. The conclusion is that McTaggart and Mbiti neglect to consider the potential existence of objective time, which would be independent of events, change, and motion. This paper adds to the field of philosophical theology, specifically focusing on modern debates on God and time.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the phenomenology of time as presented in the writings of McTaggart and Mbiti. The use of phenomenology in this article specifically refers to the essence or nature of time. The importance of the nature of time is seen in contemporary theological discussions concerning the relationship between God and time. For instance, there is currently ongoing debate among scholars about whether God exists within or outside the confines of time. Some theologians, like Paul Helm, argue that God resides in a state of timelessness. Even proponents of the notion that God is temporal, like Richard Swinburne, are guided by a certain conception of time, wherein time is interconnected with events, motion, and change.¹ In this configuration, God is situated inside the confines of time and is perceived as possessing a historical background, existing in the present, and progressing towards the future.

¹ Paul Helm, *Eternal God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Richard Swinburne, "Causation, Time, and God's Omniscience," *Topoi* 36 (2017): 675–84.

The literature unequivocally states that time is a constituent of metaphysical realities that possess intricate characteristics and are challenging to grasp.² St. Augustine acknowledges that comprehending time as a reality is a challenging task. In his book *Confessions*, he ponders the question, “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: but if I wish to explain it to one who asketh, I know not.”³ In essence, what is the concept of time?

Contemporary academic discussions on time revolve around three notable individuals from history: the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC), the English mathematician Sir Isaac Newton (1643 – 1727), and the German-born theoretical physicist Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955). A concise analysis of the statements made by these figures regarding time is hereby provided.

Aristotle posited that time is contingent upon events. Within this particular framework, he establishes a connection between time and events, movement, and change. In the book *Physics*, Aristotle contends that the absence of change, motion, or events would result in the nonexistence of time. According to his perspective, the existence of time is contingent upon the occurrence of change.⁴ Conversely, the occurrence of change implies the existence of time. Gottfried Leibniz provides support for this perspective on time.⁵ Alan Padgett and Anawat Bunnag are contemporary theologians who align themselves with this perspective.⁶ An advantage of this perspective is that time facilitates the arrangement of events in a sequential manner, thereby endorsing the concept of time as a continuous flow. Nevertheless, a drawback of this perspective is that it does not explicitly define time.⁷

Aristotle's idea of time encountered certain conceptual difficulties, prompting Newton to propose an objective conception of time, contrasting it with a relational time perspective advanced by Aristotle. Newton discusses two types of time, namely absolute and relational time, in his book *The Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. Newton explains in detail,

Absolute, true, and mathematical time, in and of itself and of its own nature, without relation to anything external, flows uniformly and by another name is called duration. Relative, apparent, and common time is any sensible and eternal measure...of duration by means of motion; such a measure – for example, an hour, a day, a month, and a year – is commonly used instead of true time.⁸

In contrast to Aristotle's conception, Newton's understanding of time posits its autonomous existence, separate from events and change. The inference is that even in the absence of events, time would persist. According to Newton's interpretation of reality, objective time is considered to be superior to relational time. In addition, Newton posits that objective time governs relational time.⁹ Modern philosopher Robert Lucas supports this perspective.¹⁰ Although Newton's understanding of time may seem remarkable, it is not without its flaws. An inherent issue with this view is that if time cannot be associated with events, motion, and change, its utility and significance for humanity's existence become questionable.

Einstein was familiar with the concepts of time proposed by both Aristotle and Newton. In his paper "Relativity: The Special and General Theory," Einstein contends that time lacks both relational and objective qualities. He believes that time is subjective. He contends that individuals belonging to distinct inertial frameworks experience time differently. The hypothesis he proposed is today recognised as the Special Theory of Relativity (STR).¹¹ Einstein's assertion that individuals experience the passage of time in distinct ways

² Joseph T Ekong, “Rethinking John S. Mbiti’s Metaphysical Trajectory of Time in Africa,” *European Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 6, no. 1 (2022): 44.

³ St. Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine by St. Augustine*, ed. Translated by Edward Bouverie Pusey (Oak Harbour: Logos Research System, 1999), 155.

⁴ Jonathan Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume One: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 1 (Princeton University Press, 1984), 69.

⁵ Gottfried Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* (Chicago: Open Court Publishers, 1998); William Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 66.

⁶ Alan Padgett, “The Difference Creation Makes: Relative Timelessness Reconsidered,” in *God, Eternity, and Time*, ed. Christian Tapp and Edmund Runggaldier (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 117–25; Anawat Bunnag, “The Concept of Time in Philosophy: A Comparative Study between Theravada Buddhist and Henri Bergson’s Concept of Time from Thai Philosophers’ Perspectives,” *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, August 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.kjss.2017.07.007>.

⁷ Mogomotsi Jaba, “An Investigation into the Timelessness of God Theology, with Special Reference to African Traditional Religion” (University of South Africa, 2023).

⁸ Isaac Newton, *The Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, ed. Translated by Bernard Cohen and Anne Whitman (Los Angeles: University of California, 1999), 408.

⁹ Newton, *The Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, 408.

¹⁰ Robert Lucas, *A Treatise on Time and Space* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹¹ Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, ed. Translated by Ronald Wilfrid Lawson (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1920), 32.

appears to be accurate.¹² For instance, the perception of time may be extended for someone experiencing a stressful situation, such as being in a fire, whereas the same duration may seem compressed for someone relishing in a cherished activity. Einstein's theory of relativity, however, implies that we should discard the notion of a single universal time applicable to all individuals.¹³ Max Jammer, a contemporary academic, advocates for Einstein's perspective and has lately presented arguments in favour of the concept of God's eternity using the STR as a conceptual framework.¹⁴ William Craig, on the other hand, identifies certain flaws in Einstein's STR. Craig argues that Einstein's reliance on verificationism to support STR is problematic, as he considers verificationism to be an unreliable means of disproving the existence of absolute time.¹⁵

Consequently, time can be comprehended as either relational, objective, or subjective, according to the analysis provided above. This indicates that scholars specialising in the study of time hold differing opinions regarding the nature of time. This paper aims to analyse the theoretical assertions on time made by McTaggart and Mbiti to determine if their ideas can provide insights into the nature of time. The comparison between the two will be used as a basis for this investigation. Although this paper acknowledges the impact of the concept of time on contemporary theological discussions, it does not explore this subject further. The focus lies only on the phenomenology of time in the works of McTaggart and Mbiti, who approach the subject from distinct theoretical perspectives. The paper progresses through three distinct stages before concluding. The paper will initially analyse McTaggart's metaphysical claims regarding time before transitioning to Mbiti. Subsequently, a comprehensive comparison will be conducted between the two scholars. The objective of using a comparative approach is to identify commonalities or differences among these thinkers if they exist.

THE UNREALITY OF TIME IN THE WORKS OF MACTAGGART

McTaggart gained prominence as a result of his 1908 publication "The Unreality of Time" in the *Mind* journal. The article's thesis has endured over time and has recently been considered in disputes about God, eternity, and time. MacTaggart's thesis fundamentally denies the reality of time, which is based on his categorization of the A-, B-, and C-series theories. To fully comprehend his reasoning, the meaning of these series must be analysed and examined.

The A-, B-, and C-series

This subsection provides a comprehensive analysis of the three series proposed by McTaggart. McTaggart argues that a proper understanding of time requires considering how events are located in time. Consequently, he suggests three methods for determining this, namely the A-, B-, and C-series. The subsequent sections elucidate these series.

McTaggart defines the A-series theory as "the series of positions running from the far past through the near past to the present, and then from the present to the near future and the far future."¹⁶ In this series, time is understood in relation to its future, present, and past attributes.¹⁷

McTaggart's avowal that is often overlooked is the intrinsic static nature of the A-series. McTaggart acknowledges that the relationships in the A-series undergo change. However, he argues that two events maintain the same temporal position relative to each other, both a million years before they occur, during their occurrence, and a million years after they have occurred. This perspective establishes the A-series as internally unchanging.¹⁸ MacTaggart's point is that while there is change occurring in the A-series, the relationship between its elements remains constant.¹⁹ In essence, McTaggart's theory of the A-series states that time progresses from the future to the present and then recedes into the past. Time, in addition, is intrinsically linked to events, change, and motion. This idea bears resemblance to Aristotle's relational theory of time, which posits that time exists whenever there is a change.

In the context of the B-series, McTaggart suggests that events should be seen as either preceding, succeeding, or occurring simultaneously with other events, rather than being seen as progressing from the future

¹² Li Qu, *Concrete Time and Concrete Eternity: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Time and Eternity and its Trinitarian Background* (Cumbria: Langham, 2014), 39.

¹³ Sampsa Korpela, "God, Time, and the Implicate Order Theory," *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 5, no. 1 (2021): 55–79, 57.

¹⁴ Max Jammer, *Einstein and Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time*, 152.

¹⁶ John Ellis McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," *Epistemology & Philosophy of Science* 56, no. 2 (2019): 211–28.

¹⁷ John McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 2,19.

¹⁸ McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence*, 19.

¹⁹ Edward Freeman, "On McTaggart's Theory of Time," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2010): 392.

to the present and then into the past.²⁰ Bunnag compares the B-series to a “series of positions that runs consecutively like beads on a string from earlier to later or conversely.”²¹ Events in the B-series are considered permanent, as no change takes place in this series, unlike in the A-series. In the A-series, events transition from the future to the present and then to the past. In contrast, events in the B-series are distinguished by their temporal relationships with one another. According to McTaggart, in this arrangement, the B-properties are unchanging and all moments in this sequence possess the same ontological status as these characteristics.²² One example is sufficient to explain this point. The death of South Africa's inaugural president, Mr. Nelson Mandela, in 2013 is earlier than the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and later than the end of apartheid in 1994 in South Africa. This is the essence of McTaggart's statement regarding the permanence of series relations and time properties in the B-series.

McTaggart supports the idea that the B-series is unchanging, but he also argues that the B-series is not essential for the concept of time. The absence of change in the B-series is the reason for the nonexistence of time, as time necessitates change.²³ Heather Dyke asserts, however, that although the B-series does not change, this does not imply that there is no change occurring inside the elements of the series. Dyke argues, for instance, that although it may be true that poker can go from being hot to cool, this does not mean that there is no change in the poker itself.²⁴ McTaggart, on the other hand, seems to believe that change only occurs when events transition from the future to the present and then to the past. According to Dyke, “If we think about the poker analogy, the objects are the main topics of change in the paradigm, not the relations.”²⁵ To summarise, the B-series remains unchanged, indicating the absence of time in this series.

McTaggart proceeds to discuss the C-series. According to him, the C-series is characterised by enduring relations between terms, in contrast to the B-series. According to McTaggart, for the B-relations to exist, they require both the A-properties and the non-temporal C-series.²⁶ While the C-series and B-series have certain similarities, such as being linear and asymmetric, the C-series distinguishes itself from the B-series. The distinction lies in the fact that the relations in the C-series are timeless, whereas the relations in the B-series are temporal. In addition, while the B-series allows for the ordering of time using terms such as “earlier,” “later than,” and “simultaneous with,” the C-series does not involve any ordering of time.²⁷ It is important to highlight that the C-series does not incorporate the temporal aspect of event sequencing in real life. As such, McTaggart bases the concept of time on the C-series due to this issue.

In general, proponents of the B-theory, such as Steven Hales and Timothy Johnson, and Trenton Merricks, support McTaggart's assertion that the A-series contains contradictions, which ultimately leads them to the conclusion that time is not real.²⁸ On the other hand, B-theorists refute McTaggart's assertion that B-relations remain unchanged, therefore arguing that the B-theory fails to explain the existence of time. Conversely, A-theorists like Theodore Sider, Dean Zimmerman, Yuri Balashov, and Ryan Mullins agree with McTaggart's assertion that B-relations are insufficient for explaining reality, but they disagree with McTaggart's contention that the A-series contains inconsistencies.²⁹ This interpretation of the series of hypotheses introduces us to McTaggart's rejection of the existence of time.

The Unreality of Time

After presenting the A-, B-, and C-series, McTaggart reaches the conclusion that time is unreal. He refutes its existence based on two crucial metaphysical perspectives. One perspective posits that time is intricately

²⁰ McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” 458.

²¹ Bunnag, “The Concept of Time in Philosophy: A Comparative Study between Theravada Buddhist and Henri Bergson's Concept of Time from Thai Philosophers' Perspectives,” 85.

²² McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” 401.

²³ McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” 463–464.

²⁴ Heather Dyke, “Mc Taggart and the Truth about Time,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 50 (2002): 139.

²⁵ Dyke, “Mc Taggart and the Truth about Time,” 139.

²⁶ McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” 461–462.

²⁷ McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” 461–462.

²⁸ Steven D Hales and Timothy A Johnson, “Endurantism, Perdurantism and Special Relativity,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53, no. 213 (2003): 524–39; Trenton Merricks, *Truth and Ontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁹ Theodore Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Dean W Zimmerman, “The A-Theory of Time, The B-Theory of Time, and ‘Taking Tense Seriously,’” *Dialectica* 59, no. 4 (2005): 401–57; R T Mullins, “Divine Temporality and Providential Bodgery,” *Theologica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 5, no. 1 (2021): 147–74; Yuri Balashov, *Persistence and Spacetime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Rognvaldur Ingthorsson, “McTaggart and the Unreality of Time,” *Axiomathes* 9, no. 3 (1998): 287–306..

connected to change. The second perspective arises when he challenges the concept of change itself. He contends that change, although indicating the presence of time, nevertheless involves inherent paradoxes.³⁰

McTaggart argues that every event exhibits features of the future, past, and present simultaneously. One example is sufficient. Although Mr. Jacob Zuma is no longer the president of South Africa, he held the position in the past. At one point, his presidency was yet to come. According to McTaggart's reasoning, all of these metaphysical time properties exist simultaneously in Mr. Zuma.³¹ But, according to McTaggart, past, present, and future are incompatible determinations since each event can only be one of them and cannot be more than one.³² What McTaggart means is that an event cannot be both present and future or past at the same time. According to him, the presence of contradictions renders the A-series unsuitable as an accurate depiction of reality.³³

MacTaggart receives backing from Rognvaldur Ingthorsson. Ingthorsson argues that a future occurrence is inevitably destined to have the quality of being present and past.³⁴ Dyke agrees with both McTaggart and Ingthorsson that the idea of change involves contradictions, but Dyke still believes that time exists. Time exists for Dyke independent of change.³⁵ According to McTaggart, time and change are inseparable.

In the researcher's interpretation of McTaggart's work, it appears that he dismisses the concept of time based on two underlying assumptions. The initial assumption is that anything that involves contradictions cannot be deemed genuine. Time, therefore, is considered unreal due to its association with change, which inherently involves contradictions. Furthermore, McTaggart firmly holds the conviction that the only way to account for change is by altering the underlying facts. This implies that time cannot be comprehended apart from change.³⁶ Nevertheless, what is the reception of McTaggart's argument in the literature?

The argument put out by McTaggart has been demonstrated to include certain difficulties. A significant issue revolves around his rationale for denying the reality of time. As previously demonstrated, McTaggart argues that an event inherently possesses aspects of the past, present, and future simultaneously. Kevin Falvey, on the other hand, regards this assertion as questionable. Falvey argues that an event does not simultaneously possess temporal features. According to Falvey, there was a period when an occurrence may be categorised as either future, present, or past.³⁷ This research agrees with Falvey. McTaggart's oversight lies in his failure to recognise that the event's potential possession of all-time qualities does not imply its simultaneous existence as future, present, and past at any given moment. Essentially, as the event transitions from the future to the present, it ceases to possess the characteristic of being in the future. Similarly, as the event transitions from the present to the past, it ceases to possess the characteristic of being present.

THE UNREALITY OF TIME IN THE WORKS OF MBITI

This section examines Mbiti's understanding of time. He formulates his thesis in reaction to the prevailing Euro-American apocalyptic beliefs of his era. Mbiti initially presents this in his 1963 doctoral dissertation titled "Christian Eschatology in Relation to the Evangelization of Tribal Africa."³⁸ In 1969, he made a valuable contribution by writing a chapter titled "Eschatology" in the influential book *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*.³⁹ The identical chapter is also present in his 1989 publication titled *African Religions & Philosophy*.⁴⁰ Mbiti's description of time is consistent across all of these works.

Mbiti utilises African traditions to enhance his understanding of time. More precisely, he makes a reference to the Akamba language. Consequently, his account can be categorised as linguistic. He opens his argument by asserting that a comprehensive comprehension of African time is crucial in elucidating the "beliefs,

³⁰ McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," 468.

³¹ McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," 468.

³² McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence*, 20.

³³ Nathaniel Goldberg, "McTaggart on Time," *Logic and Logical Philosophy*, no. 13 (2004): 71–76; Emily Thomas, "British Idealist Monadologies and the Reality of Time: Hilda Oakeley Against McTaggart, Leibniz, and Others," in *Monadologies* (Routledge, 2018), 128–46.

³⁴ Ingthorsson, "McTaggart and the Unreality of Time," 294.

³⁵ Dyke, "Mc Taggart and the Truth About Time," 145, 151.

³⁶ Jonas Dagens, "J. McTaggart and H. Mellor On Time.," *Problemos/Problems* 73 (2008), 115-121.

³⁷ Kevin Falvey, "The View from Nowhen: The McTaggart-Dummett Argument for the Unreality of Time," *Philosophia* 38(2010): 299.

³⁸ Elias Kifon Bongmba, "Eschatology in Africa: The Imperative of a Transformative Social Praxis," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 94, no. 4 (2018), 247.

³⁹ John Mbiti, "Eschatology," in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 159–84.

⁴⁰ John S Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1990).

attitudes, practices and general way of life of African peoples not only in the traditional setup but also in the modern situation.”⁴¹

Mbiti's idea of time revolves around two Kikamba time words. These words are *tene* and *mituki*. *Tene*, according to Mbiti's explanation, denotes a temporal dimension that spans the far and remote past. *Mituki*, however, refers to a period that encompasses the immediate past up to the near future. Subsequently, Mbiti appropriated two Swahili words, namely *zamani* and *sasa*, to enhance and clarify his statements regarding time. He claims that these words are synonymous with *tene* and *mituki*.⁴²

It is important to understand that Mbiti's understanding of time is based on the verb tenses used in the Kikamba language.⁴³ According to him, time in Africa is “a two-dimensional phenomenon” having a long past, a present, and virtually no future.⁴⁴ Mbiti also suggests that the Western concept of time, which sees time as linear with an endless past, present, and infinite future, is not commonly found in African thinking.⁴⁵ Mbiti supports these metaphysical claims with the Swahili words *sasa* and *zamani*. To completely comprehend his declarations, it is necessary to analyse and understand the meanings of these *sasa* and *zamani* words.

Sasa and Zamani

Sasa, as described by Mbiti, “is the period of immediate concern for the people, since that is ‘where’ or ‘when’ they exist.”⁴⁶ It encompasses the events and experiences that occur in the immediate or current period. *Sasa*, in accordance with this, “binds individuals and their immediate environment together.”⁴⁷ It refers to the state of conscious being, that encompasses both the current moment and extending beyond the past. *Sasa* exhibits dynamism, making it inherently variable and not subject to arithmetic or numerical constancy. According to Mbiti, this suggests that *sasa* is centred on real events rather than on the order of events.⁴⁸

According to Mbiti, *sasa* is considered “micro-time,” but it is also a comprehensive and complete dimension of time.⁴⁹ Johan Cilliers emphasises that *sasa* exists “to serve the past, which in turn gives purpose to the present.”⁵⁰ That being the case, what role does *zamani* time play?

Mbiti argues that African time exhibits a non-linear progression, moving in a reverse direction towards the past. He refers to this aspect of time as *zamani*.⁵¹ John Parrat agrees with Mbiti's assertion that in Africa, time is not perceived as linear and does not progress toward an ultimate end.⁵² Similarly, like the concept of *sasa*, *zamani* also encompasses its own past, present, and future, albeit on a larger scale. Mbiti categorises *zamani* as a form of “macro-time.”⁵³ In this particular context, *zamani* is seen as the definitive dimension in which no more events occur.

Zamani serves as the fundamental basis upon which the current time, known as *sasa*, is built. The *zamani* phase is essential for giving meaning to events and experiences in the *sasa*. This creates an inseparable connection between *sasa* and *zamani* as the two dimensions mutually feed each other.⁵⁴ Cilliers expands on this point by asserting that *zamani* represents “the stretches of time into timeless eternity.”⁵⁵ This leads to the essential element in Mbiti's explanation of time, a component that has garnered significant focus in contemporary discussions of Mbiti. Here, Mbiti refutes the existence of the future.

The Illusory Nature of the Future

After examining the linguistic characteristics of *sasa* and *zamani*, Mbiti contends that these words do not possess a future tense and also lack a formal subjunctive mood.⁵⁶ Other scholars also affirm this. Simon Beck and Oritsegbubemi Oyowe, for example, assert that “there is no such formal mood in many, even most, sub-Saharan

⁴¹ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 16.

⁴² Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 18.

⁴³ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 18.

⁴⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 17.

⁴⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 17.

⁴⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 21.

⁴⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 21.

⁴⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 22.

⁴⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 22.

⁵⁰ Johan Cilliers, “The Kairos of Karos: Revisiting Notions of Temporality in Africa,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4, no. 1 (2018): 113–32.

⁵¹ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 22.

⁵² John Parrat, “Time in Traditional African Thought,” *Religion* 7, no. 2 (1977): 123.

⁵³ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 22.

⁵⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 22.

⁵⁵ Cilliers, “The Kairos of karos: Revisiting Notions of Temporality in Africa,” 116.

⁵⁶ Mbiti, “Eschatology,” 160.

African languages.”⁵⁷ Similarly, Mbiti argues that the future, in its most fundamental sense, is a period of potentiality as it encompasses events that have not yet occurred.⁵⁸ According to him, Africans who believe in the existence of the future are inspired by Western eschatological concepts of time.⁵⁹

Mbiti asserts that Africans have a significant interest in both ongoing events and those that are anticipated to occur in the near future, to some degree.⁶⁰ He contends that events that are bound to happen must occur within a timeframe of two years, at the very least. These events occur within the current temporal dimension known as the *sasa*. Mbiti asserts that the absence of the future in African thought stems from the belief that future events are considered nonexistent and hence do not hold any temporal significance.

Mbiti supports his claim of an almost non-existent future by examining nine verb tenses in the Kikamba and Gikuyu languages.⁶¹ According to him, this examination provides linguistic proof that Africans do not envision a future beyond a two-year timeframe. For example, in Kikamba, the term "ningauka" is used to denote the future, which translates to "I will come" in English. According to Mbiti, this word signifies a timeframe of around two to six months ahead. Mbiti concludes that if an event is distant, more than two years away, it cannot be imagined or discussed, and Kikamba and Gikuyu languages do not have verb tenses to express that far-off "future" dimension of time.⁶² Based on this, Mbiti argues that since future events have not occurred yet, the future is therefore not real.⁶³

Ultimately, Mbiti perceives time as having two dimensions. The dimensions of time are represented by the concepts of *sasa* and *zamani*, where *zamani* denotes the passage of time in the reverse direction towards the past. According to Mbiti, in this arrangement, the future is virtually non-existent.

Certain scholars endorse Mbiti's discourse on time. Ann Riggs, for instance, asserts that while Kiswahili currently has terms to discuss the future, traditional African cultures lack concepts and terminology for extensive discourse on the future.⁶⁴ However, Mbiti's understanding of time has more critics than supporters.

Joseph Ekong disagrees with Mbiti's assertion that Africans are incapable of envisioning a future that extends beyond a two-year timeframe. Ekong argues that African languages and traditions contain indications that Africans have the ability to see a future that extends beyond a two-year timeframe. Ekong references the African practice of divination, which holds that a diviner from Africa possesses the ability to perceive events in the distant future and make predictions about forthcoming events. This implies that Africans possess a notion of the future that extends beyond a span of two years, as observed by Ekong.⁶⁵ Moreover, this implies that Africans have faith in the events that lie ahead.

Scott Moreau closely examines Mbiti's interpretation of *sasa* and *zamani* and asserts that Mbiti's utilisation of these terms is contrived. According to Moreau, this action compels the Swahili words to conform to a preconceived notion of time established by Mbiti.⁶⁶ Beck and Oyowe concur with Moreau by raising doubts about the etymology of the terms *sasa* and *zamani*. These scholars assert that *sasa* and *zamani* have Arabic origins and are not dependable for elucidating the African perception of time. They contend that these words have become devoid of their initial significance, rendering them untrustworthy. Furthermore, according to Beck and Oyowe, no one term in African languages can definitively demonstrate the existence of a two-dimensional concept of time in Africa.⁶⁷ In addition, according to Moreau's perspective, the division of time into two dimensions is not aligned with African thought. This is due to the fact that African traditional thought perceives reality in an organic manner, rather than through categorical frameworks.⁶⁸

Some African philosophers have deemed Mbiti's linguistic method, which solely concentrates on verb tenses while disregarding other aspects of language, to be unconvincing. D. A. Masolo, for instance, has highlighted that some linguistic structures, including nouns and proverbs, imply a notion of an extended future

⁵⁷ Simon Beck and Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe, "Thought Experiments and Personal Identity in Africa," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 7, no. 4 (2021): 442.

⁵⁸ Mbiti, "Eschatology," 160.

⁵⁹ Helen Lauer, "African and Non-African Time: To Contrast or Not to Contrast? The Geo-Political Convenience of Conceptual Dichotomization," *Thought and Practice* 5, no. 1 (2013): 5-6.

⁶⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 17.

⁶¹ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 18.

⁶² Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 21-22.

⁶³ Mbiti, "Eschatology," 159-160.

⁶⁴ Ann K Riggs, "Friends in Eastern Africa," *Quaker Religious Thought* 123, no. 1 (2014): 85.

⁶⁵ Ekong, "Rethinking John S. Mbiti's Metaphysical Trajectory of Time in Africa," 49.

⁶⁶ A Scott Moreau, "A Critique of John Mbiti's Understanding of the African Concept of Time," *East African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 5, no. 2 (1986): 41.

⁶⁷ Beck and Oyowe, "Thought Experiments and Personal Identity in Africa," 446-447.

⁶⁸ Moreau, "A Critique of John Mbiti's Understanding of the African Concept of Time," 41.

in certain African languages.⁶⁹ Indeed, according to Mbiti's *Concepts of God in Africa*, if Africans conceptualise God using nouns that convey the eternal nature of God, then it is possible to perceive time endlessly.⁷⁰ This implies that Africans have a concept of an unlimited future in their thoughts. According to Masolo, "the concept of the infinitude of God must of necessity include a concept of the infinite time within which God executes His acts and plans."⁷¹

Canaan Banana, like Masolo, also disputes Mbiti's linguistic assertions, making him another African academic who questions them. Banana asserts that many Shona and Ndebele proverbs imply that the future surpasses a span of two years and is boundless. Banana asserts that the Shona proverb "Natsa kwawabva kwaunoenda usika" imparts the wisdom that individuals should conduct themselves appropriately due to the uncertain nature of the future. Consequently, Banana concludes that this proverb signifies the belief of the Shona and Ndebele communities in a limitless future.⁷²

Mbiti has faced criticism about his assertion that Africans see time concretely. He holds the same perspective as Alexis Kagame.⁷³ Nevertheless, Kwame Gyekye disputes this assertion by invoking the Akan word "bere" for time. Gyekye illustrates, for instance, that the Akan proverb "bere di adannan," denoting "time changes," pertains to the abstract nature of time.⁷⁴ He asserts that in Akan's thought, events do not create time, but rather "generate the awareness of the existence of time."⁷⁵ Masolo agrees with Gyekye, affirming that Luo's understanding of time is more abstract than concrete.⁷⁶ Did Mbiti make significant errors in his understanding or interpretation?

Mbiti was cognizant of the fact that his remarks would inevitably attract criticism. Similarly, he asserted that individuals have a perception of the future.⁷⁷ However, Mbiti contends that "people do not project their day-to-day thinking into a distant mathematical future."⁷⁸ In fact, he asserts that

people are conscious that the future is potentially there and will inevitably come, such as, for example, the seasons of the year and the rhythm of birth-growth-procreation-and-death. Consequently, they act, plan and live accordingly, knowing that, for example, they plant fruit trees now which will bear only in four or five years, or that their ten-year-old child will be getting married one day.⁷⁹

Based on the interpretation of Mbiti's work, it appears that he does not refute the notion that time can persist endlessly. What Mbiti finds crucial is not necessarily the concept of future time, but rather the specific elements or aspects of the future. It must be recalled that for Mbiti time is tied to events so much so that without events taking place there cannot be time. Therefore, by rejecting the notion of a prolonged future, he is essentially refuting the presence of forthcoming events. According to Mbiti and Kagame,⁸⁰ future time is but a projection of our minds. According to the two professors, the future lacks reality in the way they are discussing.

This concluding part proposes that those who criticise Mbiti should be aware that Mbiti's portrayal of time aimed to illustrate that the Western linear understanding of time not only violates African perspectives on time but also biblical notions of time. In the Old Testament, individuals prioritised the content of events rather than the sequential order in which they occurred. Similarly, Mbiti asserts that Africans exhibit a greater inclination towards events in time rather than time's sequential order.

COMPARISON OF MCTAGGART AND MBITI

Despite the problematic nature of McTaggart and Mbiti's notions of time, their ideas have sparked discussions on the fundamental nature of time in both Western and African contexts. Regarding this matter, the contributions of the two scholars should not be underestimated. Indeed, McTaggart's arguments have been incorporated into theological debates in the Western context, particularly in contemporary disputes concerning the concept of God's eternal nature and His connection with time. Mbiti's perspective on time in Africa has garnered significant

⁶⁹ D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

⁷⁰ John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*. (London: SPCK, 1970).

⁷¹ Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, 111.

⁷² Canaan Banana, *Come and Share: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1991), 25.

⁷³ Alexis Kagame, "The Empirical Apperception of Time and the Conception of History in Bantu Thought," in *African Philosophy: A Classical Approach*, ed. Parker English and Kibujjo Kalumba (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 83.

⁷⁴ Kwame Gyekye, "On Mbiti's View of Time for Traditional Africans," in *African Philosophy: A Classical Approach*, ed. Parker English and Kibujjo Kalumba (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 94.

⁷⁵ Gyekye, "On Mbiti's View of Time for Traditional Africans," 94-95.

⁷⁶ Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, 118.

⁷⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 29.

⁷⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 29.

⁷⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 29.

⁸⁰ Kagame, "The Empirical Apperception of Time and the Conception of History in Bantu Thought," 84.

interest, particularly among African philosophers, as evidenced by the literature referenced in this paper. It is evident that Mbiti's understanding of time has not yet been incorporated into African theological debates, specifically on the concept of God's eternal nature and God's connection with Africans. Despite being a theologian, Mbiti did not explore the concept of God's relationship with time in African theological discourse. However, it should be noted that McTaggart did not intend his essay to be part of theological discussions either.

Given the aforementioned, there are few resemblances between the time discourses of McTaggart and Mbiti. The sole aspect they appear to share is that time can only exist if it is connected to change. Both theorists argue that time progresses from the future to the present and then into the past. However, McTaggart argues that this will only be true if the A-series hypothesis is embraced, which he paradoxically rejects due to some metaphysical inconsistencies. According to Mbiti, the future is constrained to a minimum of two years. This restricts his perception to only the present and past aspects of time.

However, there are a few distinctions that arise between the two scholars. McTaggart denies the existence of time while Mbiti asserts the existence of time. Furthermore, their justifications for presenting their concepts vary. McTaggart's purpose was to elucidate the essence of reality, while Mbiti's motivation sprang from his apprehension about the impact of Western eschatological concepts on African societies.

CONCLUSION

The brilliance of McTaggart lies in his demonstration of the two methods of determining the temporal placement of events in time. This perspective on time remains prevalent in Western philosophical and theological discussions. Mbiti's greatness lies in his provocative questioning of the existence and ontological significance of future events for present-day Africans. However, as previously mentioned, the arguments presented by the two scholars are not flawless. The main deficiency of both displays, for instance, is their failure to consider the potential existence of time as an independent entity, devoid of events, change, or motion. Both theorists claim that time is contingent upon its association with change. This study opines that Newton's suggestion that time can exist independently of events may well be right. Based on this assumption, it argues that time can exist independently of events, while events can benefit from the existence of time. To clarify, time can be associated with events, but the absence of events does not imply the nonexistence of time. McTaggart refutes the concept of time-based on this fundamental assumption, while Mbiti denies the existence of the future using the same assumption. This is unnecessary. However, the drawback of the objective time perspective is its failure to provide a precise definition of time and its purpose, especially if time can exist autonomously from events.

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