

MCTAGGART AND THE UNREALITY OF TIME

Rögnvaldur Ingthorsson

John M.E. McTaggart's (1866-1925) famous argument for the unreality of time really is a peculiar artefact in the history of philosophy. Despite that McTaggart's conclusion has been generally rejected, his views on tense has been widely accepted, e.g. in modern tense-logic.¹ His terms for the different ways events appear to be positioned in time, the A- and B-series, have even come to be used to characterise the two dominating views in the philosophy of time today: the A- and B-view of time, or as is often said, the tensed and tenseless view of time.

McTaggart distinguished between two ways that events appear to be *positioned* in time and claimed that they implied quite different ontological conceptions of time. On the one hand events are *earlier than* and *later than* each other, and on the other hand events are either *future*, *present* or *past*. McTaggart claimed that events hold permanent positions in terms of being earlier than and later than each other, but were continuously changing their positions in terms of being first future, then present, and finally past. Taken separately, both ways imply a conception of time as being constituted by a *series of positions*. McTaggart chose to call that series whose positions are determined only as earlier and later than each other the *B-series*, but the series whose positions are determined as future, present and past the *A-series*.

The so called A- and B-views correspond crudely to McTaggart's A- and B-series in the way that the B-view denies that the distinction of time into future, present and past are objective features and holds that the relations of earlier than and later than are the fundamental characteristics of time. The B-view claims that the experience of *now* and the transitory relation of events to *now* is a mere subjective creation. The A-view, on the other hand, holds that the apparent transition from future to past through the present is the fundamental characteristic of time and an objective feature of reality in some way or another.

¹ Needham (1975, p. 1).

A second more controversial part of McTaggart's argument is his claim that because the relations of the B-series are permanent it cannot on its own account for *change* and, assuming change to be an essential characteristic of time, that the B-series could therefore not be properly characterised as temporal. According to McTaggart the positions of the B-series were dependent on the reality of the A-series for being in time at all.

A third equally controversial part is the claim that the change of positions in A-series fashion involves a contradiction and that time must therefore be unreal. It is the ontological nature of this alleged contradiction that is the subject of this paper. A naive form of the contradiction can initially be stated like this:

1. Future, present and past are incompatible properties, but
2. in time every event appears to possess them all, and
3. these two propositions entail the contradiction that events have incompatible properties.

The proponents of the B-view tend to accept McTaggart's claim that the A-series entails a contradiction but reject that the B-series does not contain change.² The proponents of the A-view have on the other hand rejected McTaggart's claim that the A-series entails a contradiction and claim that they cannot see that he, or the proponents of the B-view, gives any satisfactory justification for this claim.

2. The A- and B-views on the notion of succession

Nathan Oaklander has suggested that the disagreement between the A- and B-view on McTaggart's claim that the A-series entails a contradiction revolves around the ontological status of succession.³ Oaklander, himself a proponent of the B-view, refers to the debate between himself and Quentin Smith, a proponent of the A-view, as being representative for this disagreement. Oaklander argues that Smith cannot account for the successive possession of incompatible temporal properties: "Smith simply

² Whether or not the B-series does contain change is a controversial issue that cannot be addressed properly here. I will be content with simply stating McTaggart's claims on this issue.

³ Oaklander (1996)

claims that an appeal to succession avoids the contradiction that McTaggart finds in temporal attributions, but he does not offer an argument.”⁴ And Smith rebuts: “*But Oaklander gives no justification for this assumption. Like McTaggart he simply asserts that whatever possesses the three temporal properties must possess them simultaneously.*”⁵

Both Smith and Oaklander recognise that the arguments of both sides are in some sense incommensurable to the view of the other on this matter:

Indeed, a reader of the literature on McTaggart’s paradox might well come away with an impression of futility, a sense that the debate repeatedly ends in the same impasse, with the tensors predictably making a certain move and the detensors predictably responding with a certain countermove.⁶

The situation can be summarised like this. The B-view demands that the A-view gives a plausible account of the successive possession of temporal properties while the A-view demands that the B-view justifies that there is a problem with this kind of succession at all. This is a curious stalemate situation and I think it might be interesting to consider again the reasons why McTaggart claimed that the A-series entails a contradiction and consequently rejected both views.

I will attempt to show that McTaggart’s claim that the A-series entails a contradiction is neither wholly unfounded nor obscure, by showing how his idealistic ontology of the general nature of the existent and real guides his reasoning in every step of the argument for the unreality of time. This has to the best of my knowledge never been done. The argument for the unreality of time in *The Nature of Existence* (NE)⁷ has always been treated by commentators as a self-contained argument independent of the rest of McTaggart’s ontological system.⁸ I will try to show that this is a mistake, and that it is because of this that McTaggart’s reasons for claiming that the A-series entails a contradiction have been considered to be obscure. McTaggart himself clearly intended the argument and its conclusion, which

⁴ Oaklander (1994, p. 195).

⁵ Smith, (1993, p. 174).

⁶ Smith (1994a, p. 202).

⁷ McTaggart (1988)

⁸ This is the case even with C.D. Broad in his admirable *Examination of McTaggart’s Philosophy* (1938, vol. 1, p. 9).

is in vol.2 [of NE], to be treated as dependent on the ontology that he had presented in vol.1. I have no ambitions, nor hope, in proving him right, but I hope that my account may provide some kind of clarification that may be useful in making the debate between the proponents of the A- and B-views regarding the alleged contradiction of the A-series less incommensurable. But I am afraid it is not going to be an easy reading. McTaggart's argument has been muddling the brains of philosophers for some 90 years now, which indicates that it is indeed no easy matter.⁹

3. *The structure of McTaggart's reasoning in The Nature of Existence*

The argument for the unreality of time is to be found in the beginning of the second volume of NE.¹⁰ In the first volume of that work McTaggart 'determines' the nature of the existent in general without, as he claims, taking anything specifically existing into consideration.¹¹ McTaggart himself characterizes his ontology as an idealistic ontology in the spirit of Berkeley, Leibniz and Hegel.¹² In the second volume, however, he looks at certain empirical features of existing entities, e.g. that they all appear to be *temporal* and some of them *material*. Both features are such, he concludes, that they can impossibly belong to anything really existing, *according to the general nature of the existent and real that he determined in the first volume of NE*:

It will be possible to show that, *having regard to the general nature of the existent as previously determined*, certain characteristics, that we consider here for the first time, *cannot* be true of the existent[...] ¹³

This structure of NE is made exquisitely clear by McTaggart but is apparently overlooked by most readers of the argument for the unreality of time. I believe that this is the main reason why the outlook of McTaggart's argument is still a subject of controversy.

⁹ McTaggart first presented his thoughts on this matter in an article in *Mind* in 1908 (1934). I will however only discuss the mature version of it contained in (1988).

¹⁰ McTaggart (1988, vol.2, Ch. 33)

¹¹ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, Ch. 3).

¹² McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 52).

¹³ [*italics are mine, RI*], McTaggart (1988, vol.2, sect. 298). McTaggart makes an almost identical statement in vol.1, sect. 54.

The purpose of this paper is to provide the reader with a short account of the fundamentals in McTaggart's ontology and to show how it affects the argument for the unreality of time, especially how it relates to the alleged contradiction of the A-series. I hope that this will contribute to a deeper understanding of McTaggart's argument. But first we must get better acquainted with the argument and its baffling conclusion.

4. A short reconstruction of the argument

As mentioned earlier McTaggart distinguished between two ways that events are believed to be positioned in time and claimed that they implied two quite different ontological conceptions of time. The way events are perceived to be simultaneous with certain events, earlier than some other events and later than the rest, gives us a conception of a *series of positions* that runs like beads on a string from *earlier* to *later* or conversely, i.e. the B-series. Events are also perceived to be either *future*, *present* or *past* and this gives us a conception of a series of positions that runs from the far future to the present, and from the present to the distant past, or conversely, i.e. the A-series. It might seem strange to describe the A-series to run from future to past *or conversely*, and it must therefore be noted that it is not the positions that change positions, but the events. The fundamental difference between the two series are that while events appear to change their positions in respect of A-series positions, from future, to present and to past, then their positions in terms of B-series positions are permanent and do not change; no event is at one time earlier than some other event and at another time later than that same event.¹⁴ McTaggart assumed that time is universally believed to involve change, and because he could not detect any change in the B-series he concluded that it could not properly be called temporal.¹⁵ The A-series however at least appears to involve change; the transition of events from the future to the present and into the past.¹⁶

McTaggart claimed that future, present, and past are clearly relations and not qualities, although, like all relations, they generate relational qualities in

¹⁴ McTaggart (1988, vol.2, sect. 305-306).

¹⁵ McTaggart (1988, vol.2, sect. 309-310).

¹⁶ For an account of other possible kinds of changes and how McTaggart rules them out see (McTaggart 1988, vol.2, sect. 309-315).

the entities they relate.¹⁷ But he could not determine as to what entity exactly the events stood in these relations and consequently to what they changed their relations to. McTaggart began to look for this change in the relations that hold between the events in the series but concluded that it is not to be found there. Every event in the A-series is changing its positions uniformly in the same direction, which can be seen by the permanence of their B-series relations; no event is first future, then present and finally past in relation to another event. McTaggart claimed that the same problem arises when saying that it is relations to moments of time or positions of time that change, if these are taken as separate entities, because these are entities that themselves must acquire their temporal properties through a relation.¹⁸

McTaggart came to the conclusion that the A-series is dependent on something or other outside the series to which the entities in the series, whatever they may be, events or moments of time, change their relation to, but which itself does not change.¹⁹ McTaggart did not himself introduce the notion of 'now' as this something outside the series. He rested content in saying that it would not be easy to find such a term, but there must exist one if the A-series is to be real. But even if the existence of such an entity was granted, and thereby the reality of the relational properties of future, present and past, there remains a contradiction he claimed.²⁰

Future, present and past are then taken as relational properties that events possess by holding a relation to something unknown, whether this is some sort of container-time, a *now* or whatever, is left unsaid. They are however incompatible temporal positions because nothing can be future, present and past in relation to the same thing all at once. And yet in time *as a whole* every event *has them all*, and this, McTaggart claims, involves a

¹⁷ McTaggart (1988, vol.2, sect. 326-328).

¹⁸ McTaggart (1988, vol.2, sect. 327).

¹⁹ McTaggart (1988, vol.2, sect. 327).

²⁰ McTaggart (1988, vol.2, sect. 328). Broad believed that McTaggart considered the necessary existence of an unknown entity to be a convincing but not conclusive reason to accept the other parts of his argument, Broad calls this the Subsidiary Argument (Broad 1938, vol.2, pp. 317-318). Nevertheless, McTaggart proceeds, for the sake of argument, *assuming* the existence of such an entity in relation to which the members of the series hold the simple relational properties of futurity, presentness and pastness (see also (McTaggart 1988, vol. 2, footnote 1, p. 22).

contradiction. It is at this point readers usually begin to be baffled and even resentful. Events, it is objected, are never future, present and past simultaneously, but well enough successively, and in that there is no contradiction. This is indeed Broad's main reason for rejecting McTaggart's conclusion:

I cannot myself see that there is any contradiction to be avoided. When it is said that pastness, presentness and futurity are incompatible predicates, this is true only in the sense that no one term could have two of them simultaneously or timelessly. Now no term ever appears to have any of them timelessly, and no term ever appears to have any of them simultaneously. What appears to be the case is that certain terms have them successively. Thus there is nothing in the temporal appearances to suggest that there is a contradiction to be avoided.²¹

Well, it is at least clear from the text in NE that McTaggart was perfectly aware of the fact that events do not appear to be nor are believed to be future, present and past simultaneously but well enough successively:

It may seem that this can be easily explained. Indeed, it has been impossible to state the difficulty without almost giving the explanation, since our language has verb-forms for the past, present, and future, but no form that is common to all three. It is never true, the answer will run, that *M is* present, past, and future. It *is* present, *will be* past, and *has been* future. [...] The characteristics are only incompatible when they are simultaneous, and there is no contradiction to this in the fact that each term has all of them successively.²²

It seems then that his reasons stem from some other source than a simple mistake in analysing the experience of time or the proper rules of temporal predication. He is aware that events never appear to hold the temporal positions simultaneously but well enough successively, he is aware that language does not imply that an event has all three tenses simultaneously, and yet he claims that a proposition about any event *e* that it 'has been future, is present and will be past,' implies that *e has them all* and that this involves a contradiction. Why does Broad, Smith and other A-view proponents see succession as a simple solution to the contradiction while McTaggart and B-view proponents like Oaklander do not, even when the appearance of succession is an admitted empirical phenomenon by all?

²¹ Broad (1938, vol.2, p. 313).

²² McTaggart (1988, vol. 2, sect. 330).

The B-view is in fact committed to accept one sense of successive possession of properties; the possession of different properties at different times. Hugh Mellor even goes so far as saying: “A change, then, is a thing having *incompatible* real properties at different times.”²³ But if the proponents of the B-view can admit that a thing can change in the sense of first being red at *t* and then not red but, lets say blue, at *t'*, thus having in succession, or at different times, properties that are clearly incompatible, why can they not accept that an event can first be future and then present? Well the answer is that the B-view accepts the possession of incompatible properties as long as they are possessed one at a time. The contradiction involved in having A-series temporal properties, according to the B-view, is that events *never* possess any *simple* A-series temporal characteristic at any single time *t*, but always a combination of the three incompatible properties future, present and past, at any time. This could be made clear by McTaggart’s views on beliefs that “[...]assert that the presence of one characteristic implies the presence of another”.²⁴ On his view anything possessing the characteristic of being a unilateral triangle implies that it has an angle sum of 180°, which entails no contradiction. Now, being blue does never imply the possession of being red, or any other incompatible property, but being either future, present or past always implies the possession of the other two; an event that is future is in a sense determined to possess the property of being present and past. Future events are bound to become present, which in a sense implies that presentness *inheres* in the event at the same time that it is future, and so does pastness.²⁵ Succession is of course no

²³ [italics are mine, R.I.] Mellor (1981, p. 110). Mellor’s account of change is in line with how Russell once defined change: “Change is the difference, in respect of truth or falsehood, between a proposition concerning an entity and a time *T* and a proposition concerning the same entity and another time *T'*, provided that the two propositions differ only by the fact that *T* occurs in the one where *T'* occurs in the other.” (1972, p. 469). Mellor however claims that it: “[...] will not do to define change as variation through time, if time itself can only be defined as the dimension of change.” Mellor therefore proposes that change must be explained in terms of causation, but without accepting the reality of tenses (Mellor 1981, p. 7-8).

²⁴ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 26-31).

²⁵ Smith proposes a tensed theory of such inferences, admits that there is an infinite regress of inherence relations, but claims that it is not vicious. A full account of Smith’s

solution to the contradiction of having at every moment different combinations of incompatible characteristics but there is controversy regarding the claim that this kind of implication is equal to actually possessing the implied characteristic.

It seems then that the B-view of time is dependent on showing that successive possession of temporal properties is not possible because they, as opposed to other properties, can never be had one at a time. The B-view must show that if anything has one of them it has them all. The disagreement, then, between the A-and B-view is not about succession in general but whether or not temporal properties can be possessed in the usual sense of succession. This provides us with an interesting contrast to McTaggart. To him it is equally contradictory that a substance has incompatible colour properties in succession as having temporal properties in succession. He would claim that the incompatible properties really belonged to numerically distinct substances that were parts of a compound substance, united by some common property, other than colour, and that this compound substance was misperceived as changing although in reality its parts have always possessed these properties and always will possess them. So to me it seems that in relation to McTaggart the B-view will have to provide an account of the possibility of change that allows the possession of incompatible properties other than tenses. Mellor, for one, argues that causation will do the job.²⁶

5. The infinite regress of temporal properties

In sect. 332 of NE vol.2, McTaggart claims that if it was objected that temporal properties were not had simultaneously but successively it would unavoidably result in a vicious infinite regress of ever more complex combinations of incompatible tenses. This section, and adjoining sections, is apparently believed to be the key sections of the whole argument. Modern writers like Mellor and Michael Dummett have provided defences of the soundness of McTaggart's infinite regress argument, but I will attempt to

theory is found in (1993). For a comprised account of his views on the infinite regress see Smith (1994b, 180-194).

²⁶ Mellor (1981, p. 8).

explain the contradiction without invoking this line of reasoning.²⁷ I believe that my account is logically independent of it. My explanation only assumes, as I believe McTaggart does, that the notion of successive possession of A-series temporal properties presupposes that at *some* point t_1 in time an event e actually is future, at *some* point t_2 in time e actually is present, and at *some* point t_3 in time e actually is past. I assume that all can accept this to be necessary truth conditions for *speaking* truly about the *successivity* of futurity, presentness and pastness; if an event e never ‘is future’ it can never be ‘has been future’ either, and if e never ‘is present’ it can never be ‘will be past’, and if e never ‘is past’ it will always be false that e ‘will be past’. I will attempt to show how the presupposition of just these three necessary facts entails a contradiction, if McTaggart’s ontology is presupposed.

The proposed explanation is consequently not open to objections that tenses are possessed successively, or to objections that sentences like ‘has been future’ only appear to imply simultaneous possession of incompatible tenses (e.g. being future now) when failing to recognise the proper nature of temporal predication. Expressions like ‘will be past’ do for instance not refer to the present, but to some other time when e possesses a different property than it does at the time the expression is uttered. E.J. Lowe and Evan Fales, among others, have claimed that McTaggart’s problem is based on a confusion concerning the indexical nature of predicates like ‘present’ and ‘now’. They claim that the indexical nature of these predicates enables us to pick out successive moments in time.²⁸ But McTaggart is in fact assuming that the reality of time is dependent on the truth of what they are claiming, i.e. that it is necessary that events possess temporal predicates successively, and that language does appear to pick out the times when events possess this and that temporal property. It is the existence of the reality thus described by language that he is rejecting *because it is in conflict with the ontology that he has previously determined*. My explanation will focus on how the notion of time, as involving the successive possession of temporal properties by events, clash with what McTaggart thinks is the necessary characteristics of anything existing and real. At this point let it suffice to say that McTaggart’s

²⁷ Mellor (1981, pp. 92-102) & Dummett (1960).

²⁸ Lowe (1987) & Fales (1990, p. 265).

ontology requires that time, as well as every other really real entity, must be shown to be an existing whole, a substance, or compound substance constituted by *coexisting* parts, if it is to be real at all. If every event is then supposed to have at least three incompatible positions in such a coexisting whole, i.e. positions they cannot coexist in, how can the positions be coexistent constituents of time? Well, they cannot! It would require that every event had three coexistent incompatible temporal properties and that involves a contradiction.

Usually we need an answer to a problem, but in this case we need to explain what the problem is in order to understand the answer. In order to fully understand this explanation we must first become familiar with the fundamental principles in McTaggart's ontology and use it to clarify the ontological status of the notions of event, position, series of positions, moments of time, and their mutual relations in McTaggart's philosophy.

6. *McTaggart's ontology: Criteria of reality for time as a 'series'*²⁹

To acquire proper understanding of McTaggart's train of thought it is necessary to become familiar with his ontology of the nature of the existent. There is no room for a thorough exposition of his argumentation on this matter. I will only present relevant conclusions about the nature of such notions as *existence*, *reality*, *substance*, *property* and *relation* in the form of postulates and only provide a short clarification when needed. I will also present his views on how our beliefs relate to the real facts they are about. This involves notions like *belief*, *assumption*, *fact*, *truth* and *falsity*. When this is done I will try to show how McTaggart's views on these matters determines his conclusion about the nature of time. McTaggart himself believed these notions to be indefinable, i.e. only ideally determinable, and much of what he proposes to adopt about them to be widely accepted.³⁰

Reality admits of no degrees; either something is real or it is not.³¹ We often say that something can be real *for* someone without really admitting that this something exists. We might grant someone to have had an experience of seeing a ghost even if we do not believe that ghosts really

²⁹ For a critique of McTaggart's ontology see, Broad (1938) & Airaksinen (1975)

³⁰ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 2, 60, 67 & 78).

³¹ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 2, Ch. 1 & 2).

exists. The ghost is therefore only real *for* someone in the sense that the *experience* of seeing a ghost exists as a mental state in a consciousness while the subject of that experience does not correspond to anything objectively real in the world.

Existence is coextensive with the real; everything that exists is real, and there can be nothing real that does not exist. Even if this was false, i.e. that something was real that did not exist, it would be of no practical consequence to us.³² There is therefore no sphere of possible existents that have not yet been realised; existence does not admit of degrees either.³³ *Possibilities*, other than those simply informing about our ignorance of what actually does obtain, are always assertions about the implication of one characteristic by another and then correspond to existing facts.³⁴

That which exists must have some other nature than existence, viz. it must have *properties*.³⁵ The existence of properties presupposes the existence of *substances* that holds the properties; there can never exist a property without substance and there can not be any substances without properties:

Something must exist, then, and have qualities, without being itself either a quality or a relation. And this is Substance[...] This is the traditional definition of substance, and it is the one I propose to adopt.³⁶

Substances can form groups by force of a common property and every such group is a *compound substance*.³⁷ Every human individual is e.g. a substance, but they also stand in a special relation to all other human individuals through their common property of being human and thus form the compound substance 'humankind'. *Events* are a class of substances having properties and holding relations.³⁸

All substances stand in *relation* to every other substance in one way or the other, and only between them, or their properties, can there be

³² McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 6 & Ch. 2).

³³ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 35 & 40).

³⁴ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 35).

³⁵ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 59).

³⁶ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 67).

³⁷ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, Ch. 14, 15 & 16).

³⁸ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 5 & vol. 2, sect. 306).

relations.³⁹ All substances in the whole Universe thus make up a single compound substance and all determine one another.⁴⁰ Reality is in this sense the totality of all existing substances, the properties they hold and the relations they stand in. This is the sense in which McTaggart means that all ‘changes’, however minor, determines the nature of all substances in the Universe.⁴¹ The fall of a sand-castle on the English coast determines the nature of the Great Pyramid because their mutual relation is part of their nature. According to McTaggart substances possess negative properties and can determine other substances and be related by them no less than through positive properties.⁴²

One should notice that the formation of compound substances, in McTaggart’s sense, is by no means restricted to substances co-present in time and space and one should therefore not associate them with ‘things’ in the usual sense.⁴³

I must also stress the point that even though properties and relations are in a sense universal, in McTaggart’s account, they *cannot have independent existence*, i.e. there cannot exist a real relation ‘larger than’ per se, if nothing really is larger than something else. We might however be able to have an idea of such a relation even if it did not really exist but then it would be an idea of something unreal. From this follows that there cannot be any real relations to non-existing entities.⁴⁴ There can e.g. not exist any real relations to mythical creatures like the Phoenix, but we can imagine them and then the *idea* of the Phoenix, as well as the *idea* of the relation we imagine it to have to us and other things, exists as a mental state in our consciousness. It might be objected that we seem to be able to have a relation in time to not yet existing or not any more existing things, i.e. to the conference we will attend next week or to deceased relatives. It will however become clear that on McTaggart’s account it is a mistake to treat not-present things as not

³⁹ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect.78-79).

⁴⁰ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 135, 137, 138).

⁴¹ Of course meaning *apparent* changes, (McTaggart 1988, vol. 2, footnote 1, p. 347).

⁴² McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 61)

⁴³ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 59 & 130).

⁴⁴ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, Ch. 8).

existing: “Now tomorrow’s weather is existent, for existence is as much a predicate of the future and past as of the present.”⁴⁵ On McTaggart’s view relations presuppose something existing as having a relation and if temporality is a relation then it requires the existence of what it relates.

Now we have the foundation of the structure that McTaggart applies to what he calls ‘Absolute Reality’.⁴⁶ It is a world constituted by substances, their properties and the relations that hold between them. The Universe is one single compound substance. The parts of this compound substance are not only the things or matter in the Universe as obtain at each moment of time but every qualitatively distinguishable entities of any kind in the entire history of the Universe, not forgetting the qualitative states of our consciousnesses. Each and all are substantially existing entities joined by relations. This is indeed the view from eternity. But something must be said of the relation between Absolute Reality and our beliefs about it.

Beliefs are mental states that assert that something is true of reality, they must therefore always be either true or false.⁴⁷ Mental states are real qualitative states of a consciousness and consciousnesses are substances.⁴⁸ *Truth* is a relation of correspondence between beliefs about reality and *facts*.⁴⁹ *Facts* are: “[...]either the possession by anything of a property, or the connection of anything with anything by a relation.”⁵⁰ That is to say, facts consist of independently existing substances having properties and which hold real relations to other independently existing substances. It is important to realise that McTaggart here uses *fact* as a universal term for any existing *state of affairs*, regardless if they appear to be, or are believed to be, events, things, thoughts or whatever, as long as they consist in independently existing substances having properties and holding relations. This is a use that may be confusing. Especially if one is used to treating facts as true propositions that can be true *about* states of affairs, and even such as do not

⁴⁵ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, footnote 1, p. 7).

⁴⁶ McTaggart (1988, vol.2, sect. 296).

⁴⁷ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 8).

⁴⁸ McTaggart (1988, vol.2, sect. 433).

⁴⁹ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 10).

⁵⁰ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 10).

obtain or exist.⁵¹ In McTaggart's terminology *facts* are not in any way distinct from the state of affairs that exist and beliefs can never be true about non-existent states of affairs (see above about truth).⁵²

McTaggart's view of facts bears close resemblance to the view of 'states of affairs' held by later Cambridge philosophers, but, contrary to e.g. the early Wittgenstein, McTaggart does not allow for the reality of possible, or non-existent, states of affairs.⁵³ There exists no negative facts in McTaggart's ontology although substances possess negative properties.⁵⁴ *Falsity* is instead the absence of a relation of correspondence between a belief and any real fact.⁵⁵ Truth, in McTaggart's sense, is purely metaphysical, not epistemological, it holds whether or not you know there is a relation of correspondence or not.

⁵¹ McTaggart goes to great length in showing that the truth and falsity of beliefs do not presuppose the reality of true and false propositions, but only a direct relation between belief and existing facts (McTaggart 1988, vol.1, ch.2).

⁵² At times McTaggart speaks as if facts are something that are 'about' states affairs and thus implying that they are distinct from them, but it should be clear that this is only a manner of speaking that he allows himself to indulge in, for the sake of convenience, when he has already given the meaning of the term.

⁵³ McTaggart's account of facts is very similar to that of the logical atomists: "The most general account given by the atomists of an atomic fact was that it was a fact consisting either in the possession by a particular of a characteristic or in a relation holding between two or more particulars", (Urmson 1960, p. 17). Wittgenstein however, in his *Tractatus*, saw a fact as always consisting of at least two things forming a state of affairs: "2. What is the case -a fact- is the existence of states of affairs. / 2.01 A state of affairs (a state of things) is a combination of objects (things)", (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 7). In a translation of *Tractatus* from 1922 by C.K. Ogden and F.P. Ramsey Wittgenstein's *Sachverhalten* is translated with 'atomic facts' (Wittgenstein 1922), whereas in the translation cited above of D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness in 1961, it is translated with 'states of affairs'. The change of terminology from fact to state of affairs is motivated, I assume, because a *Sachverhalt*, a state of affairs, is something that can be real without actually existing, while a *Tatsache*, a fact, is a *Sachverhalt* or *Sachlage* that exists in actuality. A state of affairs in Wittgenstein is therefore something that can be real as a possibility without actually existing, while a fact is a state of affairs that exists. This is a distinction not allowed by McTaggart, and I therefore use 'state of affairs' as synonymous with fact.

⁵⁴ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 62).

⁵⁵ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 19).

7. *The Universe is a compound substance, but can it be temporal?*

McTaggart believed that everything we know empirically appeared to be in time, and he wished to inquire whether the appearance of the changing relations of events in time is compatible with the general nature of relations that he so carefully determined. Can the substances in McTaggart's 'Absolute Reality' form a compound substance that is *in* time? The question is misleading, but it is usually posed in this form so it might be enlightening to consider it in contrast to a more 'McTaggartian' formulation: can the substances in 'Absolute Reality' form a compound substance characterised by changing relations thereby *constituting* time? The former question depicts reality as something in time, like a rabbit in a hat, but according to McTaggart's ontology any real entity, *even time itself*, must be either an existing substance, a property of an existing substance, a relation holding between existing substances or a compound substance constituted by substances who are the parts of reality:

Having, as it seems to me, succeeded in proving that there can be no time without an A series, it remains to prove that an A series cannot exist, and that therefore time cannot exist. This would involve that time is not real at all, *since it is admitted that the only way in which time can be real is by existing*.⁵⁶

The second question implies just this: reality itself, or that part of it we are familiar with, must be temporal if time is to be real. Let us then not be confused by the choice between time being a compound substance or a relation because relations cannot exist independently of the substances that hold the relation. There can therefore not exist a relation that successively holds between different substances, but perhaps there can exist substances that hold different relations.

According to McTaggart then, if there exist a temporal relation it must hold between two coexistent substances and thereby unite the substances it relates into a compound substance, i.e. an existing state of affairs. Given then that existence and reality are coextensive and neither allow of any degrees, how can anything existing have properties successively and hold a relation between the 'times' when it has these different properties without actually existing simultaneously in these different states? And how can time

⁵⁶ [italics are mine, RI] McTaggart (1988, vol. 2, sect. 325).

exist if the positions in time are positions that are held successively and therefore do not coexist? Broad indeed notices that McTaggart's argument "[...]seems to presuppose that all events 'co-exist', and stand to each other timelessly or sempiternally in determinate relations of temporal precedence".⁵⁷ Broad gives a very well stated, and to my mind correct, account of McTaggart's thoughts on this matter, but does not relate it to McTaggart's argument on the ontological nature of relations in general. He presents it as a "[...] 'muddle' [...] at the back of McTaggart's mind".⁵⁸ But as we have seen McTaggart made it quite clear that the argument is entirely dependent on his ontology and there the dependence of relations on the coexistence of related terms is perfectly clear. Well, before we answer that question we need to be clear on the nature of the notions of positions, series of positions and moments of time involved in the 'time-series.'

8. The sense of positions, series of positions, and moments of time

In order to understand the notion of 'series of positions' we must first understand the ontological status of *position*. Positions are determined in terms of relations: being to the left of someone, being east of Eden, being fifth in line, earlier than *e*, etc. But relations cannot have independent existence in McTaggart's ontology; they presuppose the existence of substances. Positions must therefore consist in the existence of a particular substance in a particular relation to other substances. I propose that for McTaggart a position should always be understood as a state of affairs. We are here considering temporal positions and they involve the position of events in a series of positions. Events are not by themselves *temporal* states of affairs, or temporal facts, according to McTaggart's characterisation, because he believed that future, present and past are relations, and that events are therefore dependent for their temporality on having a relation to some other substance. It is evident that McTaggart believed that the substantiality of positions is provided by the events themselves and that positions can therefore not be existent apart from the existence of an event holding certain relations:

⁵⁷ Broad (1938, vol.2, p. 307).

⁵⁸ Broad (1938, vol.2, p. 299).

The contents of any position in time form an event. The varied simultaneous contents of a single position are, of course, a plurality of events. But, like any other substance, they form a group, and this group is a compound substance.⁵⁹

Remember now that the relations of future, present and past do not hold mutually between the events but to something unknown. The positions of the A-series can therefore not consist solely of the simultaneous event-content, but also of an unknown entity outside the series of events and the relation holding between them; together they form a state of affairs. The place of that position in the series of positions must however be determined as the relation holding between the positions, or rather, between the successive states of affairs constituted by the different relations that the event-content holds to the unknown entity. Considering then what I granted as necessary conditions of successive possession of temporal properties, i.e. that the facts *e* is future, *e* is present and *e* is past, must obtain singularly at some time or other. These facts should be considered as different states of affairs constituted by *e*, an unknown entity and the relation that holds between them; these different states of affairs are the proper constitutive parts of the series of positions.

The A-series is then a series of states of affairs, or a series of *configurations* of existing substances, that consist of the different relations that events hold to an unknown entity outside the series. It must now be clear that it was in a sense misleading to claim that events change positions, implying that they do this in a way analogous to how passengers change seats on the bus, because it is the events themselves that *constitute* the positions. Rather we should say that change in the A-series consists in the event successively *constituting* different positions when its relation to the unknown entity changes. The temporal characteristic of the series is provided by the events successively partaking in different states of affairs or configurations, and consequently being constituent parts of the states of affairs it partakes in. Each state of affairs or configuration has in its turn a position in the series of configurations and it is this series of configurations that McTaggart identifies with time.

⁵⁹ McTaggart (1988, vol.2, sect. 306).

We have now got an entity, time, that divides into parts of parts. First there is time as a totality, whose constituent parts are positions, i.e. states of affairs holding a relation to other states of affairs. The constituent parts of the positions are the events holding a certain relation to an unknown entity. Every event can be further divided into parts but we need not go further for our present purposes. If we now apply McTaggart's ontology it will be clear that the reality of time, as a compound substance constituted by positions, is dependent on the *coexistence* of the positions; a compound substance is a compound of related substances and as we have seen relations require the coexistence of what is related. The existence and reality of the positions per se depend in their turn on that their constituent parts coexist in the relations required for being that position. This is however incompatible with events possessing temporal properties in succession, which in McTaggart's view is equal to participating in different states of affairs. Being future is holding a certain relation to an unknown entity, being present is holding another relation to that same entity. Holding incompatible temporal relations in succession means that events must be constitutive parts of many, and mutually exclusive positions, or states of affairs; states of affairs they cannot coexist in.⁶⁰

Going from the bottom up: Events are required to be constitutive parts of many positions, if events cannot coexist in all these positions, then the positions fail to coexist in the required sense for constituting a series of positions, and time falls short of existence. It is thus demanded on the one hand that positions must coexist in time, which means that events must coexist in all the positions they are constituent parts of; but on the other hand it is also demanded that events be in different positions successively, which means that they cannot coexist in all the positions they are constituent parts of because succession excludes coexistence. I myself see no way to satisfy both these demands at the same time and have to conclude that they contradict each other. One of them will have to be rejected. If succession is rejected, we reject change and time, but if the other is rejected the reality of

⁶⁰ I have here characterised the contradiction in McTaggart's sense as involving relations but it makes no difference if we would substitute the relations with properties, because properties are only real when held by an existing substance just as relations are only real when holding between existing substances.

time must be defined in some other terms than coexistence of constituent parts.

Regarding the relationship of all this to moments of time, if they be taken as separate entities as they are in theories of 'Absolute Time', where moments of time are considered to be homogeneous entities of time 'containing' the concrete event content. I will let it suffice to say that according to McTaggart's ontology they must be substantial enough to hold the properties of future, present and past, properties they must acquire by holding a relation to something that is outside of time. And, because all substances hold relations to all other substances, they must be parts of the temporal states of affairs that constitute and determine positions in time. So, if we originally had a problem with the coexistence of singular events in three different positions, we are not going to get a smaller problem with the coexistence of different positions involving moments of time and the different relations they hold to events in addition to their relations to the unknown entity outside time. McTaggart grants, for the sake of argument, the possibility of moments of time being real entities distinct from events, but claims that this does not solve any problems because whatever holds regarding the temporality of events, holds regarding the temporality of moments of time.⁶¹ So whether the parts of time involve events, moments of time or positions do not really affect the conclusion, but granting the possibility of them all as separate entities and then trying to sort out the relations between them can maybe complicate the problem beyond recognizability.

Let me summarize: According to McTaggart's phenomenological analysis, time depends for its *nature* upon being constituted of successive parts, i.e. parts that do not coexist, but according to McTaggart's ontology, time depends for its *existence* upon being constituted of coexistent parts.

9. *Time as a substance*

I hope I have made it quite clear that the argument for the unreality of time must be understood as a *demonstration* that time cannot be a substance, or alternatively, that substance cannot be temporal, *given McTaggart's*

⁶¹ McTaggart (1988, vol.2, sect. 327).

conception of what substances are like and how they relate to each other in 'Absolute Reality'. It is clear that all preconceived ideas about time as a 'dimension' of change, or as some kind of objective relation independent of the events that are or come to be related by it, obscure proper understanding of McTaggart, and it is necessary to rid oneself of such prejudiced ideas of what is being dealt with before delving into the argument. Ideas of time as something apart from the substance in the universe are ruled out already in McTaggart's ontology by the fundamental postulates that:

- (a) nothing can exist and thereby be real that is not a substance,
or for its existence dependent upon substances,
- (b) every substance is in relation to all other substances,
- (c) relations can only hold between existing substances.

Time must consequently be shown to be an existing whole if it is to be real at all: "By objectively real time, I mean a common time in which all existent things exist, so that they stand in temporal relations to each other."⁶² The sense of 'temporal' is here quite simply 'changing'.

10. Conclusion

In my opinion McTaggart did prove what he intended to prove in the argument for the unreality of time, i.e. that our conception of time is incompatible with a certain internally consistent systematisation of certain widely accepted notions regarding the nature of the constituents that supposedly are in time. This does not of course amount to proving that time actually is unreal, nor that tensed change is contradictory, although McTaggart himself came to this conclusion believing as he did in the truth of his ontology. I hope therefore that my account of McTaggart's argument has shown that it does not provide a conclusive proof against either the A-view or the B-view, *unless it can be shown that the proponents of these views hold the same ontology as McTaggart.* I hope this detailed explanation may help the proponents of the A- and B-views to sort out their positions regarding the ontological status of the notions treated by McTaggart. I see no other way out of the presently stalemate situation.

⁶² McTaggart (1988, vol.2, sect. 343).

I hope also to have succeeded in showing that McTaggart was not confused or mistaken concerning the proper use of temporal expressions, nor concerning the temporal characteristics of our experience. His understanding of these matters was not inadequate or mistaken in any way, but in fact exquisitely clear. He just rejected the belief that reality is as it appears to be. He claimed that there is another more fundamental reality beyond our experience, whose ontology he claimed to have determined. In his view this ontology was a measure of the truth of our beliefs about reality, beliefs that are derived from the merely apparently real.

McTaggart did not in any way reject the *experience* of time, as a matter of fact the justification of the experience of time was absolutely necessary for the completeness of any theory about reality in McTaggart's opinion. McTaggart believed that his account of what he called the C-series, did explain how the experience of time and change could emerge in a timeless, changeless reality and thus establish time as a *phenomenon bene fundatum*; a well founded phenomenon.⁶³ The terms of the C-series, which he claims to be a non-temporal series, stand in the transitive and asymmetric relations of *included in* and *inclusive of*, but this is not the place for an account of the C-series.⁶⁴

McTaggart's quest for a consistent ontology of the real and existing led him into an idealistic philosophical system that clashed with certain empirically grounded notions. Philosophical systems aiming to include everything often tend to clash with some of our well entrenched everyday notions. In McTaggart's case, it proved to be, among other things, time.

⁶³ McTaggart (1988, vol.1, sect. 53, 613 & 619).

⁶⁴ McTaggart (1988, vol.2, Ch. 47-50).