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Taking Love Seriously:

McTaggart, Absolute Reality, and Chemistry¹

Towards the end of his excellent paper ‘McTaggart on Love’, Dennis McKerlie (2011: 86) remarks that: “The subject of love clearly had a deep personal significance for McTaggart”. It is interesting that this bears remarking. Love has a deep personal significance for most of us. And this is what makes McKerlie’s remark interesting: Despite the significance that loves has for most of us, the attention that McTaggart pays to love *is* remarkable. More so than most other philosophers, McTaggart takes love seriously.²

What does it mean to say that McTaggart takes love *seriously*? I mean two things by this. The first is that McTaggart takes the phenomena of love seriously. He is dismissive of accounts of love that try to reduce it to other things, for instance pleasure or moral approbation. Secondly, McTaggart thinks that love reveals something fundamental about the nature of the universe; otherwise expressed, love plays a crucial role in his conception of absolute reality.

In this paper, I will lay out both aspects of McTaggart’s position. I will agree with the first, but depart from the second. That is to say, I follow McTaggart in his rejection of other accounts of love, but distance myself from his own account of love in absolute reality. In doing so, I hope to advance our understanding of McTaggart, and also to contribute to contemporary discussion about the nature of love.³ In terms of advancing our understanding of McTaggart, I offer my own exegesis of his views on

¹ I owe thanks to Charlotte Alderwick, Bob Stern, Natasha McKeever, Martin Sticker, and three anonymous referees for providing helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. I would also like to thank an excellent audience at the University of Essex, and Anna McQuillin, David Batho, Carl Fox, Gerald Lang, Chris Bennett, and Sophie Goddard for enduring many conversations about love with me.

² We find little discussion of love in the other prominent British Idealists. T.H Green offers no substantial discussion of love in his major works; Bradley is similar, offering a brief remark in ‘My Station and its Duties’ (see note 21). R.G. Collingwood though, offers a short account of love as a modification of hunger (NL: §8.35, p. 57), where our object is to overcome our own loneliness (NL: §8.16, p. 54; §8.3, p. 56). As with other aspects of his philosophy, Hegel seems to have had the most influence on McTaggart on love; I will say something more about this towards the end of section 1.

³ I would like to thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to make this clearer.

love, look to further situate his account of love in its historical context (primarily in reference to Hegel), but also to provide an interpretation – and defence – of McTaggart’s taking love seriously.⁴ In addition, I put forward a new criticism of his views, arguing that he fails to account for what we often refer to as ‘chemistry’. This criticism, I contend, can also contribute to contemporary discussion about the nature of love, where I argue that chemistry is important and often overlooked.

In a little more detail, this paper divides into four sections. I begin by laying out McTaggart’s conception of what love is, and what love is not (§1). I follow him in thinking that love is not always pleasant, moral approbation, nor a response to the qualities of the beloved. In setting this out, I contrast McTaggart’s views with some of his contemporaries and predecessors, primarily Moore and Hegel. In doing so, I side with McTaggart.

Having laid out McTaggart’s conception of love, I turn to detail his distinctive claim about love in absolute reality, where he thinks that everyone could love everyone (§2). Following this, I consider two objections. The first is that perhaps McTaggart takes love *too* seriously (§3). I attempt to defend him against this charge, but then offer my own objection (§4): I worry that McTaggart’s account of love in absolute reality fails to accommodate some of the phenomena of love. Here, I draw upon Schelling and Goethe to suggest that *chemistry* is an important part of love. I argue that the appeal to chemistry allows us to maintain much of McTaggart’s account of what love is not, while resisting his conclusion that in absolute reality, everyone could love everyone.

1. What is Love?

⁴ In relatively recent work on McTaggart on love, Mander (1996: 134-141) offers an excellent account of the development of McTaggart’s views from *The Further Determination of the Absolute* to *The Nature of Existence*. Mander (1996: 141-6) also argues that McTaggart’s views have contemporary relevance, in that they can help us distinguish between loving *objects* and loving *persons*. McKerlie (2011: 67-73) discusses McTaggart’s views in relation to Broad’s, Geach’s and Moore’s, before offering (2011: 73-85) an extensive account of the *value* of love for McTaggart, exploring whether McTaggart accepts a variant of Parfit’s repugnant conclusion. These are both excellent papers, and (aside from some minor disagreements) I do not seek to criticise them there. Instead, I look to draw attention to some other overlooked aspects of McTaggart’s account of love – his departure from Hegel, and his taking love *seriously* – as well as offering a new criticism of my own.

In *The Nature of Existence*, McTaggart clearly sets out his conception of love.⁵ He views love as an emotion.⁶ He thinks that ‘emotion’ “cannot be defined”, but that “with so many examples of it there is no difficulty in identifying what is meant” (NE: §455, p. 144).⁷ Love in particular, is an intense and passionate species of liking (NE: §459, p. 148);⁸ it is an “emotion which springs from a sense of union with another self” (NE: §464, p. 151).⁹ He remarks that (NE: §464, p. 150):

When *B* loves *C*, he feels that he is connected with him by a bond of peculiar strength and intimacy – a bond stronger and more intimate than any other by which two selves can be joined.

After having set out this basic conception of love, McTaggart goes on to detail what love is *not*. He argues that love is not always pleasant, moral approbation, nor a response to the qualities of the beloved. In what follows, I will set out McTaggart’s criticisms of these various conceptions of love. In doing so, the distinctive nature of his own account will emerge.

Love and Pleasure

McTaggart begins his discussion in *The Nature of Existence* by considering the view that when *B* loves *C*, the love is always dependent on the fact that *C* gives *B* pleasure. However, he notes that “this is inconsistent with the facts” (NE: §462, p. 149). The facts, in this case, are that love “often arises without such pleasure”, and that it “often happens that the pleasure *B* owes to *C*, whom he loves, is much less

⁵ McTaggart also discusses love in other works, but in this paper, I will mostly focus on his discussion in *The Nature of Existence*, which I find both his clearest and most convincing.

⁶ It is worth mentioning that, for McTaggart, emotions are cognitive; see Mander (1996: 138).

⁷ He provides the following list “with no pretence to systematic completeness” (NE: §455, p. 144): “liking and repugnance, love and hatred, sympathy and malignancy, approval and disapproval, pride and humility, gladness and sadness, hope and fear, courage and cowardice, anger, wonder, curiosity.”

⁸ I should note that McTaggart proposes to confine his use of the work ‘love’ to a liking that is felt towards persons; see NE: §459, p. 148; for a contemporary account of the distinctive nature of love towards persons, see Jollimore (2011: xi-xiii).

⁹ McTaggart (NE: §461, p. 149) notes that while this is often found in connection with sexual desire, this connection is not necessary.

than the pleasure which he owes to *D*, whom he does not love.” (NE: §462, p. 149).¹⁰ McTaggart holds that love is neither always caused by pleasure nor always pleasant.¹¹

He then offers a diagnosis of the rival view:

The view that love must be pleasurable is, I believe, due to people who accepted or assumed the validity of psychological hedonism, and then argued that, if a lover was unwilling to cease to love, it only be because he found love pleasant. (NE: §462, p. 150-1)

This is part of what I mean when I say that McTaggart takes love seriously. He is dismissive of other accounts of love that have a prior account of human behaviour or value, and then try to make love fit that. Allow me to put the point schematically:¹² If you are committed to viewing *X* as what really matters, then there will be a temptation to make out the value of love in terms of *X*.¹³ And the worry is that this can distort the phenomena of love.¹⁴ On that note, let us turn to another example of something McTaggart thinks love is *not*.

Love and Moral Approbation

McTaggart also rejects a conception of love as moral approbation. In this, he departs from G.E. Moore.¹⁵ In *Principia Ethica*, Moore offers a short discussion of love. He claims that “the object [of love] must be not only truly beautiful, but also truly good in a high degree” (PE: §122, p. 251). Moore then continues to claim that this moral approbation is “far more valuable than the mere love of beauty” (PE: §122, p. 253), and that “the most valuable appreciation of persons appears to be that which consists in the appreciation of their appreciation of other persons.” (PE: §122, p. 252).

¹⁰ It is worth noting an ambiguity here. Talk of *owing pleasure* might suggest that McTaggart is making a claim that we owe – somewhat literally, in the sense of having an obligation to provide (or repay) – pleasure to those we love. However, it is clear from the context of this passage that McTaggart is instead claiming that *C* might cause *B* more pleasure than *D* causes *B*, but that *B* still loves *C* rather than *D*. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for drawing this ambiguity to my attention.

¹¹ For similar reasons, he also dismisses the view that “benevolence and sympathy are always found together with love” (NE: §463, p. 150), noting that love can occur without both, and that both can occur without love.

¹² I frame this in terms of value here, but a similar point holds for behaviour: If you are committed to viewing human behaviour as primarily motivated by *X*, then there will be a temptation to make out the behaviour associated with love in terms of *X*. And again, the worry is that this can distort the phenomena of love.

¹³ Brogaard (2015: 74; 232-3) for instance, tends to make out the value of love in terms of how love can contribute to well-being. And this, very roughly seems to fit the schema: Brogaard (2015: 223) holds that well-being is the ultimate goal in life, and then tends to make out the value of love in terms of well-being.

¹⁴ See Zangwill (2013: 2) for some interesting reflections upon this methodology.

¹⁵ For an extended account of this disagreement, see McKerlie (2011: 69-71); for a brief account of McTaggart’s influence on Moore, see Levy (1979: 107-8).

McTaggart, by contrast, notes that “it is possible that *B* should love *C*, [...] though he knows him to be wicked” (NE: §463, p. 150).¹⁶ Now this might sound like a merely descriptive account of love, and perhaps something Moore could agree with; Moore might accept that it’s possible that *B* loves wicked *C*, but insist that such love would be *defective*. However, McTaggart’s criticism of Moore is not only descriptive; he goes on to claim that “love towards a person known to be wicked is just as truly love (and, for that matter, just as good) as love towards a person known to be virtuous” (NE: §463, p. 150).

Leaving aside love of the wicked, we can see McTaggart’s point through a simple example. Marge might morally admire Ned more than she does Homer, but she loves Homer. And it seems wrongheaded to suggest it would be more appropriate for Marge to love Ned because he is more deserving of moral approbation.¹⁷ Love does not appear to be not moral approbation.

Recently, Abramson and Leite (2011) have offered a sophisticated defence of the thought that love is a form of moral approbation.¹⁸ They argue that love is a:

[...] response to particular kinds of morally laudable features of character expressed by the loved one in interaction with the love (and others the lover loves) (Abramson and Leite 2011: 677)

There is a lot to be said for this view, but I suspect that McTaggart would still want to reject it. We can see this by altering the above example. Let us imagine that Ned has a more morally laudable character than Homer, and in addition, that he expresses this more in interactions with Marge (and others). Once again though, McTaggart would want to resist the thought that it would be more appropriate for Marge to love Ned rather than Homer. Marge *loves* Homer; she feels connected to him by a bond of peculiar strength and intimacy, and this seems laudable, regardless of whether or not Ned deserves more moral approbation.

¹⁶ McTaggart also dismisses Moore’s linking of love and beauty, remarking that: “it is possible that *B* should love *C*, though he knows him to be ugly” (NE: §463, p. 150).

¹⁷ Abramson and Leite (2011: 687), Brogaard (forthcoming, §4) and Jollimore (2011: 137-8) all argue that there is an important distinction between there being *reasons* to love someone and being *obligated* to love that person. With this distinction in mind, I do not claim that, on the moral approbation view, Marge *should* love Ned, but instead that it would be *more appropriate* for her to love Ned.

¹⁸ I would like to thank an anonymous referee for inviting me to make this comparison.

Of course, I cannot fully adjudicate between McTaggart and Abramson and Leite here, but hopefully the basic contrast is clear. I will return to say a little more about Abramson and Leite's position in the final section of the paper, where I will argue that both they and McTaggart fail to adequately accommodate an important part of love; but before we get to that, I want to continue to consider McTaggart's position.

Love and Qualities

There is one more thing that McTaggart thinks that love is not. He thinks that one does not love someone *in respect of* their qualities. This point needs some clarification. McTaggart draws a distinction between an emotion being *caused* by a quality and *in respect of* a quality (NE: §465, p. 151-2).¹⁹ As an example, Sophie loves Rebecca because of the way her eyes look, but this is best understood as a *cause* of her love, rather than what she loves Rebecca *in respect of*. Another way to get at this distinction is through McTaggart's discussion of proportionality, which he thinks supports his claim.²⁰

McTaggart claims that "love is not necessarily proportionate to the dignity or adequacy of the qualities that determine it" (NE: §466, p. 152).²¹ He remarks that a "trivial cause may determine the direction of intense love" (NE: §466, p. 152). One may, for instance, "love one person above all the world for all one's life because her eyes are²² beautiful when she is young" (NE: §466, p. 153).

Once again, this might just appear to be descriptive; perhaps disproportionate love is possible, but defective. And McTaggart notes that, of course, other emotions can also be disproportionate – Homer is often filled with anger at trivial matters. However, McTaggart thinks that something different is going on with love:

If the love does arise, it justifies itself, regardless of what causes produce it. To love one person above all the world for all one's life because her eyes are beautiful when she is young, is to be

¹⁹ See McTaggart (FDA, p.255-8) for an earlier treatment of this, and Mander (1996: 139-40) and McKerlie (2011: 67-8) for alternative accounts of this distinction.

²⁰ McTaggart (NE: §466, p. 153-4) thinks that there are two other characteristics of love that support his claim. These are our positive attitudes towards love, even when: 1) we are unable to find a quality which causes the love; and 2) where someone loved someone because they believed them to have a certain quality, then realised that they did not possess that quality, but nevertheless continues to love them..

²¹ Cf. McTaggart (FDA, p.255).

²² One might puzzle over why McTaggart writes 'are' here, rather than 'were'. One possible reason for this is his belief that absolute reality is timeless.

determined to a very great thing by a very small cause. But if what is caused is really love – and this is sometimes the case – it is not condemned on that ground. (NE: §466, p. 153).

McTaggart is making two claims here. Firstly, like other emotions, love can be disproportionate. But secondly, unlike other emotions, love justifies itself, regardless of its cause.²³ Otherwise expressed, McTaggart thinks that love is supremely valuable, and as such, it can be justified despite how it came about.²⁴ Sophie loves Rebecca because of the way her eyes looked when she was young; and yet, their love may be all that love can be.²⁵

At this point, one might object: “The way Rebecca’s eyes looked is not a good reason for Sophie to love her!”²⁶ And McTaggart would agree. He would claim that this is best thought of as a cause of Sophie’s love rather than what justifies it. As for what justifies Sophie’s – or any – love, McTaggart’s claim seems to be that when love occurs, it justifies itself.

One benefit of insisting that love is not justified by the qualities of the beloved is that it allows McTaggart to easily differentiate between *admiring* someone and *loving* them.²⁷ Sophie and Danielle might both appreciate Rebecca’s good qualities, but Sophie loves Rebecca, where Danielle merely likes her.

McTaggart would claim that, as it is not the good qualities of the beloved that justify the love, neither person is being irrational. As McKerlie puts it:

[...] we should not regard [...] genuinely good qualities as reasons that mandate loving her. If another man appreciated her good qualities in the same way, but ended up admiring and liking her rather than falling in love with her, we would not say that he was being irrational, or that her good qualities made it the case that she deserved to be loved by him. (2011: 70)

These claims will end up playing an important role in how McTaggart conceives of love in absolute reality. But before I turn to that, I want to draw one final contrast, between McTaggart and Hegel, in order to contextualise McTaggart’s views.

²³ McTaggart notes that, with other emotions, “we condemn the result if the cause is trivial and inadequate” (NE: §466, p. 152); Homer gets angry *too* easily, and Marge is right to condemn him for this.

²⁴ In *Some Dogmas of Religion*, McTaggart (DR §240, p. 290) goes so far as to suggest that love would have value even if nothing else did.

²⁵ Cf. NE: §465, p. 152.

²⁶ Jollimore (2011: 142) offers a similar objection to McTaggart, but also (2011: 139-142) provides a defence of the thought that someone’s past qualities might count as reasons to love them.

²⁷ For an alternative attempt to make sense of a similar distinction, in terms of *acknowledging* and *appreciating* something, see Jollimore (2011: 102-8).

Hegel on Love and Marriage

Out of all the British Idealists, McTaggart was the most dedicated Hegel scholar.²⁸ McTaggart accepts some of Hegel's views about love, but also departs from him on a couple of crucial points.

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel claims that “[l]ove means in general the consciousness of my unity with another” (PR: §158z, p. 199). As we have seen, McTaggart has a similar conception of love.²⁹ He conceives of love “as an emotion which springs from a sense of union with another self” (NE: §464, p. 151).

However, McTaggart departs from Hegel on love in two main respects. The first concerns Hegel's emphasis on marriage, which we do not find in McTaggart. Hegel thinks that the ideal form of love is an “ethical unity” (PR: §158z, p. 199), which he locates in marriage (PR: §161-9, p. 200-8).³⁰ He does not want to equate love with marriage, for the following reason:

[An] equally unacceptable notion is that which simply equates marriage with love; for love, as a feeling, is open in all respects to contingency, and this is a shape which the ethical may not assume. Marriage should therefore be defined more precisely as rightfully ethical love, so that the transient, capricious, and purely subjective aspects of love are excluded from it. (PR: §161z, p. 201)

Hegel worries that love can be contingent, transient, capricious and purely subjective, and sees marriage as the cure.³¹ He does recognise that we often tend to celebrate the contingency and subjectivity of love, but seems dismissive of this:³²

But in those modern dramas and other artistic presentations in which love between the sexes is the basic interest, we encounter a pervasive element of frostiness which is brought into the heat of the passion such works portray by the total *contingency* associated with it. For the whole interest is represented as resting solely upon *these* particular individuals. This may well be of infinite importance *for them*, but it is of no such importance *in itself*. (PR: §162, p. 202)

²⁸ See Mander (2011: 48).

²⁹ For an interesting account of other similarities between McTaggart and Hegel, see Stern (2009: 131-42)

³⁰ For a partial defence of Hegel's account of love, see Bennett (2003).

³¹ F. H. Bradley adopts a similar tone at one point in *My Station and its Duties* (1876: 201): “There is nothing better than my station and its duties, nor anything higher or more truly beautiful. It holds and will hold its own against the worship of the “individual,” whatever form that may take. It is strong against frantic theories and vehement passions, and in the end it triumphs over the face and can smile at the literature, even of sentimentalism, however fulsome in its impulsive setting out, or sour in its disappointed end. It laughs as its frenzied apotheosis of the yet unsatisfied passion it calls love.”

³² Allen Wood (2006: 438-9) suggests that Hegel is taking aim at Schlegel here, whose novel *Lucinde* “insists on the priority of personal love over public standards of social respectability”.

I began this paper with a quotation from McKerlie. Here it is in full:

The subject of love clearly had a deep personal significance for McTaggart, but I will not speculate about the reasons for this. (McKerlie 2011: 86)

In a footnote to this, McKerlie directs the reader to a chapter on McTaggart in Paul Levy's biography of Moore. In this chapter, Levy (1979: 103) makes reference to a then famous – but now lost – prized paper of McTaggart's, 'Violets or Orange Blossom?', where McTaggart defends homosexual love. Unlike McKerlie, I will indulge in some speculation here: McTaggart's sympathy for homosexual love could be one reason why McTaggart does not emphasise the importance of marriage for love in the way Hegel does. But more generally, Hegel seems worried about the contingency and subjectivity of love, where McTaggart does not. As we have seen, he thinks that love is an *intense* and *passionate* liking, a bond of peculiar strength and intimacy, and is open to embracing some of the unpleasant, wicked and disproportional elements of this.

Summary

We have now seen McTaggart's account of what love is, and what love is not. McTaggart conceives of love as an intense and passionate liking that arises from a consciousness of union. In addition, he argues that love is not always pleasant, not moral approbation, nor a response to the qualities of the beloved. And finally, we saw that unlike Hegel, McTaggart does not emphasise the importance of marriage for love. Now that we have this in view, we can turn to McTaggart's account of love in absolute reality

2. Love in Absolute Reality

In *Some Dogmas of Religion*, McTaggart writes the following:

I will not inquire whether the ultimate significance of spirit is anything except love. But it will scarcely be denied [...] that the significance of love for spirit is very great. And, if this is so, then the emotional relations which exist between people must be highly significant of their real positions towards one another in the scheme of the universe. (*Some Dogmas of Religion*: §108)

As we saw in the previous section, McTaggart conceives of love as an emotion springing from a consciousness of a type of union (NE: §464, p. 151).³³ McTaggart thinks that when we love someone, we are conscious of our union with them. Recall his remark that (NE: §464, p. 150):

When *B* loves *C*, he feels that he is connected with him by a bond of peculiar strength and intimacy – a bond stronger and more intimate than any other by which two selves can be joined.

In addition, McTaggart thinks that this consciousness is revealing of our real positions towards one another, namely that we stand in union. In this way, love reveals something fundamental about the nature of absolute reality.³⁴

What is absolute reality? McTaggart thinks that it is non-material, non-spatial and (most famously) timeless, but we need not concern ourselves with this here.³⁵ For our purposes, what matters is that in absolute reality our knowledge is no longer inadequate. Currently, our knowledge and perception is limited by all sorts of factors – we know each other indirectly, “only by means of the knower’s perception of sense” (NE: §458, p. 147) – but in absolute reality, we would have no such limitations.

McTaggart’s views on this matter are tied up with his idealist metaphysics, and I do not have the space to adequately address this here; In order to properly address the issue of love in absolute reality for McTaggart, I would have to say something about how McTaggart conceives of absolute reality as spirit (NE: §432, p. 119), and composed entirely of selves (NE: §433, p. 120).³⁶

Leaving this aside, the upshot of McTaggart’s account is that in absolute reality, “every self will love every other self whom he directly perceives” (NE: §470, p. 155). Recall that for McTaggart, love is “an emotion which springs from a sense of union with another self” (NE: §464, p. 151). In present reality however, our consciousness of our unity is not strong enough (NE: §469, p. 155). Our present knowledge

³³ There is a puzzle here, namely how this relates to McTaggart’s other claim that love can be caused by anything. The text is not crystal clear on this, but McTaggart’s basic idea seems to be that any quality of the beloved can cause a consciousness of a type of union between the lover and them, and that this sense of a union is an emotion, namely love. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for asking me to think about this.

³⁴ Here, we can see traces of Aristophanes’ account of love in the *Symposium*. Although one key difference is that McTaggart’s sense of union seems to involve union between distinct individuals, rather than a union which overcomes this individuation.

³⁵ For a classic treatment of McTaggart’s claim that absolute reality is timeless, see Geach (1979: 89-103); for a recent discussion of this, see Ingthorsson (2016).

³⁶ I would like to thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify this.

is inadequate, and as such, we are unaware of our union with each other (NE: §470, p. 155). Yet in absolute reality, our knowledge is not inadequate, and we will be aware of our union with everyone we directly perceive (NE: §473, p. 158); accordingly, everyone could love everyone.³⁷

And McTaggart thinks this follows from his previous account of love. He notes that:

The conclusion that in absolute reality each of us loves every person that he knows may appear to be paradoxical because it maintains that every person known must be loved, regardless of his qualities. But any appearance of paradox is illusory. [...] present experience is sufficient to show us that it is possible to love a man, whatever his qualities are, provided that the unity and the consciousness of the unity are sufficiently intense” (NE: §472, p. 158).

The basic line of thought here is relatively straightforward:³⁸ If love is just an emotion arising from consciousness of a union, and we are all in union in absolute reality, then we could all love each other.

This provides another possible reason why McTaggart departs from Hegel’s emphasis on the importance of marriage. In allowing that everyone could love everyone, McTaggart seems open to the possibility of thoroughgoing polyamory.³⁹

As described in this section, love seems to play two roles for McTaggart:⁴⁰ The first is that it *results* from our knowledge of others and our union with them; the second is that it *reveals* something about the nature of ultimate reality to us.⁴¹ How do these two roles relate to each other? I propose the following: Various things happen to cause us to fall in love with someone, where we then are aware of our unity with this

³⁷ McTaggart’s claim is that we *will* love everyone who we directly perceive. Thus, we *could* love everyone, but will *only* love those who we directly perceive. He also offers an account of *indirect* perception in absolute reality (NE: §474-5, p. 161-3), the details of which I cannot do justice to here. The basic upshot of his account is that we will possess some sort of liking towards those who we indirectly perceive: “[...] that emotion which we feel, in present experience, towards those whom we do not love, but are loved by those whom we do love” (NE: §475, p. 162-3)

³⁸ For an extended account of this line of thought, see Mander (1996: 140).

³⁹ By this, I mean that McTaggart seems to allow for everyone to be *romantically* in love with everyone. ‘Polyamory’ sometimes connotes sexual love with more than one partner, but it can also be taken to mean romantic love with more than one partner, where this is not necessarily sexual. For a brief history of this term, see Brogaard (2015: 183-4); and for recent accounts of relationship between monogamy, polyamory and romantic love, see Jollimore (2011: 161-7) and McKeever (2017).

⁴⁰ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify this.

⁴¹ We see this in the previously quoted passage from *Some Dogmas of Religion* (§108): “it will scarcely be denied [...] that the significance of love for spirit is very great. And, if this is so, then the emotional relations which exist between people must be highly significant of their real positions towards one another in the scheme of the universe.”

person. This consciousness of unity also reveals our real relation to each other, namely that we do actually stand in union together.⁴²

3. Taking Love too Seriously?

At this point, I want to stop to consider a natural objection: Perhaps McTaggart takes love *too* seriously. Earlier I mentioned that there were two ways in which McTaggart took love seriously, namely that he took the phenomena of love seriously, and in addition, he afforded this a crucial role in his conception of the universe. The objection I want to consider in this section runs as follows: McTaggart might have been right to take the phenomena of love seriously,⁴³ but in affording this a central role in his conception of the universe, he ends up taking love *too* seriously, resulting in an absurd metaphysical picture, where we all could love each other in absolute reality.

I have some sympathy with this objection. Ultimately, I want to distance myself from McTaggart's account of love in absolute reality; and I will do so in the next section. However, I think that methodologically, McTaggart's approach is perfectly respectable.

Philosophical systems are in part defined by which phenomena they take seriously.⁴⁴ Kant, for instance, takes the experience of an unconditional obligation very seriously. In the second *Critique*, he calls it the "fact of reason" (V: 31. 24), which he thinks reveals our freedom, and thus stands as the "*keystone* of the whole structure of a system of pure reason" (V: 4. 25-6). I take it that McTaggart is doing something similar with love. He takes the phenomena of love seriously, and considers what it reveals about us and the structure of the universe.

⁴² McTaggart sometimes suggests a *third* role love plays in absolute reality, namely that (NE: §473, p. 159): "[...] in absolute reality all the life of every self is, or is dependent on, love." This stems from his metaphysics of the self, where (NE: §473, p. 159-60): "The self has no parts except his perceptions of himself, of other selves and parts of selves". So conceived, love is part of what unifies individuals together; for more on this, see (NE: §473, p. 160) and Mander (1996: 134).

⁴³ Of course, one could also dispute this. I offer a few remarks on such scepticism shortly.

⁴⁴ This applies to both ethics and metaphysics. Utilitarians take pleasure and pain seriously, and build their ethics around that. Similarly, certain types of naturalists take certain physical sciences seriously, and build their metaphysics around that. And sometimes, one phenomena can play both roles. The experience of an unconditional obligation can be seen to do this for Kant: It reveals both what we ought to do, and that we are free to do it.

Of course, this might just seem like a quirk. And here I want to return once more to McKerlie's (2011: 86) remark that "[t]he subject of love clearly had a deep personal significance for McTaggart". This seems to be a recurring theme in commentary on McTaggart.⁴⁵ Lowes Dickinson (1931: 82), for instance, in his biography of McTaggart remarks that:

As we have pointed out more than once, the origin of McTaggart's philosophy was not in his intellect but in his emotion.

Leaving aside Dickinson's dichotomy between emotions and the intellect, this feels unfairly *ad-hominem*. One could, for instance, adopt a similar tone with Kant: the origin of Kant's philosophy was not in his intellect but in his *feelings* about morality. But Kant's methodology is perfectly respectable, and so is McTaggart's.⁴⁶

Now perhaps the issue is that an unconditional obligation is an appropriate feeling to take seriously, whereas love is not. But why think that? Kant can point to examples of unconditional obligations and the important role that these play in our lives,⁴⁷ but McTaggart can just as much point to the important role that we assign love.⁴⁸

I do not want to speculate on the respective value of love and morality here, I just want to note that, at least on my reading, McTaggart is doing something methodologically familiar.⁴⁹ He is taking certain prevalent phenomena seriously. He thinks that love involves a consciousness of a sense of union; and he takes this very seriously, suggesting that this consciousness reveals something about the structure of the universe, namely that we stand in union in absolute reality. Returning to the passage we considered in the previous section, we see that McTaggart is uninterested in scepticism about love:

I will not inquire whether the ultimate significance of spirit is anything except love. But it will scarcely be denied [...] (*Some Dogmas of Religion*: §108)

⁴⁵ See also Broad (1938: 129) and Geach (1979: 15).

⁴⁶ For a defence of Kant's phenomenological method, see Grenberg (2013: 15-28).

⁴⁷ See Sticker (2015) for a comprehensive discussion of Kant's account of moral education.

⁴⁸ At one point, comparing Kant and McTaggart on self-reverence, Geach writes the following (1979: 169): "Each of us will regard himself with what McTaggart calls self-reverence (477); he will feel himself king and God because he loves. (To my mind this is a pleasanter idea of self-reverence than Kant's idea of revering oneself as a promulgator of the moral law; it certainly answers to a lot of what poets say.)"

⁴⁹ See Mander (2011: 48; 48n66) for some remarks on McTaggart, Kant and Hegel's methodologies.

This might seem hopelessly dogmatic, but again, I think we can find a respectable methodological parallel in Kant. Kant is uninterested in scepticism about our experience of an unconditional obligation.⁵⁰ Instead, he wants to take such obligations at face value, consider what they reveal about us, and then vindicate this.⁵¹ McTaggart is doing something similar, and as such, I have no problem with his taking love seriously.

4. There's No Chemistry

At this point, I want to distance myself from McTaggart. I am sympathetic to his taking love seriously and his views about what love is *not*. I also think that his account of love in absolute reality makes some sense given his other views about love; If one thinks that love is not always pleasant, not moral approbation, nor a response to the qualities of the beloved, but instead an emotion arising from consciousness of a union, and we are all in union in absolute reality, then we could all love each other. However, I contend that we can maintain McTaggart's insights about what love is not, while resisting his conclusion that everyone could love everyone in absolute reality.

An Intense and Passionate Liking

If love is just an emotion arising from consciousness of a union, and we are aware of our union in absolute reality, then it seems to follow that we would all love each other in absolute reality. However, in setting this out, McTaggart seems to overlook another crucial component of his conception of love, namely that it is an *intense* and *passionate* species of liking (NE: §459, p. 148).⁵² This is important. It seems entirely possible that you could be aware of my unity with you, but not *love* me. Moreover, there could even be *hate* involved in consciousness of a union⁵³ – a torturer and their victim might have a sense of

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Stern (2015: 78-81) for an account of the type of scepticism Kant is – and is *not* – engaging with in the *Groundwork*.

⁵¹ For an overview of Kant's methodology here, see Ameriks (2003: 4-17).

⁵² See also NE: §468, p. 154: "love [...] involves a connection between the lover and the beloved which is of peculiar strength and intimacy"

⁵³ Cf. Mander (1996: 141).

union, whilst despising each other.⁵⁴ Something is missing. Love is not just a consciousness of union; it also involves a particular type of liking.⁵⁵

In the first section of this paper, we saw that McTaggart tries to take the phenomena of love seriously. The worry here is that, in claiming everyone could love everyone, he ends up not doing justice to his initial task, as he fails to adequately account⁵⁶ for an important part of the phenomena of love.⁵⁷

Elective Affinities

On this, I turn to an earlier strain of thought, which I find in Schelling and Goethe. For a while, both thinkers were interested in chemistry, both at the level of molecules, but also when it comes to us.⁵⁸

Schelling looks to move beyond a mechanistic conception of nature towards a dynamic one. In his *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, he does so in part through appealing to work in chemistry. He claims that:

It is forces of attraction that are primarily at work, both within and on the surface of the earth. A secret affinity binds one material with another, [...] (IPN: Bk. 1, §6, p. 132)

He also writes that:

[...] Nature is able to achieve the entire manifold of her phenomena, on the small scale as well as on the large, by means of opposing forces of attraction and repulsion. (IPN: Bk. 1, §6, p. 135)

One of Schelling's key concerns was to develop a dynamic account of nature that could accommodate human agency.⁵⁹ And in his novella, *Elective Affinities*, Goethe explores how forces of attraction and repulsion might apply to us. In chapter 4, the captain explains to the three other central characters how forces of attraction and repulsion work in the case of molecules, which foreshadows the development of

⁵⁴ I want to thank an anonymous referee for this example.

⁵⁵ McKerlie (2011: 71n12) offers an additional criticism of McTaggart's conception of love as a consciousness of a union. Where I am arguing that consciousness of a union is not *sufficient* for love, McKerlie argues that it is not *necessary*, pointing to cases of unrequited love. For a recent defence of unrequited love, see Protasi (2014).

⁵⁶ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for helping me clarify this point. Earlier, I had claimed that McTaggart *overlooks* chemistry, but that is not quite right. McTaggart recognises that love is an intense and passionate liking, but his characterisation of love as a consciousness of a union fails to adequately account for this.

⁵⁷ McKerlie (2011: 69) remarks that McTaggart "sees himself as explicating the ordinary view of love, not as arguing for a distinctively philosophical view of it".

⁵⁸ For an account of the historical development of theories of affinity in the 18th century, see Carrier (1986).

⁵⁹ In this paper, I leave aside an important question about agency, namely: if we are all governed by chemical forces that repulse and attract us to each other, what room for agency is there? In *Elective Affinities*, Charlotte voices this objection to the Captain (1809: 33); It seems that what we really have are chemical affinities that *appear* elective. I think there is some room for agency in this picture, in that even though the affinities themselves might not be elective, we can choose how to react to them, but I will not further explore this here.

the novella: Eduard and Charlotte are married, but the captain and Charlotte are drawn towards each other; Eduard and Otilie are drawn to each other; and Eduard and Charlotte are drawn apart.

Chemistry and Love

What are we to make of this? I think Goethe is onto something. There is an attraction we feel towards some people and not towards others; and to capture this, we sometimes talk about “chemistry”.⁶⁰ Earlier I mentioned that both Sophie and Danielle appreciate Rebecca’s good qualities, but Sophie loves Rebecca, whereas Danielle merely admires her. When asked about this, Danielle might naturally respond: “Rebecca’s great, but there’s no chemistry”.

McTaggart would claim that Danielle fails to love Rebecca due to inadequate knowledge. In absolute reality, she would be aware of their union, and thus according to McTaggart, would love her. But we have no reason to think this. Once more, it seems that one could be conscious of being in union with someone without loving them. Love also requires a certain – intense and passionate – type of liking, and this seems to be particular: we feel this way towards some people and not others. And part of this, I want to suggest, comes down to chemistry.

What does this reveal about the structure of the universe? Not much, I suspect. The appeal to chemistry is useful, but vague. And what I am referring to as ‘chemistry’ seems to encompass a variety of things that are not actually chemical, including complicated social dynamics, but also things like pheromones and our own *biological* attraction towards certain people.⁶¹ *Pace* McTaggart, love doesn’t reveal anything special about the structure of the universe.⁶² However, I do think it reveals something about us.

On this, we can return to a point from the first section of this paper, namely that McTaggart’s criticism of rival accounts of love was not just descriptive. Perhaps then, McTaggart could accept that chemistry plays

⁶⁰ Zangwill (2013: 15) remarks that “we sometimes are said to “fall” in love, due to what is colloquially known as “chemistry”.”

⁶¹ For a contemporary overview of some of the physiological and chemical aspects of love, see Brogaard (2015: 12-9).

⁶² If one was going to speculate here, one could push a vaguely Schellingian thought, namely that if love reveals something about absolute reality, and love involves forces of attraction and repulsion, then perhaps absolute reality is more dynamic than McTaggart makes out.

some role in love, but insist that this is merely a causal role; in current reality, something like chemistry is what happens to cause our conscious of union with particular people.

However, my claim is not merely that chemistry happens to be part of love, it is that it is an important part of love. Indeed, without it, it is hard to see how love could be the intense and passionate liking of particular people that it is.

I want to end by relating this objection to contemporary discussions about the nature of love. In what follows, I lay out some basic aspects of different contemporary accounts of love, and suggest that they too overlook the importance of chemistry, and often fail to make sense of love as an intense and passionate liking of particular people.

Velleman (1999) argues that love is a kind of valuation of rational nature. But this does not seem to capture the *particularity* of love. Kolodny criticises Velleman on this, asking:⁶³

What kind of “appreciation” of one’s beloved as “special and irreplaceable” could be compatible with the “judgment” that one has just as much reason to appreciate anyone in that way? (Kolodny 2003: 179)

Kolodny then continues:

Perhaps acknowledging one’s beloved as special and irreplaceable consists in acknowledging the fact that one’s beloved is a distinct person [...] presumably what they would really like one to appreciate is that one has reason to love them in particular, reason that one does not have to love other people. (Kolodny 2003: 179)

This seems right: contrary to Velleman (and McTaggart), part of what makes love special is that it is particular. Kolodny’s own solution is to view love *as valuing a relationship*, but this comes with problems of its own. One can value a relationship with someone without loving them; and one can also love someone whilst not valuing a relationship with them.⁶⁴

Abramson and Leite (2011), who we considered earlier, argue that the only appropriate reasons for love are morally significant traits. Considering sexual attraction, they claim that there might be some moral

⁶³ Brogaard (2015: 87-91) also criticises Velleman along these lines. She also remarks upon the importance of the bodily aspect of love (2015: 90): “If love is indeed the appraisal of another person’s core value, [...] the bodily aspect of love is marginalised. But the disposition to have certain bodily feelings is no doubt central to love.”

⁶⁴ See Protasi (2014: 216-9) for recent criticism of Kolodny along these lines.

traits involved in this – where someone’s handsomeness, for instance, is somehow an “outgrowth of his moral qualities” (2011: 686). They then claim that:

Once such morally significant elements are factored out, what is left over are not good reasons for love, [...] It is, for instance, a familiar form of confused immaturity to take as a reason for love a physical allure that is independent of the person’s values and laudable ways of interacting with others. (Abramson and Leite 2011: 686)

My worry here is that if we remove the sexual and physical attraction and allure from love, we will fail to adequately capture (at least part of) the intense, passionate and particular form that love often takes.

Jollimore (2011) offers an account of love as vision, in an attempt to do justice to both love’s particularity and its rationality. Jollimore (2011: 167) agrees with me, against McTaggart, that:

Love is exclusive by nature – that it has us focus on some individuals rather than others is what makes the personal attitude personal.

He sees love as a response to the beloved, which involves “appreciative and generous attention” (2011: 99), along with a commitment to paying this sort of attention.

I agree with much of what Jollimore says, but want to suggest that he too overlooks the importance of chemistry. Jollimore offers an excellent account of how, when one views someone in a generous romantic light, this loving vision can find lovable qualities in the beloved, and hence be rational. However, a question still remains as to why we find ourselves able to view some people in this light, but not others; returning to Rebecca, she might be unable to view Danielle in this light, but also find it very hard to not view Sophie in this light. Moreover, a further question remains as to why we *admire* some people we see in this light, but *love* others;⁶⁵ both Sophie and Danielle view Rebecca in an appreciative and generous way, but Danielle sees Rebecca only as a friend, while Sophie loves her.

This peculiar attraction that we feel for some people and not for others is often overlooked. But if we want to take love seriously, we should pay attention to it. In §3, I remarked that philosophical systems are, in part, defined by which phenomena they take seriously. This also applies to accounts of love; they are,

⁶⁵ McKeever (2012) also challenges Jollimore on this point, noting that “he is unable to distinguish between romantic love and friendship”.

in part, defined by the phenomena of love which they take seriously, and I contend that contemporary accounts of love often overlook chemistry.

My worry is that without this chemistry, love would be more lifeless than it often is. I say this not to dismiss the contemporary accounts of love that we have just considered. There is definitely something to be said for the importance of: valuing another's rational natures; valuing a relationship; appreciating another's morally significant traits; and seeing another in an appreciative and generous way. However, there is also something to be said for the intense, passionate and particular form that love often takes.

What then, does all of this reveal about us? For one, something like chemistry affects us; we feel a peculiar attraction towards some people and not others. Secondly, we embrace this. It is part of what makes love special that it is intense, passionate, and particular. As Geach (1979: 169) remarks elsewhere, "it certainly answers to a lot of what poets say".

I think the relationship between love and chemistry merits further attention, but I want to bring things to a close here. In this section, my aim has been to draw attention to an important part of the phenomena of love which I contend that both McTaggart's and contemporary accounts of love fail to do adequate justice to.

Conclusion

McTaggart thinks that love is a consciousness of a union with another, which is not always caused by pleasure, not moral approbation, nor a response to qualities. He also thinks that in absolute reality, when we are no longer limited in our knowledge, we could all be conscious of our unity, and accordingly everyone could love everyone.

In this paper, I hope to have advanced our understanding of McTaggart, both through offering my own exegesis of his views on love, comparison with Hegel, and also providing an interpretation – and defence – of his taking love seriously. In addition, I have argued that both McTaggart's and contemporary accounts fails to adequately capture an important part of the phenomena of love, namely that it is an intense, passionate, and particular liking. I suggest that what we refer to as 'chemistry' provides a good

way of accounting for this, while at the same time allowing us to maintain some of McTaggart's insights about what love is not.

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