

# Bradley and the Impossibility of Analysis

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## **British Idealism**

- Early analytic philosophy emerged in part as a reaction to British idealism.
- British idealism arose as a reaction to the empiricism of Locke, Hume, Mill, and others.
- The main impetus for idealism was the wide dissemination in Britain of the works of German idealists such as Kant and Hegel.
- Both German and British idealism were largely rationalist in tone, emphasizing the priority of reason over the senses.
- As a result, common sense was thought to be inappropriate in settling philosophical questions.

## **Bradley's Metaphysics**

- F. H. Bradley is considered one of the main proponents of British idealism.
- He claimed that the world as understood by common sense is appearance only, and not reality.
- The problem he found with common sense ran deeper than its empiricism.
- He thought that the basic way in which common sense understands the nature of object is untenable.
- Specifically, he held that the partitioning of the world into things, qualities, and relations is practically workable but cannot truly describe reality.

## **The Common-Sense Account of Reality**

- According to many philosophers who adopt the point of view of common sense, the world consists of things and their qualities.
- Things (e.g., the sugar) are substantive, and they are qualified by adjectivals (e.g., sweet).

- Relations play three roles.
  - Things are related to one another (sugar is sweeter than olive oil).
  - Qualities are related to one another (sweet and white are in sugar)
  - Qualities are related to things (sugar has the quality sweet).
- Bradley argues that qualities and relations are impossible.
- This precludes philosophical analysis of reality.

### **Qualities Are Not Related**

- Bradley uses a trilemma to show that the relation of qualities required for the unity of a thing is impossible.
- If A is in relation with B, then either:
  - “In relation with B” is identical to A, or
  - “In relation with B” is an attribute of A, or
  - There is a relation C in which A and B stand.
- “In relation to B” is obviously to be not identical to A itself.
- “In relation to B” is not an attribute of A (see next slide)
- There is no relation C independent of A and B (see slide after next)
- Therefore, A is not in relation with B.

### **Relations are not Attributes**

- There are two objections to taking “in relation with B” to be an attribute of A.
  - To say that A *has* a relation with B is merely metaphorical.
  - “The old dilemma” arises.
    - \* If having a relation with B is different from A, then *what A is not* is predicated of A.
    - \* If having a relation with B is the same as A, then nothing is said about A when “having a relation with B” is predicated of it.
    - \* Therefore, to say that having a relation with B is an attribute of A is either false or empty.
- So we may not say that “in relation with B” is an attribute of A.

### **Relations are not Independent**

- If there is an independent relation C relating A with B, then something has been said about A, B and C.
- It is not said that C is identical to A or that C is predicated of A.
- Then it can only be said that A is related to C, etc.
- But if A is related to C, and relations are independent, then there is a relation D which relates A to C.
- There is no logical stopping point for this process.
- Therefore, there is no independent relation C relating A with B.
- In sum, A is not in relation with B, from which it follows that an object cannot be analyzed into related qualities.

### **A Poem**

If your battery's dead, don't ask Bradley  
to give you a jump. He'll say: "Gladly,  
I have jumper cables; but need another item:  
a cable to connect the cables" and so ad infinitum.

—Dean W. Zimmerman

### **The Impossibility of Qualities and Relations**

- Bradley seeks to show that qualities and relations depend on each other yet are incompatible with each other.
- As a consequence, there are no qualities or relations.

### **Qualities and Relations Depend on Each Other**

- If A is a quality, then A is distinct from other qualities.
- If A is distinct from nothing else, it is a unity and not a quality.
- If qualities A and B are distinct from each other, there must be some basis for the distinction.
- If the basis for the distinction lies outside A and B, then there is a relation between A and B.
- If the basis for the distinction lies inside A, then A has been resolved into a quality and a difference from B, and there is a relation within A.
- Therefore, if qualities A and B are distinct from each other, it is by virtue of a relation.
- Relations are nothing, or are a mere abstraction, without qualities that they relate.

### Qualities and Relations are Incompatible

- Qualities must both support relations and be made by relations.
- But this “double character” is impossible.
- The character  $\alpha$  of quality A that supports relations must be related to the character  $\alpha$  that is made by the relation.
- This generates a regress, which divides A into infinitely many sub-characters.
- Relations must both support and be supported by qualities, which generates the original infinite regress.
- So, qualities and relations cannot co-exist, while they must co-exist.
- As a consequence, qualities and relations are impossible.

### The Character of a Thing

- It seems that a thing is independent of some of the relations in which it might stand.
- A piece of sugar is a piece of sugar whether:
  - It is larger than or smaller than another piece of sugar.
  - It is in a bowl or outside a bowl.
- But this independence applies to the thing only with respect to its character as sugar, but not with respect to the whole thing.

### Against Purely Extrinsic Relations

- A premise in the argument for the unreality of qualities and relations was that qualities are made by relations.
- A relation in which A stands would be *purely extrinsic* if the qualities of A were to remain the same whether it stands in that relation or not.
- Suppose A is larger than B: A would have all the same qualities whether or not it was larger than B.
- But if being larger than B makes no difference to A, then it is arbitrary to attribute *being larger than B* to A.
- B may as well be said to be larger than A.
- One does not find the truth about A by postulating a relation to B that makes no difference to A.
- So, even if there were relations in reality, they could not be purely extrinsic.