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.

A Poem

If you need help starting your car
Don't ask Bradley
For he will answer, "Gladly,
I've got jumper cables but require one more item,
Cables to connect the cables and so on *ad infinitum*."

–Anonymous Class Member

Qualities Are Not Related

- Bradly 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.

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* 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.

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 a of quality A that supports relations must be related to the character α 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.