Russell's reply to Bradley's regress argument

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We saw in our discussion of Moore on internal and external relations that there is a satisfactory reply to the arguments of the idealists that every relation is internal. This undercuts one of the motivations for monism. However, recall that a second motivation for the view is Bradley's regress argument against the reality of relations. Since the method of analysis seems to require the denial of monism, it would bea good to have a reply to Bradley's argument. In §99 of the *Principles of Mathematics* (1903), Russell discusses this argument.

Russell says,

> "We have already had occasion to distinguish two kinds of regress, the one proceeding merely to perpetually new implied propositions, the other in the meaning of a proposition itself ..."

What distinction does Russell have in mind here? It seems to me that what he has in mind is a distinction between the following two sorts of situations:

- *Regress of perpetually new implied propositions.* A proposition p_1 entails a further proposition p_2; but p_2 entails a further proposition p_3; and in general, for any proposition p_n in the series, it entails a further proposition p_{n+1}, such that no two propositions in the (infinite) series are identical.

- *Regress in the meaning of a proposition itself.* A proposition p has some feature in virtue of which it must have some analysis in more basic terms if it is to be true. But any analysis of p will also have that feature. So we can never arrive at a satisfactory analysis; and as a result we can conclude that p is not true.

It is very plausible that, as long as we can make sense of infinite series (and it seems we can), Russell is right that the first sort of regress is unproblematic. Compare the series of natural numbers.

Is Russell right that Bradley's regress is of the first sort, rather than the second? Consider Bradley's statement of the regress:

"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)

This quote seems ambiguous between the two sorts of regress argument.

The real question, I think, is whether Bradley is right to demand that all relational facts need some analysis in more basic terms. Bradley seems correct that any such analysis will have to itself be a relational fact; so he seems correct that if we do need an analysis, it will leads to a regress of the second, more worrying sort. But if one come to the debate (as it seems we do) thinking that among the contents of reality are relational facts, then perhaps it is not so hard to resist this kind of demand for analysis.