

Bradley's monist idealism

PHIL 43904
Jeff Speaks

August 29, 2007

1	Object and property	1
2	Quality and relation	2
3	'The general nature of reality'	4
3.1	Monism	4
3.2	Idealism	5

F. H. Bradley (1846-1924) was one of the most prominent of British idealists at the turn of the century, and was widely regarded at the time as the most important British philosopher of his generation. He had a direct and important influence on Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, some of whose articles — including some of those we'll be reading in the next few weeks — are reactions to Bradley's views and arguments.

Bradley's most important work in metaphysics was his 1893 *Appearance and Reality*, from which we will read a few selections. Bradley held that much of our ordinary thought about reality contains hidden contradictions. The first part of *Appearance and Reality* ('Appearance') is devoted to showing how riddled with contradictions our ordinary conception of the world is. The second, longer part ('Reality') is devoted to explaining the true nature of reality — what Bradley calls 'the Absolute.'

1 Object and property

Bradley's principle negative aim is to show that our intellectual attempts to divide reality land us in contradiction. He begins with arguably the most fundamental metaphysical division of reality, the distinction between things and their properties, which he calls the distinction between substantive and adjective:

“The substantive and adjective is a time-honoured distinction and arrangement of facts, with a view to understand them and arrive at reality. I must briefly point out the failure of this method, if regarded as a serious attempt at theory.” (19)

He develops an argument for this in Chapter II of *Appearance and Reality*, 'Substantive and Adjective.' The argument is based on the impossibility of analyzing an ordinary object, like a lump of sugar, in terms of the distinction between objects and properties:

“We may take the familiar instance of a lump of sugar. This is a thing, and it has properties . . . It is, for example, white and hard, and sweet. . . . [But] a thing is not any one of its qualities, if you take that quality by itself . . . Nor, again, can the thing be all its properties, if you take them each severally. Sugar is obviously not mere whiteness, mere hardness, and mere sweetness; for its reality lies somehow in its unity. But if, on the other hand, we inquire what there can be in the thing besides its several qualities, we are baffled once more.” (19)

Here Bradley considers and rejects three ways of understanding the relationship between objects and their properties: (i) the view that an object is identical with one of its properties, (ii) the view that an object is identical with the set of its properties, and (iii) the view that an object is distinct from all of its properties.

This leads Bradley to consider a fourth option:

“Sugar is, of course, not the mere plurality of its different adjectives; but why should it be more than its properties in relation? When ‘white’, ‘hard’, ‘sweet’, and the rest coexist in a certain way, that is surely the secret of the thing.” (20)

The difference between this possibility and option (ii).

Bradley seems to give two arguments against this fourth option:

1. We set out to explain the relationship between an object and its properties; but now we have found that the only way to do that is to invoke facts about the relations that properties have to each other. But this is circular; the connection between a thing and its properties is the same as the connection between properties and the relations in which they stand, so we can hardly use the latter to explain the former. This seems to be what he has in mind when he writes that ‘the whole question is evidently as to the meaning of *has*’ (20).
2. The explanation of the nature of objects and properties in terms of relations is only satisfying if relations have independent reality. But supposing that relations have an independent reality leads to an infinite regress. (More on this argument below.)

2 Quality and relation

In the next chapter, Bradley extends his skeptical argument from objects to properties (qualities) and relations. He seems to present the following argument:

1. If qualities are real, then they must be either independent of other things, or explained in terms of something which is real.
2. Qualities are not independent, since they are unimaginable without relations.
3. Qualities cannot be explained in terms of relations (or anything else).

C. Qualities are not real.

The argument is valid; so the question is whether the premises are true.

Argument for premise 2: Bradley thinks that for qualities to have independent existence, it must be possible for qualities to exist in the absence of anything else, e.g. relations. But this is, he thinks, impossible; if more than one property exists, then there must be some difference between these properties; but if there is a difference between them, then they stand in some relation. As he puts it: “I rest my argument upon this, that if there are no differences, there are no qualities, since all must fall into one. But, if there is any difference, then that implies a relation.” (29)

Argument for premise 3: Qualities cannot be explained in terms of relations, since “nothings cannot be related.” (30) The idea seems to be that we can’t make sense of two things standing in a relation unless there is some story about what those two things are, independent of the relation. But then we can’t explain the nature of those things in terms of the relation.

What about premise 1? The idea there is that a category — e.g., qualities — might be related to another category — e.g., relations — in one of two ways. First, qualities might be independent, in the sense that they can exist without relations. Or, second, they might be dependent on relations, in the sense that we can explain what it is for qualities to exist in terms of facts about relations. There’s no third option. Is this plausible?

Bradley develops a separate line of argument for skepticism about the reality of relations. The argument is that the very idea of qualities (or objects) standing in relations to each other does not, upon analysis, make sense, because it leads to an infinite regress. Bradley states his argument as follows:

“But how the relation can stand to the qualities is, on the other side, unintelligible. If it is nothing to the qualities, then they are not related at all; . . . But if it is to be something to them, then clearly we now shall acquire a *new* connecting relation. For the relation hardly can be the mere adjective of one or both of its terms . . . And, being something itself, if it does not itself bear a relation to the terms, in what intelligible way will it succeed in being anything to them? But here again we are hurried off into the eddy of a hopeless process, since we are forced to go on finding new relations without end. The links are united by a link, and this bond of union is a link which also has two ends; and these require each a fresh link to connect them with the old.” (27-8)

In the preceding chapter, Bradley gives a different, and in some ways clearer, presentation of the argument:

“Let us abstain from making the relation an attribute of the related, and let us make it more or less independent. ‘There is a relation C , in which A and B stand; and it appears with both of them.’ But here again we have made no progress. The relation C has been admitted different from A and B , and no longer is predicated of them. . . . If so, [there] would appear to be another relation, D , in which C , on the one side, and, on the other side, A and B , stand. But such a makeshift leads at once to the infinite process.” (21)

Is this argument convincing? What assumptions are required to generate the infinite regress?

3 ‘The general nature of reality’

Bradley has argued that none of substances, qualities, and relations are a part of the true nature of reality. This provides the materials for arguing that just about anything is not a part of true nature of reality. Consider, for example, thought — Bradley points out that thought is relational, and that since relations are not part of reality, thought isn’t either.

Bradley presents the following metaphysical picture, according to which reality is not truly divisible into individual facts or objects:

“Our result so far is this. Everything phenomenal is somehow real; and the absolute must at least be as rich as the relative. And, further, the Absolute is not many; there are no independent reals. The universe is one in this sense that its differences exist harmoniously within one whole, beyond which there is nothing. Hence the Absolute is, so far, an individual and a system but, if we stop here, it remains but formal and abstract. Can we then, the question is, say anything about the concrete nature of the system?

Certainly, I think, this is possible. When we ask as to the matter which fills up the empty outline, we can reply in one word, that this matter is experience. . . . Sentient experience, in short, is reality, and what is not this is not real. We may say, in other words, that there is no being or fact outside of that which is commonly called psychical existence. Feeling, thought, and volition . . . are all the material of existence, and there is no other material, actual or even possible. This result in its general form seems evident at once . . .” (127)

We can describe Bradley’s positive view as a *monist idealism*. What we want to understand now is how this positive view is related to his discussions of objects, properties, and relations.

3.1 *Monism*

In the above passage, Bradley expresses his monism with the words “the Absolute is not many; there are no independent reals.” This is meant to be taken strictly: there are not

many things, but just one thing. Contrary to what we ordinarily think, you and I, and this desk, are not distinct things, but, in some sense, one thing.

We can see this view emerging from his views on relations in two ways.

First, the obvious. If there were several things, those things would surely stand in some relation — at least, in the relation of being distinct. But Bradley denies that there are such things as relations. So there cannot be distinct things, and there must be just one thing.

A second route to monism is more subtle, and involves the ‘doctrine of internality’ – the view that insofar as we can make sense of relations, we can see that every relation in which a thing stands is a part of its nature, so that the nature of any one thing depends on every property of every other thing. Why this suggests monism. (We’ll discuss this idea later in the context of one of McTaggart’s arguments, and Moore’s reply.)

Bradley’s monism has clear consequences for philosophical method. If monism is true, then analysis — the division of a thing into its constituents — must always be a kind of falsification. After all, if monism is true, then the parts of a thing can’t exist in the same full sense as the thing itself — if they did, there would be more than one thing. As you might guess, this is one of Bradley’s views that early analytic philosophers rejected.

3.2 *Idealism*

Bradley’s idealism comes out in his claim that “Sentient experience, in short, is reality, and what is not this is not real.” It is a bit harder to see how this claim relates to Bradley’s views on relations, but even here perhaps we can see two connections.

First, it is hard to deny that there is such a thing as sentient experience. The ordinary view is that, in addition to sentient experience, there is a world of non-sentient things that our experiences are experiences of. But, if this were true, there would be two fundamentally different sorts of things — sentient and non-sentient. But this conflicts with Bradley’s monism.

Second, we know from Bradley’s monism that whatever the Absolute is going to be, it had better be a unity. But this imposes a substantial constraint on what sort of thing the Absolute could be. Indeed, it seems clear that it couldn’t really be a thing in the ordinary sense at all — for things typically have properties from which they are distinct. Some of the more mystical passages in Bradley seem to suggest that there was a certain kind of unity, or immediacy, in experience which is not found anywhere else. Perhaps this is what made it natural for him to, once adopting monism, identify the Absolute with some higher version of our sentient experience.