

Bradley's Regress and the Unity of the Proposition

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1. Since Russell and Moore, propositions have been defined by analytic philosophers to be the meanings of declarative sentences, and declarative sentences have (since Aristotle) been defined to be those sentences which can be true or false. Propositions themselves can be true or false. This is guaranteed by grammar, for we say not only

(1) 'Snow is white' is true

but also

(2) 'Snow is white' means that snow is white,

and

(3) That snow is white is true.

In (2) the meaning of 'snow is white', which, as we've said, is a proposition, appears to be named by the noun clause 'that snow is white', and in (3) that proposition is said to be true. What are propositions and what unifies them, i.e. what distinguishes them from mere aggregates and enables them to be true or false? Likewise we may ask: what unifies declarative sentences and distinguishes them from mere aggregates of words, enabling them to be true or false? The former question is prior to the latter. Why?

2. The first point to note is this: the criterion for the unity of a declarative sentence cannot be *merely syntactic*. There is a distinction between a mere bunch of words which are of the right syntactic form to constitute a sentence, and a sentence actually composed of those words. This is obvious for token words and sentences, but it is true of types as well. Something has to unify a type sentence, beyond the mere grammatical fitness of the words to be unified. There is a conceptual distinction to be made between a mere bunch of type words, however conveniently shaped and ordered to form a sentence, and a sentence actually composed of those words. The second point is now this: the unity of the type sentence will be constituted by a dependence on the prior unity of the proposition. That is because any syntactically well-formed type sentence will both itself be unified and express a unified proposition, and there can be no restrictions in advance on what counts as acceptable syntax for the purposes of constructing a linguistic entity capable of bearing a truth-value. We may gather up all (type) sentences expressive of a given proposition into an equivalence class, collected by an appropriate synonymy relation. What *collects* this class—what determines its membership—is the relevant proposition, whose unity is therefore constitutive of the unity of the collected sentences. Hence though a proposition is unified iff it is expressed by a unified declarative sentence—thus far no asymmetry is in the offing—what determines whether a purported declarative sentence has an acceptable syntax and so is unified is just whether it is a member of a class of synonymous sentences expressive of some given unified proposition. Hence the question of the unity of the expressed proposition has priority over the question of the unity of the expressing sentence.

3. If we follow Frege in recognizing objects and concepts or properties as the referents of names and concept-expressions, it is a short step to acknowledge (as Frege did not) that there must also exist propositions at level of reference, as well as at the level of sense. For the considerations which lead us to introduce the former sorts of entity to the level of reference—namely the requirements of extensionality—will also compel us to introduce the latter sort of entity to that level. By 'the requirements of extensionality' I mean this. The level of reference is introduced to provide a subject matter for discourse—to provide a world for language to be

about. For some purposes, as Frege saw, making sense of speakers requires us to acknowledge the existence of a further semantic level, which Frege called the level of 'sense'. But not for all purposes: in many contexts we require a *purely extensional* conception of what is expressed (meant) by words and sentences. In these contexts the particular way in which a word or sentence conveys its content is irrelevant to what is being said (irrelevant to criteria of fair reportage). It follows that we need to recognize the existence of propositionally structured entities correlated with sentences not only at the level of sense (in effect, Fregean Thoughts) but also at the level of reference (in effect, Russellian propositions). Such propositions at the level of reference we may think of as composed of objects and (Fregean) concepts.

4. So the question of unity is: what unites object and concept? Frege's chemical metaphor doesn't help and he misapplies it: it doesn't help because it doesn't answer the question what distinguishes a mere aggregate of an object and a concept from a proposition actually formed from them; and he misapplies it because it cannot be the case, as he claims, that *both* objects *and* sentences are saturated. The metaphor of saturatedness makes sense as applied to sentences (its purport being that sentences are the smallest unit of meaning capable of bearing a truth-value), but if it is correctly applied to sentences, all *subsential* components ought to count as *unsaturated*, if any are—in effect as unsaturated names referring to unsaturated objects. There is nothing privileged about the grammatical proper name and its referent: the context principle assures us that *all* words are names of objects, if any are. Further, Plato, Frege, and Russell were surely wrong to suppose that the sentence *must* contain words of different syntactic sorts (noun, verb): we can surely imagine, and construct, sentences consisting entirely of grammatical names (early Wittgenstein). What unites the propositions expressed by *these* sentences, composed as they are of entities that are *ex officio* unsaturated objects? Merely recognizing that all components of the proposition are unsaturated does not solve the problem of unity, because it does not tell us what distinguishes a mere aggregate of such objects from a proposition actually formed from them (the same problem as Frege had above).

5. Suppose we analyse all sentences as containing a *logical copula*, a feature whose job is to constitute the sentence as a sentence rather than a mere list. So far this move is merely programmatic. The question we are trying to answer then becomes the question what the logical copula means. Frege tells us that the copula refers to a relation of subsumption, but expressly warns us against treating this relation as an object on all fours with the referents of proper name and concept-word. For, if you reify the structural component which effects unity (e.g. by finding a referent for the copula), you get into a regress—a version of Bradley's regress. But now the regress is unavoidable, because the context principle requires us to treat all semantically significant components of the sentence as (in effect) names, and their referents as (in effect) objects. So we should see whether we can live with the regress.

6. My suggestion: don't treat the regress as vicious, but regard it as providing the metaphysical condition of unity. Each stage in the regress supplies necessary and sufficient conditions for the unity of the relevant proposition at each stage (if any) on either side of it. Consider an analogy (from Meinong): the continuity of the real number line is constituted by an infinitistic condition; that condition is not vicious, but precisely constitutes the real number line (or a stretch of continuous matter) as having that order-type. Note that the analogy is not perfect: for one thing, the instantiation regress is an ω -sequence; that is, it has the order-type of the natural numbers, not the rationals (which Bolzano, following Aristotle,

understood to compose the continuum), nor the reals (which are now held to compose it). Bradley's Regress, like the structure of the real line, is infinitistic in a *metaphysical*, not an *epistemological*, sense, and for that reason is not vicious: it represents an infinitistic condition on the structure of the world, and not an infinitistic, and so uncompletable, task for the understander. The condition imposed by Bradley's regress on the proposition, and on the world, can be captured in a finitely based theory of meaning, and so is within the grasp of the understander. Accordingly, though acquaintance with the unified proposition involves acquaintance with an infinity of entities, the process of becoming acquainted with it and them does not involve performing the impossible feat of, in Aristotle's phrase, 'going through infinitely many things'. The regress unpacks the original proposition into an infinity of further propositions, and it structures, infinitistically, our understanding of that original proposition, but it does not present us with a series of discrete epistemic tasks: we do not have to perform an infinity of such tasks corresponding to the stages of the regress before we can assure ourselves of the unity of a given proposition. Even so, its unity depends on the presence, in the unspoken and unwritten background, of the members of the regress: were that background not fully in place—if the regress did not get going, or if it faltered at some point—the proposition in question would not be unified, but would fall apart into a mere aggregate.

7. Note that the various stages of Bradley's regress are genuinely distinct from one another: for there is no question of a relation of synonymy's obtaining, at the level of language, between any two stages, and so correspondingly no question of a relation of identity's obtaining between any two stages at the level of the expressed proposition. Further, the explanatory value of the regress attaches both to the regress as a whole and to each stage of it: indeed, one must surely say that that explanatory value attaches to each of these *in virtue of* its applying to the other. To draw on a useful distinction made by Peter Klein, the infinitism I embrace is of both a *holistic* and a *dependent-property* variety, and it is each of these *because* it is the other: for the two varieties point at one another. The holistic variety of Bradley's-regress infinitism takes the unity of a given proposition to consist in its generating an infinite set of propositions—those constituting the regress that arises in respect of that proposition. The dependent-property variety of Bradley's-regress infinitism holds that unity is conferred piecemeal on proposition by proposition as we move through the regress. Klein himself supports a holistic infinitism for the regress of justifications, but argues that the dependent-property variety is not vicious. He does not consider the possibility that the two varieties of infinitism might actually be mutually supporting. At least as far as the present context is concerned, and the role of Bradley's regress in unifying the proposition, that seems to me the right thing to say.

8. What we should affirm is that the regress as a whole is explanatory because each stage is; and each stage in Bradley's regress owes its explanatory status to the fact that it is indeed a stage in an *infinite* regress. Were this latter not the case, one would have to allow that it is not explanatory of an instantiation relation's occurring at a given stage n that an instantiation relation of higher adicity occurs suitably at stage $n + 1$. But the fact that any given stage of Bradley's regress is indeed, and essentially, a *stage of that infinite regress* entitles us to overcome this objection. And it would be a fallacy—the fallacy of composition—to move from the fact that any given stage of the regress, taken in abstraction from its position in the regress as a whole, lacks explanatory value to the conclusion that the regress as a whole lacks explanatory value; equally, it would be fallacious to suppose that, because any given stage of the regress, taken in abstraction from its position in the regress as a whole, lacks explanatory

value, that stage *continues* to lack explanatory value when we consider it *without* abstracting it from its place in the regress as a whole, that is, when we consider it *as* being a stage in Bradley's regress.

9. So when William Vallicella puts Bradley's point by saying that 'the unity of *a*'s being *F* cannot be explained by saying that the connector EX (exemplification) connects *a* and *F*-ness, for the unity of *a*, *F*-ness and EX is just as much in need of explanation as the unity of *a* and *F*-ness', we may reply by agreeing with the content of the 'for' clause but disagreeing with the 'for': it does not follow from the agreed fact that the unity of *a*, *F*-ness and EX is just as much in need of explanation as the unity of *a* and *F*-ness that the unity of *a*'s being *F* cannot be explained by saying that exemplification connects *a* and *F*-ness. An explanation that itself stands in need of explanation may, for all that, *be* an explanation. Lewis tells us that Bradley's regress is harmless so long as its stages are taken to be mere equivalences, not explanations, and he adds that 'Bradley's regress shows that if we insist on trying to explain having [i.e., instantiation] *simpliciter* in terms of relational having, the explanation we seek will never be finished'. But the fact that a given explanation will never be finished does not mean that it cannot get started or that it cannot, so far as we take it, be a good explanation. Wittgenstein famously remarked that explanations have to come to an end somewhere, by which he meant that, when we *in practice* provide explanations we perforce come to rest on a basis that we do not explain. But I do not think he should be taken to imply—and it would not be correct to say—that the fact that explanations must in practice come to an end means that there can be no infinitely long explanatory chains—chains which we cannot go through stage by stage, but which for all that exist, and are such that each stage (and the chain as a whole) is indeed genuinely explanatory. This is denied by Alan Weir, who claims that an infinite regress which is such that 'there is *no* explanatory power at all at level α unless the explanation at level $\alpha + 1$ works is indeed vicious, for the usual reason: explanation must come to an end'. But I see no basis for this claim, no reason in general metaphysics why an explanatory chain may not exist in which, for each stage α , α 's having explanatory efficacy depends partly or even entirely on the explanatory efficacy of stage $\alpha + 1$.

10. Given the symmetry imported by the claim that each stage in the regress at the level of language supplies both a necessary and a sufficient condition for the presence of the logical copula at any immediately preceding and succeeding stages, it seems to me that we are obliged to say that at each non-initial stage of the regress at the level of reference the direction of explanation is both downwards and upwards—down towards the original unified proposition, up through the increasingly complex stages of the regress. (At the initial stage, of course, the direction of explanation is just upwards.) Here I am in disagreement with Gregory Currie, who suggests that, though the regress, as such, is innocent, 'the direction of the *in virtue of* relation is . . . downwards toward the base level of the hierarchy, rather than upwards'. Francesco Orilia, by contrast, thinks that the 'in virtue of' relation runs upwards, not downwards: that is, at any given stage of the regress, where an instantiation relation unites *n* appropriate arguments, it does so in virtue of an instantiation relation's uniting *n + 1* appropriate arguments at the next stage up. My position, against both Currie and Orilia, is that the explanatory 'in virtue of' relation operates in both directions, rather as—to borrow a point of Wiggins's from a different area—the presupposition relation which Locke thought linked personal identity and memory in one direction, and which Butler thought linked them in the opposite direction, indeed connects them in both directions.

11. What, then, is the difference between a ‘mere list’ or ‘mere aggregate’ on the one hand, and a sentence, or proposition, on the other. Recall (§4) that any sentence can be *duplicated* by a list. That is the fundamental reason why no *ingredient*, such as the verb (Russell) or the predicate (Frege) can be what is responsible for sentential unity: for any bunch of ingredients you may care to construct, we can duplicate the recipe in a ‘mere list’. There is a conceptual difference between a type list, composed of any items you like, and a type sentence: even if the type list is composed of items which fit together to make a sentence, and even if they are listed in the right order to do so, there is still a difference between a mere list of suitable items suitably arranged to form a sentence, and the actual constitution of a sentence so constructed. What makes the difference? My answer is that the difference concerns the semantic analysis of the relevant bunch of words: if, and only if, their semantic analysis generates Bradley’s regress do they have sentential unity, and the entity they refer to propositional unity.

12. Problem: does our unified proposition, analysed as I have proposed it should be analysed, fall apart into a mere aggregate of discrete objects—the referents of the corresponding sentence, and an infinity of instantiation relations of ever increasing adicity? Do we not need a further relation of instantiation—a transfinite one—to unify those referents and the infinity of instantiation relations we have so far, and does not the problem then continue to repose itself on an ever grander and more daunting scale as we proceed into higher and remoter regions of the transfinite? That is, if our original proposition is the schematic proposition *that a is F*, surely, it is tempting to suppose, we can simply collect up all the instantiation relations, of which there are countably many, adduced by the analysis, and summarize my proposed solution to the unity problem as discerning a transfinite relation of instantiation connecting *a* and *F* in the original proposition, thus:

(4) a instantiates _{ω} F .

What (4) means is that a instantiates F , a instantiates the instantiation of F , and so on. But if the original proposition disintegrates into a mere aggregate of discrete entities, and if the same fate befalls each finitely indexed stage of the regress, then an identical upshot surely awaits the first transfinite stage of the regress, represented in (4), and all subsequent such stages, as we advance from (4) to

a instantiates _{$\omega + 1$} F ,

a instantiates _{$\omega + 2$} F ,

and so on up into the dizzying heights of the transfinite ordinals, with—so the Burali-Forti paradox, as it is familiarly known, assures us—no prospect of an end (indeed with the prospect of no end). But if one relation of instantiation cannot unify the proposition, how, one might ask, can an infinity—no matter how large—of such relations fare any better? As Priest puts it: ‘If one elephant will not support the world, then neither will an infinite regress of elephants’.

13. If something like that were right, we should no doubt have to abandon the project of giving a philosophical account of the unity of the proposition; instead we should have to follow Russell, Wittgenstein, and (in effect) Frege in assigning to that unity the status of the ineffable. For in that case there would be, so to speak, no point in embarking on the regress at all: nothing would be achieved at any stage of it which was not already achieved—or not achieved—at the very first stage, where appeal is made to an initial relation of instantiation. If the relation of instantiation which we initially appeal to in trying to account for the unity of the schematic proposition *that a is F* does not succeed in unifying it, no appeal to more complex such relations, ultimately burgeoning into a transfinite stratosphere, is going to do

the trick. As Russell remarked: ‘a proposition . . . is essentially a unity, and when analysis has destroyed the unity, no enumeration of constituents will restore the proposition’, and he adds that analysis destroys the unity of a proposition even if that unity is mentioned as an element of the proposition.

14. But the starting point of this tempting line of thought is mistaken. At each stage of Bradley’s regress we have a unity: the initial analysandum—the schematic proposition *that a is F*, as it might be—is a unity, the first stage of analysis—the proposition *that a instantiates F*—is a unity, the next stage is a unity, and so on. The point about the regress, which does indeed burgeon into the upper reaches of the transfinite, is not that each stage of it seeks to restore a unity which has broken down at the previous stage—that would indeed be a hopeless task—but that each stage provides an *analysis* of the unity which was securely present at the previous stage. Each stage *guarantees* the unity of the previous stage, and tells us what that unity *consists in*. Embarking on Bradley’s regress, in the present context, does not either destroy the unity of the original proposition or fail to unify an originally fragmented object; rather it analyses a proposition’s original unity. It does so by producing, at each stage of the regress, another propositional unity. That further propositional unity *itself* stands in need of analysis, and so on, with the result that the *final* analysis is, in a sense, indefinitely deferred, but at no stage do we arrive at a mere aggregate of constituents from which the original unity has to be pieced together. The analysis does not *mention* the unity of the original proposition as a constituent, as Russell has it, so (in effect) destroying that unity, but preserves it by *producing another* unity, and so on indefinitely.

15. It follows from the foregoing that there is a sense in which you cannot *construct* a proposition (or sentence) from bits; you can only *find* that you *have* constructed one. Of course in any ordinary sense of the phrase you *can* construct a sentence: what my paradoxical-sounding form of expression is meant to highlight is that there is no *procedure* which, if followed, allows you to start with some bits and end up with a proposition (or sentence); or rather, more accurately, there is no method of constructing a proposition (sentence) *as opposed to* a mere aggregate (mere list). Whether what you end up with when you have followed the instructions in your construction kit, as it were, is a proposition (sentence) or mere aggregate (list) depends on its *ex post facto* analysis, not on what you do with any components, internal or external, to arrive at the finished product (so long, that is, as they are put together in the right way, if there is a right way). If the finished product is analysable as generating Bradley’s regress, in the manner I have indicated, it is a proposition (sentence); if not, it is a mere aggregate (list). Taken in itself, the thing might be either.

NB. I have not put in detailed references for textual claims and citations: these can be found in my book, *The Unity of the Proposition*.