

Bradley on substance, property, and relation

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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 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. Like McTaggart, Bradley held that much of our ordinary thought about reality is false, and 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 nature of what Bradley calls 'the Absolute.'

1 Substance and property

We have already discussed McTaggart's skeptical argument that the idea of something existing in time contain contradictions. Bradley's skeptical arguments are even more ambitious; he argues, for example, that the very idea that the world contains objects with properties contains contradictions. As he puts it,

"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." (16)

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.” (16)

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.” (16)

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 (relational) properties of properties. But this is circular; the relationship between a thing and its properties was just what we wanted to understand.
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. His argument for skepticism about qualities seems to have the following form:

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.

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; of 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.” (25)

Argument for premise 3: Qualities cannot be explained in terms of relations, since “nothings cannot be related.” (25)

Bradley develops a separate line of argument for skepticism about the reality of relations:

1. If relations are real, then they must be either independent of qualities, or exist along with qualities.
 2. Relations are not independent, since they are unimaginable without qualities.
 3. The relationship between relations and qualities is unintelligible, so relations cannot exist alongside qualities.
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- C. Relations are not real.

Again, the argument is valid, and we should focus on the arguments Bradley offers for the premises.

Bradley dismisses the denial of premise 2 as ‘mere verbiage.’

The more interesting argument is for premise 3; this connects to Bradley’s earlier dismissal of the idea that substances are qualities standing in relations to each other. The argument is that the very idea of qualities standing in relations to each other does not, upon analysis, make sense. Bradley summarizes 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 an earlier 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.” (17-18)

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. Instead, he 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 phenomena 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)

References

- Bradley, F. H., *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893).
Hylton, Peter, *Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).